

DRAFT

Under Pressure: Attitudes Towards China Among American Foreign Policy Professionals*

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Abstract

How do career and reputational concerns affect China policy discourse within the Washington foreign policy community? We conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews and a novel survey experiment of nearly five-hundred American foreign policy and national security professionals about their views towards the People's Republic of China. Contrary to concerns of a rigid consensus, we identify a noticeable diversity of policy perspectives among these professionals. However, many participants perceived a degree of what they referred to as “hawkflation” or “groupthink.” Roughly one fourth of survey respondents noted instances of professional pressure to voice a more hawkish point of view towards China, and many feared being perceived as naïve or compromised by their views on, ties to, and experiences in China. These pressures were particularly noteworthy for foreign policy professionals that are traditionally marginalized from power—those who are younger, non-white, or female. Our subjects reported a number of different strategies to cope with these pressures, including mirroring hawkish rhetoric in their advice, modifying or self-censoring their views in public settings, and even exiting the field entirely. Taken together, these social dynamics appear to foster perceptions of ‘consensus’ and bias policy discourse towards hawkish prescriptions and inflated threats.

Keywords: International Relations; China; foreign policy; elites; threat inflation; consensus; groupthink; self-censorship

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In Spring 2023, Congress established the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. Despite praise for its bipartisan stewardship, some observers worried that the committee reflected a concerning trend in Washington policy discourse towards China. Writing about the committee's first hearing, CNN's Fareed Zakaria alluded to the McCarthy era— "To watch Tuesday's hearing of the new House select committee on China was to be transported back to the 1950s." He reflected on what he perceived as a "wide-ranging consensus on China that has turned into a classic example of groupthink," questioning whether it may lead the United States down a path toward "decades of arms races, crises, perhaps even war" (Zakaria, 2023).

Zakaria is not alone in his observations (Drezner, 2020; Hirsh, 2024; Johnson, 2022). As China's economic, military, and geopolitical influence have grown over the past decade, mentions of a burgeoning 'consensus' about the challenge China poses to U.S. interests have only become more common. While some praise this phenomenon as a rare example of bipartisanship, others in Washington have expressed apprehension, noting the "disturbing parallels between the run up to the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the current situation with China" (Kuo and Mazarr, 2022). Some scholars have suggested that the current climate in Washington and Beijing is contributing to a security spiral that makes hostility, crises, and conflict more likely (Glaser, 2024; Shirk, 2022; Weiss, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022; Shiffrinson, 2020).

Despite the implications of this consensus for American foreign policy, we know relatively little about its character and implications. To what extent is there consensus on China policy, and at what level? Do members of the foreign policy community feel pressure to speak and think about China a certain way? If so, what types of people are most affected by this dynamic? What are the implications for policymaking?

To address these questions, our study draws from new survey and semi-structured

interview data.¹ First, we fielded an original survey of U.S. national security and foreign policy professionals (n=495) that measured respondents' attitudes towards the People's Republic of China and U.S. policy towards the country. The Foreign Policy Professionals China Attitudes Survey (FPP-CAS) was conducted in the summer and fall of 2023 and included a brief treatment condition which varied the anonymity of the survey: half of the respondents were asked to input their names at the beginning of the survey and the other half were not. This allowed us to observe whether respondents expressed more or less confrontational views towards China when the condition of strict anonymity was removed.²

We then conducted a series of semi-structured interviews (n=55) from August 2023 and July 2024 with members of the foreign policy community. The interviews included individuals with a wide range of expertise, professional experiences, and personal backgrounds. We asked respondents questions about their professional aspirations, their views on China and U.S.-China relations, their perceptions of the China-related discourse in Washington, DC, and their professional experiences in seeking to shape U.S.-China policy.

Our analysis yields three primary results. First, there exists a substantial amount of variation in policy beliefs towards China among the American foreign policy community (McCourt 2022, 2024; Wang et al. 2024). Any 'consensus' that does exist may be around the central framing of China as a competitor nation, but foreign policy elites hold a diverse range of views as to which policies are most appropriate to compete with China. This is reflected in our quantitative data and more vibrantly in our interviews. In general, we find that foreign policy elites that lean Republican, white, male, or who have military experience expressed more confrontational attitudes towards

¹The survey and interviews were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Princeton University (Protocol #15532) and Emory University (Study #00006248).

²Note that the respondents' names were visible only to researchers and the survey data was de-identified prior to the analysis.

China. These differences aside, the distribution of China attitudes shows substantial overlap across the two parties, and substantial variation within parties. Interview subjects were generally able to position themselves in the broader spectrum of China observers and foreign policy professionals, noting subtle differences in points of view across institutions and sectors, such as academia, government, and think tanks.

Second, our data shows that a large number of people in the foreign policy community perceive social and professional pressure to voice a more confrontational position towards China. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they or their colleagues “had ever experienced social pressure to express certain views on U.S. policy towards China.” About 21.8% of respondents ($n = 108$) answered “Yes,” 71.3% ($n = 353$) said “No,” and the remaining 6.87% of respondents ($n = 34$) refused to answer the question. This experience is pervasive but not uniform, and is usually (but not always) experienced in the direction of confrontation: pressuring the individual to express more hawkish attitudes towards China. Our open-ended responses and interviews suggest that this pressure is felt more greatly by individuals who have less confrontational views on China, and especially those who retain career ambitions to serve in government and operate within the confines of the political system. Indeed, this group of people generally eschewed the terms ‘dovish’ or ‘moderate’ to describe their own views on U.S.-China, as these labels are considered pejorative in Washington and carry a connotation of naïveté. Our interviews also reveal how unique pressures are felt by people in the early or middle stages of their career, and among female or minority foreign policy professionals.

Third, the combined result of these dynamics is to produce a discourse that is skewed towards hawkish China policy prescriptions. In general, our identification treatment did not induce respondents to display more confrontational attitudes towards China. However, subgroup analysis of the set of respondents who experienced

“pressure” demonstrates that these individuals do voice more hawkish attitudes towards China when forced to attach their names to their responses. This finding is also supported in the interviews, where many (but certainly not all) respondents noted distinctions in how they express their attitudes towards China in public versus private settings. Though direct censorship, self-censorship, and preference falsification do occur (Kuran 1998; Shen and Truex 2021), more commonly our subjects revealed the tendency to engage in what we term *discourse mirroring*— instrumentally framing ideas and recommendations in the prevailing language of threat in order to be more persuasive. This has the effect of what one interview subject called “hawkflation,” with individuals appearing more hawkish and confrontational than they actually are, especially to those who do not know them well (Interview 20).

Our findings make three contributions to the literature in International Relations and Comparative Politics. First, they build on a growing literature examining the psychological dispositions, decision-making processes, and influence of foreign policy advisors (Saunders, 2014; Duelfer and Dyson, 2011; Jervis, 2013; Weeks, 2014; Kertzer, 2016; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018; Schub, 2022; Jost et al., 2024). While this literature has greatly enhanced our understanding of how advisors influence foreign policy decision-making, the politics of elite interaction has been identified as ‘major ingredient’ that remains unexplored (Saunders, 2022). Our results contribute to this gap by demonstrating how professional pressures and social dynamics among Washington’s think tank community may constrain debate by shaping the content and expression of foreign policy advice.

Second, and by consequence, our findings challenge the assumption that U.S. foreign policy advisors operate within a relatively unfettered ‘marketplace of ideas,’ which functions to check ill-considered foreign policy decisions and adventurism (Kaufmann, 2004; Snyder, 1991; Reiter and Stam, 2002). Instead, our results suggest that profes-

sional norms, reputational concerns, and structural inequalities can suppress dissent and amplify psychological biases, such as those favoring hawkish policy prescriptions (Kahneman and Renshon, 2007). These dynamics appear to disproportionately affect traditionally marginalized groups in foreign policy—such as younger, non-white, and female professionals—holding the potential to further constrain diverse debate over the future of American foreign policy.

Third, our findings contribute to studies of self-censorship and “preference falsification” across the literature in Comparative Politics (Kuran, 1998; Berinsky and Tucker, 2006; Nicholson and Huang, 2022; Chapkovski and Schaub, 2022). This phenomenon is typically studied in the context of public opinion in authoritarian settings (Shen and Truex, 2021), and we present evidence that elites are susceptible to similar pressures that encourage them to conceal or falsify their private beliefs in order to appear socially acceptable (Kuran 1998). In doing so, we identify social and professional dynamics in the Washington foreign policy community that encourage this tendency. In doing so, we forward the concept of discourse mirroring, an intuitive but distinct behavior that functions like preference falsification by allowing individuals to shroud divergent beliefs in the language of the perceived public majority.

Theory and Hypotheses

Over the past decade, the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China has witnessed a dramatic deterioration that threatens continued competition, confrontation and even conflict (Thurston, 2021). A key driver of this shift has been China’s foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era. As Shirk observes, “China’s aggressive posture in world affairs and its relentlessly tight grip on domestic society are leading to what it most fears—a return to the politics of containment” (Shirk, 2022, 291). Although a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, reasoning behind this perspective frequently

cites China's illiberal and authoritarian governance, growing influence in international institutions, protectionist economy and mercantile trade policies, geopolitical coercion towards U.S. allies and partners, and grand strategy to displace American power (Campbell and Ratner, 2018; Campbell and Sullivan, 2019; Economy, 2019; Doshi, 2021; Friedberg, 2024; Pottinger and Gallagher, 2024). Decades of U.S. policy seeking to integrate China into the international system through economic and diplomatic engagement are now characterized as naive and damaging to U.S. interests (Johnston, 2019).

Scholars have begun to investigate the distinct social and professional dynamics shaping Washington's response to the evolving China challenge. As documented by McCourt (2022, 2024, 623, 596), this "paradigmatic shift" from a policy of engagement to strategic competition can be understood as an "outcome of politicization and professional status struggle in America's China expert community." With the election of the Trump administration in 2016, this perspective emphasizes the "turnover in key individuals' view of China in the government and China expert community"—out were the established 'engagers' and in were the previously marginalized advisors who explicitly rejected the 'nuanced' views of their predecessors, bore suspicion of those with China ties and expertise, and embraced ideological views that politicized issues from the trade war to COVID-19 (McCourt, 2022, 2024, 596). Although the subsequent Biden administration has relied on advisors with more typical backgrounds and expertise, the embrace of strategic competition remained unchanged. In the words of Kurt Campbell, the Biden administration's then-coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, "The period that was broadly described as engagement has come to an end" (Martin, 2021).

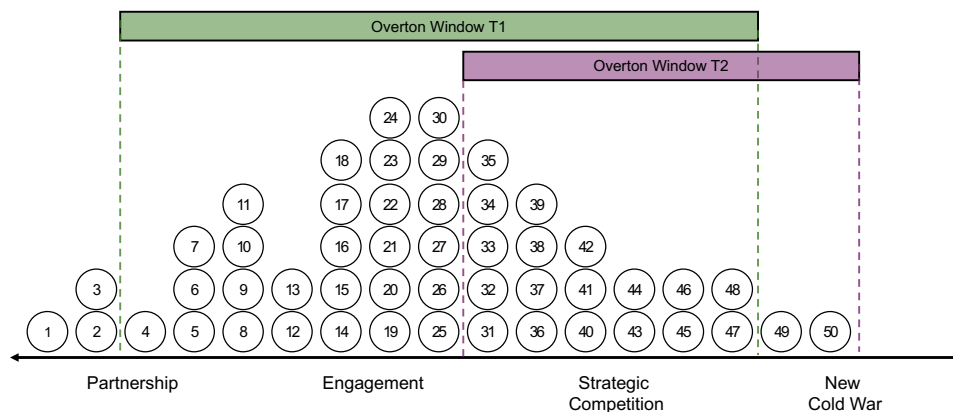
Given recent shifts in U.S. policy and the surrounding discourse, how might foreign policy professionals have adapted? We propose that their responses may have been

influenced by instrumental considerations or career-related pressures. Some may have embraced the change, seeing it as an opportunity for career advancement as confrontation gained salience. Others might have adjusted their views to align with existing policy momentum surrounding strategic competition, aiming to remain relevant within their organizations and the broader discourse on U.S. policy towards China. Additionally, some might have engaged in self-censorship or what Kuran terms “preference falsification,” concealing their true policy beliefs in favor of publicly acceptable views about U.S.-China diplomacy and engagement (Kuran 1998; Shen and Truex 2021).³ Others might remain adamant in their positions, despite a loss of relevance, while a few might even exit the field entirely.

Figure 1 provides a simple schematic for understanding this policy shift. It visualizes private preferences over U.S.-China policy among a hypothetical distribution of American foreign policy professionals. The line shows a spectrum of policy options moving from least to most confrontational, ranging from a partnership with China, to engagement, then strategic competition, and finally a new Cold War paradigm. In reality, China policy is not unidimensional nor static, and even these four labels do not capture the complexities and evolution of the policy space. Nonetheless, the figure offers a useful illustration: on the line we see a histogram, with each circle representing a hypothetical foreign policy professional. It also depicts the “Overton Window” at time T_1 and time T_2 (Lehman 2010). Here, we see a narrowing of the window and shift rightward. In T_1 , which reflects the engagement era, notions of partnership and strategic competition were in bounds while a Cold War framework was not, and engagement represented the median. By contrast, in T_2 , engagement has moved out of bounds as strategic competition occupies the center, and the Cold War paradigm now opens for discussion.

³See Shen and Truex (2021) for a discussion of the distinction between self-censorship and preference falsification.

Figure 1: Illustration of Shift in Overton Window



Note: Figure shows hypothetical distribution of 50 American foreign policy professionals' attitudes towards U.S.-China policy in T_1 . Figure depicts rightward shift in Overton Window in T_2 .

Again, this figure is purely illustrative and should not be taken as representative of the true distribution, but it helps us consider how the shift from T_1 to T_2 would affect various foreign policy professionals. Suddenly, the preferences and favored policy of a large number of them (individuals 1 through 25) are now out of bounds. Individuals favoring strategic competition, like 40 through 46, are now at the center of the debate. Individuals who support a Cold War framework or a more adversarial footing, like 49 and 50, were once more extreme but would now firmly be in the conversation.

Our central hypothesis is that this sudden and significant shift in discourse may have compelled individuals in the foreign policy community to want to appear more confrontational:

H1: Pressures associated with social conformity should encourage American foreign policy elites to over-report their public support for containing the People's Republic of China.

We also hypothesize that these pressures would be felt more strongly by junior profes-

sionals, who are less established in the community and might seek to conform to the dominant discourse and norms to facilitate their career advancement:

H2: Pressures associated with social conformity should be felt more strongly by younger and junior foreign policy professionals as they seek to advance their careers.

This hypothesis was motivated by our own interactions with younger professionals and some of the popular discussion on China ‘groupthink.’ For example, editor-in-chief of *World Politics Review* Judah Grunstein stressed how the current discourse might adversely influence younger generations of foreign policy professionals who, in an effort to forward their careers, might feel pressured to “formulate smart-sounding ways to operationalize [consensus], rather than to question it” (Grunstein 2023).

These hypotheses were pre-registered, along with our experimental design and pre-analysis plan, on OSF on August 10, 2023.⁴ In the interest of transparency, we present our main results as originally constructed in that plan, though as the project evolved, we realize that we were failing to account for key variables that would moderate whether an individual is affected by this dynamic. While we do observe strong evidence of pressure at work, this feeling is limited to a subset of the foreign policy community, conditional on factors like the individual’s personal experiences, gender and ethnic identity, nature of workplace, and attitudes towards U.S.-China policy.

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we fielded the Foreign Policy Professionals China Attitudes Survey (FPP-CAS), which sampled professionals employed by or affiliated with American think tanks and research organizations. We collected a list of all American think tanks on the [Open Think Tank Directory](#) classified as specializing in defense, peace,

⁴The OSF registration available at: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/DW9KB>.

and security, along with those listed on the University of Pennsylvania’s 2020 “Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” (McGann, 2021). We then compiled all staff and associates listed on these organizations’ websites, including fellows and adjuncts. This produced a sampling frame of 7,841 contacts with valid email addresses across 102 think tanks and non-governmental organizations.⁵

The survey was fielded between August and October 2023, with respondents receiving up to three recruitment emails originating from a Carter Center email address. Of 685 total respondents, 495 proceeded through the survey, yielding a final response rate of 6.3%. Table 1 presents sample information for the different demographic variables included in our survey. The sample is predominantly white (75.6%) and male (65.1%). Most of the respondents report working for a think tank or NGO (67.1%), though some affiliates are employed at universities (23.2%), private companies (3.23%), or the U.S. government (3.03%). More than a third of the sample reported some government experience (43.0%) and about one in ten (10.5%) reported military experience. About one in four respondents (27.1%) listed some regional expertise in East Asia.

Based upon these numbers alone, it is difficult to ascertain how representative our sample is of the population of interest, as we do not have reliable information on the individual’s age, race, and political affiliation in our sampling frame. With regards to political affiliation, we had a large number of Democrats (56.9%) and self-identified independents in our sample (32.7%), which appears to reflect the broader composition of the DC metro area. We were surprised to only have 31 self-identified Republicans (6.26%) in our sample, which at face value appears low, though it is important to remember that only 28% of Americans overall identify as Republican. Notably, when accounting for partisan leaning, there are 56 (11.3%) individuals in the data that identify or lean Republican, which appears slightly more balanced. To account for these factors, we apply weights based on partisan leaning in the DC Metro area, as

⁵For more details, please see the Supporting Information.

Table 1: Survey and Interview Sample Attributes

Demographic	Category	Survey Sample		Interview Sample	
		<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Female	169	34.1%	19	34.5%
	Male	322	65.1%	36	65.5%
	Other	4	0.81%	0	0.00%
<i>Race & Ethnicity</i>	Asian	44	8.89%	10	18.2%*
	Black	15	3.03%	4	7.27%*
	White	374	75.6%	38	69.1%
	Hispanic/Latino	15	3.03%	0	0.00%
	Middle Eastern	14	2.83%	0	0.00%
	Other	16	3.23%	3	5.45%
<i>Age Group</i>	18-29	76	15.4%	12	21.8%*
	30-39	122	24.6%	17	30.9%
	40-49	92	18.6%	11	20.0%
	50-59	79	16.0%	7	12.7%
	60-69	76	15.4%	6	10.9%
	70-79	34	6.87%	2	3.64%
	80+	14	2.83%	0	0.00%
<i>Career Level</i>	Senior	277	56.0%	25	45.5%
	Middle	132	26.7%	22	40.0%
	Junior	68	13.7%	8	14.5%
<i>Employment Type</i>	Private Company	16	3.23%	1	1.81%
	Think tank/NGO	332	67.1%	38	69.1%
	Government	15	3.03%	2	3.63%
	College/University	115	23.2%	14	25.5%
	Other	17	3.43%	0	0.00%
<i>Professional Experience</i>	Government	213	43.0%	24	43.6%
	Military	52	10.5%	3	5.45%
	East Asia expertise	134	27.1%	45	81.8%*
<i>Partisan Lean</i>	Democrat	363	73.3%	NA	NA
	Neither/No answer	76	15.4%	NA	NA
	Republican	56	11.3%	NA	NA

Note: Some values may not add up to one hundred due to rounding and non-response. Interview demographics are approximations based off publicly available information. Starred values indicate over-sampled populations in the interview portion of the project. Biracial individuals are included in the “Other” category for Race & Ethnicity.

well as age and gender distributions within each party. Notably, our findings are robust to both weighted and unweighted estimates.

Survey Instrument and Experimental Design

To test for the presence of preference falsification, the survey contained a simple experimental design which varied the survey's perceived anonymity. Respondents in the control group were primed to understand that their responses would be fully anonymous. After consenting to the survey, they received the following introduction prior to answering questions:

You are being asked to participate in this survey because you are a professional in the field of American national security and foreign policy. This survey seeks to understand how professionals like yourself view bilateral relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. You do not have to be an expert on these subjects to take the survey.

Please note that your responses are anonymous.

Respondents in the treatment group, by contrast, were told their answers were visible to the researchers and were asked to enter their name. The italicized text from the control condition above was replaced with the following:

Please note that your responses are visible to the researchers at Princeton University and The Carter Center. Please enter your name here:

The key feature of the experiment was to test whether respondents expressed systematically different views on China once they were forced to attach their name to their answers, even if that information was only privy to the researchers. Note that no identifying information about the respondents or their views will ever be shared in a replication file or distributed to the broader public.

After being randomly assigned to the treatment and control conditions, respondents answered a series of demographic and non-identifying professional questions, including their age, gender, race, party identification, military and government experience, and

regional expertise, among others.⁶ They then completed a series of questions designed to measure their attitudes towards China and U.S.-China policy. The core question battery is shown in Table 2.

The treatment appears to have induced a degree of differential attrition relative to the control group, which is consistent with our general intuition that foreign policy elites are reluctant to tie their names and reputations to their views towards China. This amounts to approximately 10% of the total sample and could potentially compromise the quality of causal inference. To address this, we confirm the robustness of our results using specialized techniques to characterize and address consequent imbalance in the Supporting Information. In sum, the treatment and control groups appear relatively well-balanced despite attrition, though there is some evidence that respondents that were Asian, university employees, or above the age of 80 may have been slightly less likely to accept the treatment. We employ balancing and sensitivity analyses to confirm the robustness of our estimates in the Supporting Information.

Survey Outcomes & China Confrontation Index

Our primary attitudinal outcomes asked respondents to identify their favorability towards China along a thermometer-style question (on which higher and lower numbers along the scale indicate warmer and colder attitudes respectively) and to what extent they agreed that China represents an ‘enemy’ of the United States. In addition, the survey instrument included a battery of questions regarding U.S. policy towards China— assessing respondent attitudes toward engagement and containment, militarily defending Taiwan, restricting the access of Chinese students to American universities, and cooperating with China on climate change and public health among others. We also posed questions about the seriousness of China’s behavior in the context of

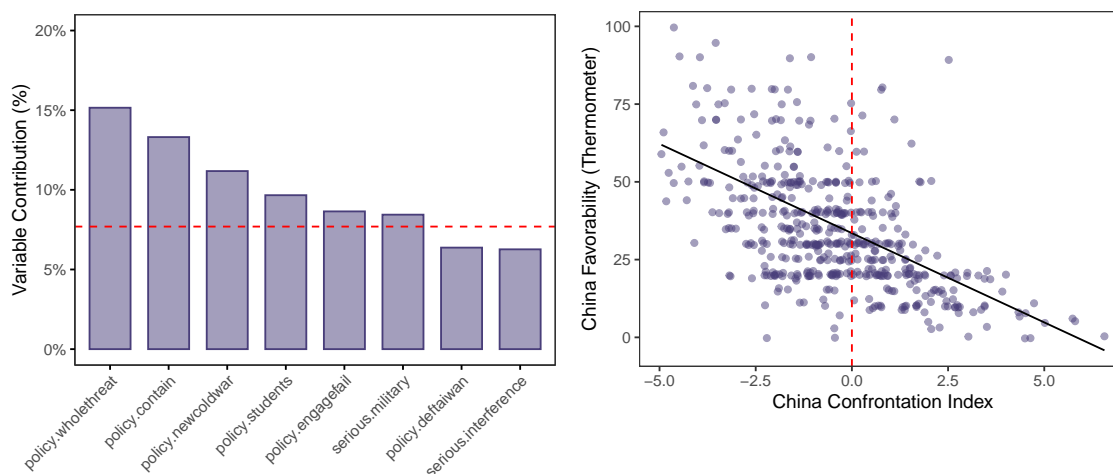
⁶Please note that any identifying information, such as the names entered in the treatment condition, have been omitted from the replication materials.

military modernization, human rights, economic competition, and domestic political interference.

To facilitate our analysis, we compiled these policy-level questions into an index using Principal Component Analysis (PCA).⁷ Just over one third (38.4%) of the total variation in responses was explained by the first principal component (termed the China Confrontation Index), which measures respondents support for confrontational policies toward China. Figure 2 visualizes its key qualities. The first panel identifies the variables which principally contribute to the index, including a respondent's perceptions towards China as a 'whole-of-society' threat, their support for containment policy, their assessment of a new 'Cold War', their support for restrictions on Chinese students, their perception of engagement policy, and the perception of the seriousness of Chinese military modernization. As a validation measure, we plotted the index against respondents' scores on the feeling thermometer (x -axis). As expected, there is a negative correlation between more favorable perceptions of China and more hawkish positions on the index.

⁷See more details in the Supporting Information.

Figure 2: Visualizing the China Confrontation Index



Note: The left-hand plot visualizes the most important variable contributions to the first principal component (dubbed the ‘China Confrontation Index’), with each column displaying the proportion of variance explained from 0% to 100%. The red dashed corresponds to the expected value of explained variance if all variables contributed equally to the first principal component. The right-hand plot visualizes the distribution of the index along the China Favorability (Thermometer) variable (points are jittered to aid visualization).

Quantitative Analysis

Foreign Policy Professionals’ Attitudes Towards China

From a descriptive perspective, the survey data complicate the perspective that attitudes towards China among American foreign policy and national security professionals can be broadly characterized as a ‘consensus.’ By contrast, our data demonstrate that attitudes towards China vary according to the level of analysis. With respect to problematic aspects of Chinese government behavior, there appears to be broad and high-level agreement—respondent attitudes towards China are generally cold and confrontational. The weighted mean “feeling thermometer” attitude towards China in the sample was 33 (out of 100) and most survey respondents reported their opinion towards the People’s Republic of China as either “somewhat unfavorable” (50.75%) or

“very unfavorable” (34.93%).⁸

Although more than three quarters of survey respondents expressed unfavorable views towards China, there appears to be notable disagreement at the level of U.S. policy towards the country. Table 2 reports the percentages for the battery of questions related to U.S. policy towards China.⁹ Critically, the distributions do not appear to reflect a strong consensus. The level of aggregate agreement or disagreement exceeded 50% for only five of eight questions and, among the other four, aggregate agreement and disagreement does not consistently trend in the direction of confrontation.

⁸In an interview setting, some subjects rejected the question design, noting they had positive feelings towards the Chinese people and China as a country, but not the Chinese government or Communist Party (Interview 11).

⁹To avoid contaminating our descriptive statistics, we include only data from the control group.

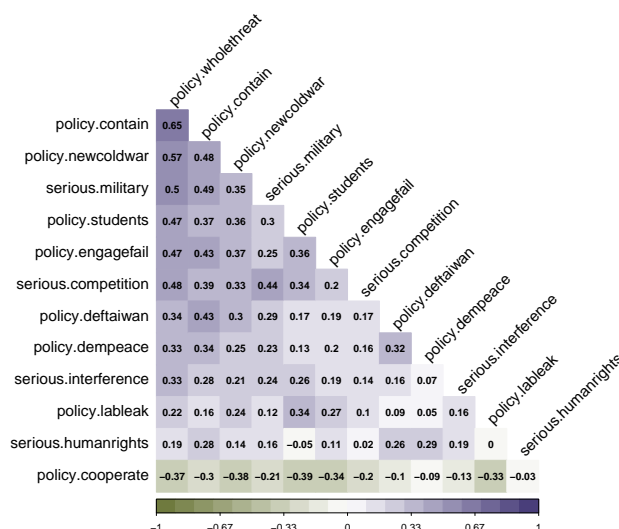
Table 2: Policy Questions and Response Frequencies Among Foreign Policy Elites

Question	Agreement Level				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The President of the United States should declare a new ‘Cold War’ with the People’s Republic of China (<i>policy.newcoldwar</i>).	2.17% [1.11%]	1.06% [1.48%]	3.52% [3.33%]	48.10% [42.96%]	45.14% [51.11%]
In the long run, the United States’ policy of engagement toward the People’s Republic of China was a failure (<i>policy.engagefail</i>).	8.17% [5.19%]	19.56% [19.63%]	29.33% [30.00%]	34.85% [38.52%]	8.08% [6.67%]
The People’s Republic of China presents a ‘whole-of-society threat’ to the United States (<i>policy.wholethreat</i>).	8.15% [5.93%]	24.35% [17.04%]	18.47% [21.48%]	37.37% [40.00%]	11.66% [15.56%]
If the United States does not take rapid action to contain the People’s Republic of China, the security of the United States and its allies will be in jeopardy (<i>policy.contain</i>).	6.95% [5.93%]	27.29% [26.30%]	22.63% [27.04%]	30.74% [31.85%]	12.39% [8.89%]
The United States military should defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion (<i>policy.deftaiwan</i>).	19.91% [18.89%]	37.07% [40.37%]	18.93% [21.85%]	10.14% [12.59%]	13.95% [6.30%]
There would be peace between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of China if China was a democracy like the United States (<i>policy.dempeace</i>).	10.40% [7.78%]	26.91% [30.00%]	32.61% [35.93%]	21.98% [21.48%]	8.10% [4.81%]
The access of Chinese students to American universities should be restricted (<i>policy.students</i>).	6.67% [4.44%]	10.02% [9.63%]	20.25% [12.22%]	27.17% [37.04%]	35.89% [36.67%]
It is likely that COVID-19 leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China (<i>policy.lableak</i>).	16.90% [8.52%]	32.40% [21.11%]	33.31% [44.81%]	11.03% [16.67%]	6.36% [8.89%]
The U.S. government should cooperate with the Chinese government on issues of shared concern (<i>policy.cooperate</i>).	39.72% [53.70%]	38.16% [36.30%]	8.68% [5.19%]	6.97% [2.59%]	6.48% [2.22%]

Note: Table calculates percentages among respondents for respondents in the control group (n=273). Percentages may not add to 100% due to item non-response. Main statistics represent weighted percentages to account for the possibility that the original sample under-represents Republicans. Unweighted statistics are displayed in brackets.

As further demonstration of weak policy-level consensus, Figure 3 visualizes the correlations between each policy question. Although there is moderate to strong alignment on certain policies towards China, most correlations are relatively weak and reflect a diversity of opinion. For instance, strong correlations between *policy.newcoldwar*, *policy.wholethreat*, *policy.contain*, and *serious.military* suggest a relatively cohesive bloc that perceives China as a threat, advocating for more aggressive containment policies. This question battery also shows a high correlation with a willingness to restrict Chinese students' access to American universities (*policy.students*). However, weaker correlations involving *policy.deftaiwan* and *policy.dempeace* suggest that even within this hawkish group, there is less agreement on certain aspects of policy. In the case of *policy.deftaiwan*, for example, there is observable disagreement as to whether the U.S. should come to the military defense of Taiwan in the event of invasion. Similarly, in the case of *policy.dempeace*, there is disagreement as to whether regime change would effectively resolve U.S. concerns. Overall, these results suggest that policy views are not uniform, with varying degrees of support for different aspects of a confrontational strategy.

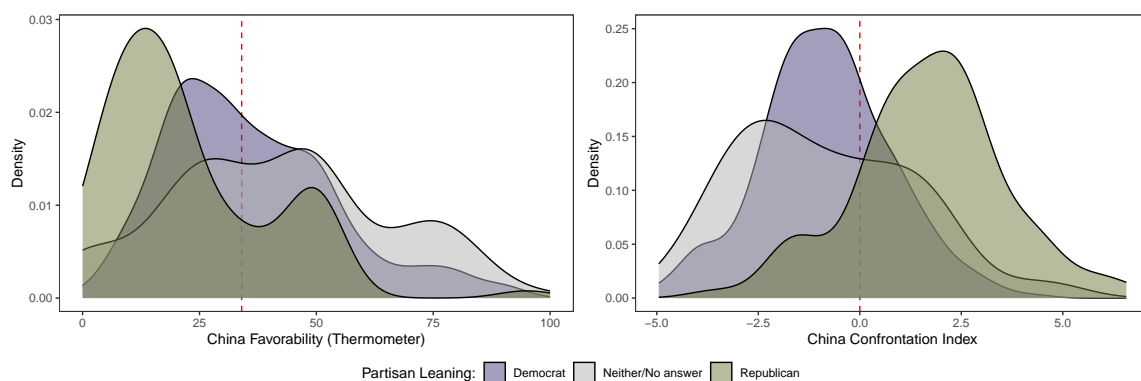
Figure 3: Correlates among Policy Attitudes



Note: The plot visualizes the correlation among policy-level questions included in the index. Values closer to zero indicate weak correlations whereas values closer to -1 and 1 indicate strong correlations.

Turning our analysis to which foreign policy professionals are more likely to express confrontational attitudes towards China, our data indicate that partisanship clearly plays a key role. The mean “feeling thermometer” towards China among Democrat-leaning respondents ($\bar{x}_{LeanDemocrat} = 35.99$) was more favorable than among Republican-leaning respondents ($\bar{x}_{LeanRepublican} = 22.78$). Similarly, Republican-leaning respondents were more likely to consider China an ‘enemy’ of the United States ($\bar{x}_{Enemy} = 1.04$, 95% CI = [0.86, 1.22]) and embrace more confrontational policy attitudes ($\bar{x}_{CCI} = 2.80$, 95% CI = [2.45, 3.16]). Figure 2 plots the distribution of the China Thermometer and China Confrontation Index by partisan leaning, which highlight these distinctions. Equally important, however, is the notable overlap in their distributions—there are plenty of more confrontational Democrats and less confrontational Republicans, suggesting a diversity of views across the index.

Figure 4: Distribution of China Attitudes by Party

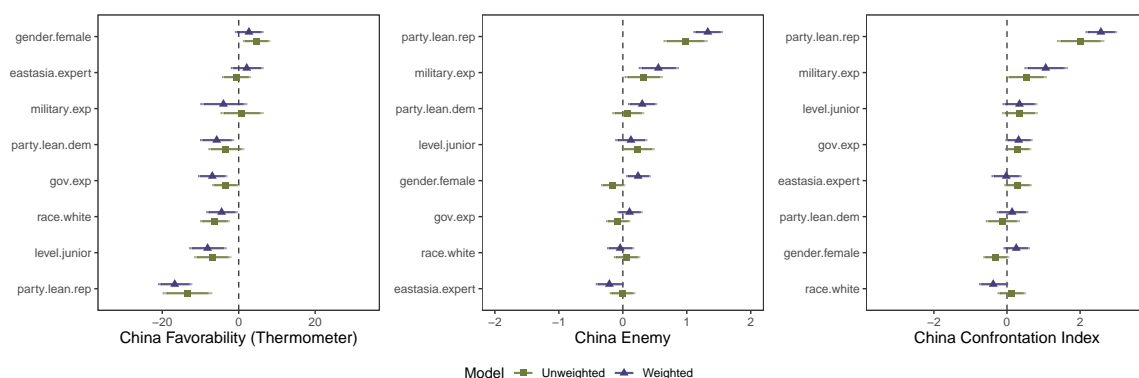


Note: The left-hand plot displays the weighted distribution of partisan attitudes towards China along the feeling thermometer. The right-hand plot shows the weighted distribution of partisan attitudes along the China Confrontation Index. The red dashed lines indicate the sample means.

Figure 5 visualizes the results of multivariate regressions exploring the determinants of three outcome variables: the feeling thermometer towards China, perceptions of China as an ‘enemy’ of the United States, and the China Confrontation Index. We observe that individuals that lean Republican, have military experience, and are junior professionals in general have more confrontational attitudes. Individuals that lean Democrat are not quite as confrontational as those who lean Republican, but compared to Independents, they view China less favorably and are more likely to perceive China as an enemy. Female foreign policy professionals in general view China more positively and expressed slightly less confrontational attitudes than their male counterparts. Respondents who were non-white expressed more favorable attitudes towards China, but were not significantly less confrontational in their policy views as aggregated by the China Confrontation Index.

Overall, the views presented in the survey were more moderate in tone than one might expect (including our own expectations as researchers). Respondents in general rejected the notion that the U.S. and China are in a new Cold War, that engagement was a failure, and that the PRC is an enemy of the United States. Though it is possible

Figure 5: Correlates of China Attitudes



Note: The figure displays the coefficient plots for three outcome variables regressed on relevant covariates. The thin line segments denote 95% confidence intervals, whereas the thick line segments denote 90% confidence intervals.

our sample has some degree of liberal bias given the small number of Republicans, it is unlikely our results are driven by this fact. If we reweight the data to partisanship in the DC metro area, the same general results hold despite modest shifts in the policy-level distributions (see bracketed statistics in Table 2).

Effects of the Identification Treatment

Turning to our experimental estimates, we examine whether pressure associated with the China ‘consensus’ encourages foreign policy professionals to shift their public beliefs about U.S.-China policy. Figure 6 visualizes the core treatment effects, with the top panels plotting pooled estimates and subgroup estimates below. We refrain from weighting these estimates to offer a simple and transparent perspective on the treatment effects, but readers should note that these results are substantially stronger when re-weighted to the DC Metro area (Supporting Information). We observe a large number of null effects in the aggregate—removing the perceived anonymity of the survey does not appear to have substantially affected respondents’ answers in the full sample, though there is some evidence that respondents in the treatment group were more

likely to report that China is an enemy of the United States ($\beta_{Treat} = 0.268$, 95% CI = $[-0.036, 0.500]$).

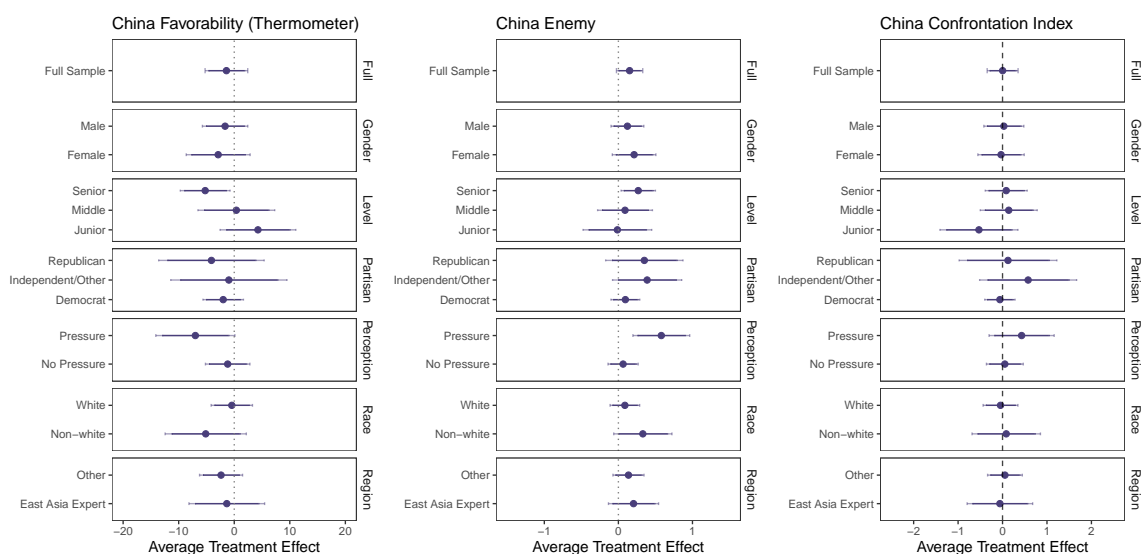
When we subset the data by demographic characteristics, we also do not see statistically significant results in general. Our hypothesis about junior professionals, for example, does not bear out in the experimental data with this sample (though our interview evidence suggests this may be consequence of a selection effect in the professional field). Interestingly, treated respondents in senior positions were more likely to report negative attitudes about China ($\beta_{TreatID} = -5.22$, 95% CI = $[-9.71, -0.748]$) and were more likely to report that China is an enemy of the United States ($\beta_{Treat} = 0.281$, 95% CI = $[0.048, 0.514]$).

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they or their colleagues “had ever experienced social pressure to express certain views on U.S. policy towards China.” About 21.4% of respondents ($n = 108$) answered “Yes,” 69.9% ($n = 353$), said “No,” and the remaining 8.71% of respondents ($n = 44$) refused to answer the question. This is the one sub-population where we observe consistent treatment effects—individuals who have experienced social pressure to express certain views on China appear to report more hawkish attitudes in the treatment group.

Figure 7 disaggregates the analysis one level further, plotting the results for the *china.favorability* and *china.enemy* questions, the China Confrontation Index, and the six policy variables that contributed most to its dimension, for both the full sample and the pressured subgroup.¹⁰ For transparency, we also plotted results for the second dimension of our PCA analysis and its associated policy questions. When anonymity is removed, among respondents who have experienced this type of social pressure, they were more likely to identify the PRC as an enemy of the United States, more likely to consider China’s military modernization a serious threat, more likely to agree that

¹⁰Given modest covariate imbalance among pressured respondents across the treatment and control groups, we employ entropy balancing prior to estimating treatment effects (?).

Figure 6: Pre-Registered Treatment Estimates



Note: Figure shows the effects of the identification treatment across three different outcome variables. The top panel shows the Average Treatment Effect for the full data, and the panels below show the Conditional Average Treatment Effects for different subgroups in the data. The lines reflect 95% confidence intervals.

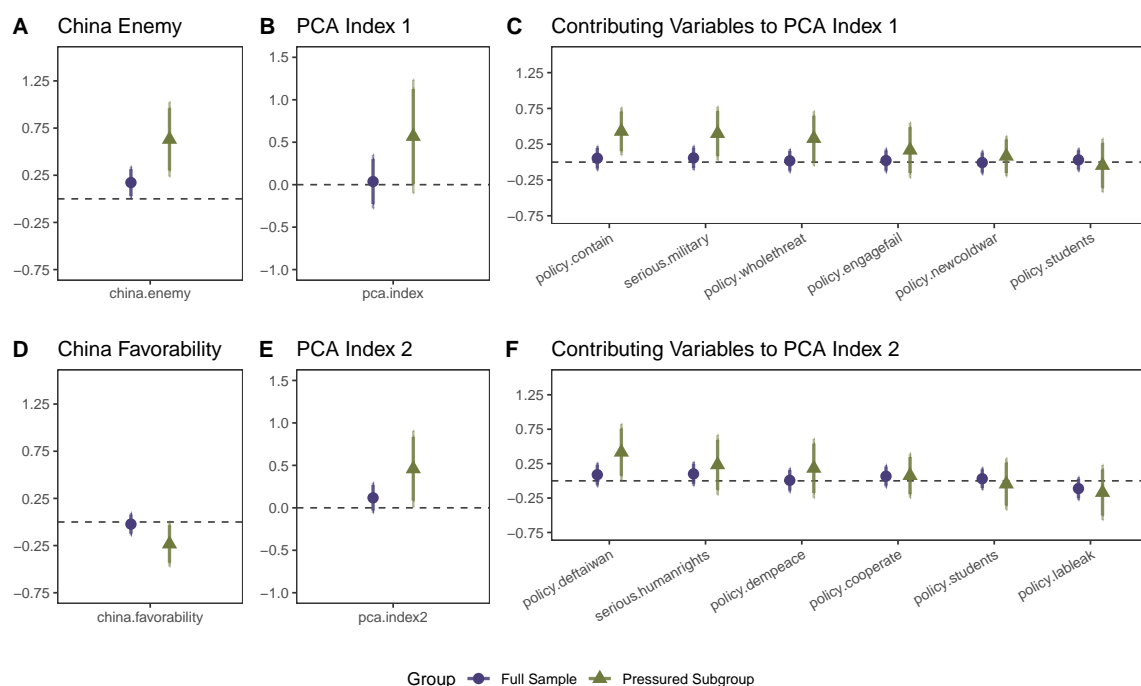
China needs to be rapidly contained, and more likely to express that the U.S. military should defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. For survey research, the magnitude of these effects are quite large, roughly a quarter to half point increase on a five point Likert scale.

Experiences of Pressure

Given these findings, it is evident our treatment does not behave uniformly across the population of American foreign policy professionals. In the aggregate, we observed little-to-no effect on attitudes towards China, but for “pressured” individuals, the effects are quite noticeable.¹¹ Figure 8 visualizes the probability that a given respondent

¹¹In the Supporting Information, we offer convincing evidence that this is a partial consequence of respondents with with more favorable attitudes towards China dropping out of the survey shortly after receiving the treatment. Moreover, we demonstrate that this should bias our estimates towards zero.

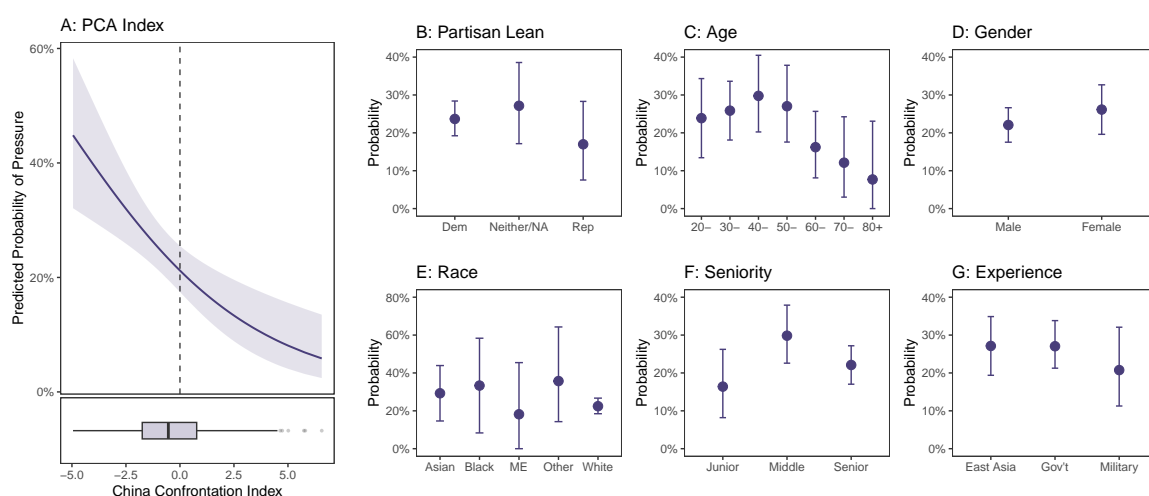
Figure 7: Treatment Estimates among Full Sample & Pressured Subgroup



Note: The plot visualizes the results of model estimates using weighted, heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors, and pre-registered controls. Subgroup estimates are exploratory. Coefficients are plotted with 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

experienced pressure according to their demographic and professional characteristics. Panel A plots experiences of pressure against the China Confrontation Index, visualizing how these experiences and perceptions are most felt by individuals with less confrontational attitudes towards China. Approximately 34% of respondents in the first quartile of the index reported this type of pressure compared to just 16% in the fourth, more confrontational quartile. In Panel B, we again see a distinct partisan dimension—Republicans appear less likely to report feelings of pressure (about 17%) and Democrats and Independents moreso (24% and 27%, respectively). This dovetails with the general finding that pressure seems to be most felt by individuals that hold less confrontational attitudes towards China. These individuals are more likely to be Democrats or Independents, and they appear to be most “squeezed” by the shift in

Figure 8: Correlates of Experiencing Pressure



Note: The figure shows the predicted probability of experiencing social pressure regarding attitudes towards China according to China Confrontation Index score. Panels B through G display bootstrapped means.

the China discourse.

Lastly, Panels D and E similarly demonstrate how experiences of pressure are also more prevalent among women and respondents from minority groups, notably Asian and Black foreign policy professionals. As evidenced in our data, the national security community remains primarily white and male, and respondents who were not in this dominant group tended to hold more moderate views towards China. Additionally, feelings of pressure appear most salient for mid-career professionals (Panel F) and we see an increase in these experiences as individuals approach middle age (Panel C), and then a decrease thereafter.

Qualitative Evidence

To complement our survey findings, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 55 American foreign policy professionals from September 2023 through July 2024.¹²

¹²The Supporting Information includes a list of 7-10 questions that were asked across most of the interviews, though the interviews frequently touched on a broader range of topics

The interviews generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted and recorded (with the interview subject's consent) on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Both researchers attended most interviews (62.5%), with the remaining interviews conducted by a single researcher. The vast majority of the individuals we approached agreed to do an interview.¹³ The interviews aimed to probe the subject's personal views on U.S.-China relations, their perceptions of their views relative to others in the field, and their experiences with social or professional pressure, among other topics. For example, with some subjects we discussed issues of funding and fundraising, interactions with the media, or perceptions of specific institutions in the U.S. government (i.e., the Biden White House, the House Select Committee, and so on). Many respondents brought in their expertise and focused their answers on specific issue areas (e.g., human rights, climate, technological competition).

In terms of subject pool, our approach focused more directly on individuals with U.S.-China policy experience, though we did include some subjects that did not have this regional expertise or worked on adjacent policy areas with relevance to the U.S.-China relationship. Overall, we aimed to interview a diverse set of people from a range of personal and professional backgrounds, representing different parts of the ideological spectrum. Given the low numbers of minority and conservative respondents in the survey, we also made a point of reaching out to a larger number of interview subjects in these groups to make sure their perspectives were adequately represented in the interview process. In doing so, we are confident we reached "meaning saturation"—over the course of the interviews, we began to hear the same set of themes repeatedly, to the point whereby additional interviews were not yielding significantly new insights or understanding (Fusch and Ness 2015; Hennink et al. 2017).

In addition to our interviews, our survey included an open-ended question where,

depending on the experiences and answers of the subject.

¹³Respondents were instructed that their answers and participation would be fully anonymous and any quotes used would be de-identified.

if respondents indicated that they or their colleagues had experienced pressure, they were prompted to describe their experiences. About 68% of respondents that viewed this question provided a response, yielding about 75 comments in total. We focus our qualitative discussion on the interview evidence, which is much richer, but we also incorporate the survey responses as appropriate. For both types of evidence, we will aim to provide direct quotes where possible, in addition to our own synthesis. We believe that letting our interlocutors speak for themselves is particularly important in this research setting.

As a final note, we carefully considered how our positionality as researchers may have affected the interview evidence along with ways to counteract potential biases (Holmes 2020). Both of us work at institutions perceived as liberal leaning, and both have been publicly associated with viewpoints that would likely be identified as less confrontational towards China. We both identify as Democrats. This may have affected our ability to reach certain types of interview subjects, though we did successfully reach individuals from the other side of the ideological spectrum, and those interviews were always cordial and informative. Throughout the process, we strove to maintain an ethos of impartial inquiry, to be open to a range of perspectives and to present them fairly and accurately in this paper and beyond.

Consensus and Perceptions of Others

In line with our survey findings (see again Table 2), we observed a diverse range of policy perspectives in our interviews. Our subjects were readily able to position themselves ideologically in the context of the broader foreign policy community, drawing out differences and similarities between themselves and other policymakers. We usually began interviews by prompting subjects to place themselves on the broader spectrum of attitudes towards China in Washington. Those who were particularly confrontational

towards China embraced the term “China hawk” and often self-identified as such (Interviews 06, 24, 47, 49 among others). Interview subjects who were more favorable towards engagement with China, or who felt certain aspects of the threat were overstated, generally did not embrace the term “dove” or would only jokingly use that word, instead using phrases like “moderate,” “pragmatic,” “principled,” “rational,” “analytical,” “nuanced,” “balanced”, or “evidence-based” (Interviews 03, 22, 26, 27, 28, 30, 32, 35, 53 among others). One respondent explained how the word “dove” was usually seen as a pejorative term in Washington, signaling a degree of naïvete:

I think the dovish-hawkish continuum is... usually used to slander views that are presented as dovish... hawkish is generally good and dovish is considered generally naïve. At least that is how people in Washington conceive of it... there's almost hawk inflation where people are competing to establish their credentials as tough enough to participate in the debate... (Interview 20).

Many respondents also rejected this continuum altogether, either viewing labels as unproductive or expressing that they were competitive on some policy questions and more engagement-oriented on others (Interviews 07, 25, 30, 42, 48, 50, 52). Notably, interview subjects who did not identify as hawkish were more defensive of their views and made greater effort to caveat their stances, often adopting a speech pattern of acknowledging certain threats or issues first before making their arguments about the issues with a more confrontational U.S.-China policy. Subjects who advocated more confrontational policies, in contrast, were generally less apologetic in their positions.

Though we did not have the time in our interviews to go issue by issue, we observed a wide range of opinions about the appropriate response to the challenges posed by a rising China. Some respondents favored diplomatic tools depending on the situation (Interviews 08, 11, 21, 29, 31, 32, 35, 42, 48, 53), others believed more conditionality on diplomatic interactions was needed (Interviews 31, 42), and others believed diplomacy was unproductive altogether (Interview 09, 47). Some believed human rights concerns

needed to play a more central role in the relationship (Interviews 34, 47) while others believed they derailed progress in other areas more central to national security (Interview 30). If pressed, effectively all respondents voiced support for and solidarity with Taiwan, though they disagreed about the nature of proper support, including whether the U.S. should intervene at all in the instance of invasion of Taiwan by the PRC (Interviews 40, 49, 51). Our more politically conservative respondents showed a range of perspectives on the appropriateness of advocating for regime change and drew distinctions between different wings of the American right (America First, isolationist, neo-conservative, and so on) (Interviews 01, 10, 13, 19, 23, 24, 49, 51, 52 among others). In most instances, our interview subjects' preferred policies did not cluster neatly into one box—they would express a more confrontational position in one area and less confrontational position in another. As one noted, “those hawk-dove lines are completely blurred because people have [a] hawkish diagnosis, but dovish prescriptions or a dovish diagnosis and even more hawkish prescriptions... I see a lot of fluidity in the debate, not a lot of rigidity” (Interview 50). This is in line with our quantitative analysis, notably the policy correlations in Figure 3, which suggest that China attitudes do not always neatly cluster or correlate, and classifying individuals into different types is somewhat misleading.

Despite this variation in viewpoints, many of our interview subjects believed that an overarching consensus had taken hold in the foreign policy and national security community. We often posed this question in reference to media commentary about ‘groupthink’, usually towards the end of the interview after they had the opportunity to explain their policy positions and experiences. Some of our survey respondents also noted this concern, unprompted:

A group think has emerged in Washington in which people are competing to out hawk each other (Survey Respondent 003).

Try going to DC to do a briefing and saying anything other than “China threat!” People roll their eyes now. Having a realistic and balanced discussion about China is difficult. Try publishing anything that isn’t “China’s rise is a threat”...the amount of mansplaining and “you haven’t changed my mind” is simply incredible. These are not scholarly responses. These are emotional responses (Survey Respondent 079).

DC policy groupthink on China sometimes leaves little room to criticize of policies that aim to contain China. In the current environment, it’s challenging but necessary to neutrally evaluate the likely costs and benefits of these policies (Survey Respondent 568).

Several subjects explained that their personal concerns about this ‘groupthink’ had changed over time, and that things had actually improved in recent months (Interviews 35, 40):

I think the groupthink is real, but I think it kind of ebbs and flows. I would put the high point at 2022, and the post-Ukraine war, I think drove a lot of very panicked assessments about Taiwan. The Davidson window I think started getting talked about before then. But I did notice this disturbing kind of mindset shift in when I would go to think tank events with the think tanks that are more plugged in to the admin especially plugged into the DoD. I just got a sense from listening to the speakers that they would have in either from government or from very government adjacent places, that there was this mindset of a Taiwan attack was a “when” question, not an “if” question. And that it seemed like all the discussions were not [only] about deterring. It seemed like a lot of the discussions were on war fighting. And I was like, I understand the need to have those discussions, but it just felt very like, “Whoa, it seems like you guys are very convinced that this is going to happen soon. Why? Where is this coming from?” (Interview 40).

Others pointed to the inception of the House Select Committee on Competition with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in January 2023 as the high point of groupthink dynamics and noted distinctions in mindset between politicians and the broader think tank community (Interviews 21, 29, 47). Some disagreed, pointing a “pushback” to

dominant narratives centered on influential figures in the policy community like Jessica Chen Weiss and Ryan Hass (Interviews 29, 33, 35).

Seems to me there's groupthink, and as much as anything, it's just like, what's the political environment? Who gets any benefit from saying something that goes against the tide of claiming Chinese threats across any kind of dimension you can imagine? And that's why I think it requires, and it's bold of people like [Weiss], [Hass], and I mean, you just have to be smart, or else you're going to be laughed out of the room (Interview 33).

Many of our interview subjects dismissed the notion of “groupthink” or believed the word to be inappropriate to describe the nature of current policymaking (Interviews 30, 47, 50, 51, 52, 55 among others), pointing to vigorous partisan debates in Congress or prominent publications like *Foreign Affairs*:

I wouldn't say there's groupthink because if there were groupthink, there wouldn't have been so much criticism of the Biden Administration from the right. The president would not have tried to intervene on certain questions in Congress in his own way since he's quite respectful of Congress's independence. But basically, I found that there were plenty of places where the White House and Congress and the two parties disagreed on some axiomatic questions and probably the most obvious of those was Taiwan policy, but also the balloon incident (Interview 50).

In commenting directly on the groupthink piece by Fareed Zakaria, one subject noted how it overemphasized the optics of the initial hearing of the House Select Committee:

I was pretty critical of him for that piece, actually. It's not always unfair to use that word in Congress, but in this particular instance, I think it was premature. Because again, I'm like, “Yeah, one hearing might give you a bit of that vibe.” ... But I don't think it's really a fair assessment to say it's groupthink, and part of that is probably because I'm pretty well-versed in the internal dynamics of the committee, and that there's been a lot of disagreement and discussion about the best way to approach certain issues and craft policy recommendations (Interview 47).

One interview subject explained why some individuals in the foreign policy community lamented the dynamics of groupthink, while others did not:

I think part of this is the elevation you're making your analysis from. I think if you're at 35,000 feet, there is a narrow parameter of debate or discussion such as it is, and there's sort of a fuzzy consensus of "China bad." I think that's true. I think once you start dropping down in elevation, you begin to see that there are clear debates and divisions.... Aside from a few folks who are sort of socially marginalized at the Quincy Institute, there's no radical debate about US foreign policy. The debate is "what is the size of the weapons package we sell to Taiwan?" There's no open debate about is Taiwan worth it and should we abandon it. So, groupthink is not quite the word that I feel describes it.. because it's far more fractious on the ground (Interview 30).

After fielding both the survey and interviews for this project, we tend to agree with this assessment. There is a relatively narrow set of parameters around which the China debate occurs and that set has narrowed over time, but within that space there is vigorous debate about strategy and tactics (Interviews 30, 35, 50, 51). As one subject summarized, there is consensus on the diagnosis, but not on the prescription (Interview 50). Whether respondents deemed this "groupthink" or problematic depended largely on their position within those debates and whether they felt personally squeezed by the rapid shift in the Overton window. In general, we found that professionals that felt marginalized in current discussions, or perhaps operated at the edge of the acceptable policy discourse, were more likely to use the language of "groupthink."

The Nature of Pressure

As we saw in the survey data, a sizable number of foreign policy professionals perceive a pressure to voice a certain point of view on China, and this feeling is more pervasive among those who are less confrontational towards China in their ideas. We sorted the open-ended survey responses into three different categories: those that indicated a pressure to be more hawkish/critical of China, those that indicated a pressure to be dovish/less critical, and those where the direction of pressure was indeterminate. Of the 75 revealed examples of social pressure, 60 (or 80%) expressed the sentiment that there was pressure to be more hawkish towards or critical of China.

The interview evidence provides a much richer sense of the social and professional context among China-focused foreign policy professionals. We observed some instances of what can be termed *direct pressure* or even censorship by bosses or other superiors within the organization (Interviews 37, 52). Many of these stories contain identifying information, but some of the quotes below from the survey responses are instructive:

Previously, a paper I authored was reviewed by higher-ups in the think tank and suggestions were made to change the language used to present China as posing a greater threat than I believed was the case. I did not ultimately incorporate those suggestions but there was significant pressure to do so (Survey Respondent 214).

At a previous think tank, not allowed to voice positive views of China (Survey Respondent 069).

Where I work we are encouraged/expected to hold militant views toward China (Survey Respondent 044).

Colleague aggressively arguing for defending Taiwan and attacking the personal character of people who felt otherwise (Survey Respondent 184).

One of our interview subjects recalled an instance where a piece they had written was directly censored by their boss because it was too critical of current China policies. The individual noted how their organization had a “party line,” lamenting that “It’s just very much macho talk and there’s not much space for nuance” (Interview 52).

We would note that these types of anecdotes were unusual in our both our interview and survey samples. For the most part, participants in our project appeared comfortable voicing their opinions at their places of work, especially with close colleagues and in private settings. Indeed, there was an obvious sorting process, whereby people gravitated towards institutions and positions that were consistent with their views (Interviews 08, 31, 40, 48 among others). More often, feelings of pressure centered around what types of policy positions and language were valued in Washington, what types

of people were “getting ahead” and what types of people were becoming marginalized. Many respondents and interview subjects noted that voicing more confrontational positions on China was the safest strategy to advance one’s career, and those who did not risked ostracism or backlash. Subjects had different ways of articulating the nature of these *career incentives*:

I also believe that this debate of hawkish versus dovish, we are talking about tidal patterns in a vast ocean, and you’re not going to get anywhere swimming against the tide. (Interview 20)

This is mainly about the problematic structure of how DC is organized in terms of relations between think tanks and funders, between think tanks and advocacy groups, or think tanks that are advocacy groups as well, because this is the vicious circle that happened. I mean, for a funder to give you funding, the first thing they ask you, they want to test whether you’re going to be influential. Are you able to influence policy? The ones who influence policy are the ones who are in good relationship with policy makers or at least have a connection. If you are singing outside of the choir and either you are partisan in a way like Republican or Democrat, and if you are a nuanced and you criticize both, you will not really have a big chance [of] being identified as influential (Interview 04).

I certainly have friends who are prominent scholars in this space, who have experienced backlash for being seen as weak on China, or they’re perceived as being almost potentially part of a fifth column that is undermining U.S. national security. So I think that the pressure to tow a certain line, I think that that pressure exists on the Hill. I think the members of the administration are pushing back, but they certainly feel that pressure I think especially in an election year (Interview 45).

This pressure was especially true of people wanting to enter into government at some point. Several subjects noted a bifurcation in the field, where people who wanted to serve in an administration had to be more circumspect in their language, and those with no intentions of ever serving in government again generally spoke more freely and critically (Interview 30).

Feelings of pressure appeared to be felt more acutely by the junior people in our subject pool, perhaps partially for this reason. The interviews were generally supportive of our original hypothesis about age and seniority.

I think being a younger woman in the field, I don't really want to stick my neck out in certain ways, I think, because I do see my own space in the field as a longer time horizon, if that makes sense... I think I really respect where [Identifying Information Omitted]'s coming from of she's just going to plant her flag and say what she wants to say. And I see that as more of a "late-stage career type" attitude (Interview 31).

I think that, yes, I think that as a young person and a liberal person and a woman in this field, there's a pressure to overcompensate by being more hawkish (Interview 12).

Anyone who tells you no is probably lying to you. Okay? I think there's definitely pressure to go with the herd no matter who you are, no matter what you do. Right now, there are two herds leading the pack. Sure, I think there's been pressure, there's been, "Well, you're only [Identifying Information Omitted], you don't know enough," or, "We've been doing this for a while," or, "This is how things are done," or, "Look at all these people over here and look who you are with." That kind of societal pressure, I think, definitely has been there. (Interview 49).

Many of our younger interlocutors reported being counseled to watch their words and carefully manage their reputations by senior colleagues and mentors. "I have been told to be careful not to be perceived as a panda-hugger," noted one survey respondent (Survey Respondent 206). Some of our more senior interview subjects noted the difficulties of being young in the field at the moment (Interview 38), and wished to be able to provide advice about how to navigate the professional environment (Interview 29). In contrast, nearly all of the senior people in our sample, especially those close to retirement age, felt little in the way of pressure, noting that they had developed and articulated their views over decades and were established entities in Washington (Interviews 10, 19, 29, 38, 39). This is indicative of the "late-stage career type attitude" identified by a younger interviewee (Interview 31).

Notably, interview subjects who identified as part of minority groups reported feeling unique pressures linked to their ethnic identities, though not uniformly so (Interviews 03, 32, 43, 46, 48, 49). As shown in Figures 5 and 8, members of these groups generally hold less confrontational attitudes and are more likely to perceive pressure than their white counterparts. Chinese Americans frequently noted concerns about people questioning their political loyalties (Interview 17, 26, 32, 35, 43). One subject put it bluntly—“Anybody who is of the Chinese diaspora and to the left of Gordon Chang, it’s open season on us. That’s what I think” (Interview 17). One lamented the general environment of racism in DC, where they felt their perspectives were undervalued, and who shared that they had received death threats from the general public for their positions on China policy (Interview 32).

Some of our Black interview subjects noted their general lack of representation in the policy community, which created a sense of distinct pressure and responsibility (Interviews 37, 41).

I find a lot of my peers, especially in the Black community that are doing the China work, they’re very concerned about the reputational risk. And I get it, because the reality is that Black folks don’t have many opportunities to mess up (Interview 37).

I never really let my guard down, unfortunately, because I realize that in those spaces I’m very self-censored and very self-surveilling because I represent a lot more than just myself. I represent my community in a way that I never thought before that moment. So that’s one of the challenges I’m always trying to navigate of how much of me is there but also how much am I representing other people in my community? So that in some cases, I think, is a challenge that some of my colleagues don’t have to necessarily navigate but I do (Interview 41).

Feelings of marginalization seemed especially pressing for our interview respondents who were both female and nonwhite, with some struggling to navigate the racial and gender dynamics of the national security community. Issues of identity and positional-

ity came up organically in the conversation with these subjects (Interview 03, 16, 36, 41), where they almost never did for white, male interlocutors.

Overall, policy views were the most predictive factor for whether an interview subject reported an instance of censorship or other less direct forms of pressure. With some exceptions, those who self-identified as “China hawks” or who worked at more conservative think tanks generally did not voice instances of feeling pressure in the way others did.¹⁴ Subjects who were specialists in human rights also did not convey such concerns (Interviews 34, 47). This is broadly consistent with the quantitative data presented in Figure 8 and the theoretical framework motivating the paper. Individuals who have policy views inside the current Overton window are less likely to perceive some pressure to conform or change their ideas, because they already operate within the boundaries of acceptable policy.

Coping Strategies

Across these interviews, many subjects described a range of coping strategies to deal with the pressures of the U.S.-China policy environment. The most drastic option is to *exit* the career path entirely. In some interviews, our interlocutors would question whether there was really a place for them in D.C., and some voiced a desire to leave national security as a profession (Interviews 17, 32, 36). One subject described how younger practitioners are “just very disillusioned, burnt out and disappointed in everything” (Interview 17). Others were resigned to the idea that they would never be able to serve in government given their views on China or previous work experience (Interviews 31, 36). We would note that by design, our project underrepresents these

¹⁴Notably, two of our survey respondents identified instances where they actually felt pressure to moderate their positions in a less confrontational direction out of concern as being viewed as racist towards the Chinese American community, but that issue did not come up in the interview setting. One respondent wrote, “On the left, any criticism of China is taken as “dangerous Asia-bashing” that will fuel violence and discrimination against people of Asian descent in the US.”

sorts of individuals. Our samples center on individuals currently working in the foreign policy/national security space, and we cannot systematically capture people who have left the industry entirely or took alternative career paths.

Another concern, and a hypothesis motivating the paper, would be if members of the community are engaging in some form of systematic *preference falsification* or other form of self-presentation bias (Kuran 1998; Shen and Truex 2021). Are members of this community voicing certain policy positions in public that they do not actually believe in private? In our survey we observed that for respondents who identified pressure, the act of attaching one's name on the answers did appear to induce more confrontational policy positions. Occasionally our interview subjects would identify this behavior among themselves or others in the community. One explained a pattern they dubbed "hawkflation."

So I don't think that there's that much misrepresentation of what people believe on specific issues. But when it comes to big picture sort of vibes questions, talking about China in general, I get the sense that my colleagues on average probably inflate their hawkishness on a scale out of 10 by maybe two points. So if people are a five on the dove to hawk scale, they'll represent themselves or talk about China as if they're a seven (Interview 20).

Another subject linked this behavior to ignorance in specific issue areas and concerns over being seen as naïve:

A lot of times when people don't understand, they tend more towards that hawkish perspective, because they don't have the nuance of the situation. But I also, again, I feel a little uncomfortable talking about some of these issues because I still feel like there's so much I don't know about it. And I think that there's a fear on my part and on a lot of other people's part of seeming naïve, and so the people overcompensate in the opposite direction by being more hawkish (Interview 12).

Several interview subjects noted distinct pressures facing politicians or their advisors, noting how these individuals would present their views on China quite differently

in public and private settings, often out of concerns as being seen as “soft on China” (Interviews 18, 45). As one subject described, “The one safe place to be these days if you’re campaigning for office is to be harsh on China. That’s a no-lose proposition, and being tagged by your opponent, and... it doesn’t matter what party you’re from, as, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re the person. You’re the person who is giving away the farm to China,’ it’s just dangerous for you if you’re campaigning” (Interview 18).

The above quotes are indicative of preference falsification—the act of adjusting one’s public preferences to fit some preconceived social norm (Kuran, 1998). Another form of self-presentation bias is self-censorship, simply keeping one’s mouth shut. The following survey response reveals this sort of logic:

If I say something balanced involving China, or advocate for something is effective and not counter-productive, a response from many is that I am only saying that because I must be paid for by China or in “Beijing’s pocket.” It is very hard, if not impossible, to have a thoughtful discussion of China – even when concerns are the same – given the reaction of many on the far right attack anything thoughtful or fact-based as “supporting China.” Thus, I don’t speak as much as I would in order to not provoke false attacks on my patriotism (Survey Response 47).

This sort of evidence should be balanced against the fact that for most of the survey sample, we did not observe any effect of the identification treatment. Moreover, the vast majority of our interview subjects felt they were able to be their authentic selves and perceived others around them to be doing the same (Interview 23).

Our sense is that rather than flat out self-censoring or misrepresenting their views, the more common coping strategy among the less hawkish thinkers was what we would term *discourse mirroring*. Our subjects would detail examples of how they would subtly adjust their language, assuaging their more hawkish colleagues by first acknowledging their concerns before trying to insert a more moderate point of view or set of facts. One interview subject explained:

I don’t think I felt pressure to say something I didn’t think, to change my perspec-

tive because it doesn't conform with kind of the mainstream thinking. But I will say, I'm mindful of how I talk about China. I'm mindful in certain situations to start out with saying certain things like, China is a challenge, there's a lot of difficult things in our relationship that we need to address, trying to pose a security issue, which are all things that I believe and are true, but I do sometimes feel a need to kind of state at the outset to, I don't know, ensure credentials in some ways, to set the tone just to the opposite side, set the temperature a little bit on that (Interview 22).

Others noted how this strategy was necessary to be taken seriously, as it helped assure their counterparts they were all on the same team:

Generally, I do say what I think. Situation matters affects how I say things. I think when you talk to people in the administration or on Capitol Hill, you have to first reassure them that you take protecting American national security as job number one. If you were to dismiss their concerns outright or not acknowledge them, you would be dismissed yourself. So usually, I will preface the kind of view that I just gave you about [Identifying Information Omitted] by explaining that I share the goal to protect American national security. We just have differences over how to achieve that (Interview 42).

One interview subject quipped about how this dynamic isn't that different from a functioning marriage:

There are times where I'm like, "Okay, I have to play the game," but I do it strategically. I play the game, but the substance of my comments aren't playing the game. They're saying, "Okay, I recognize the national security..." It's kind of like marriage. It's so weird. It's funny, it's like marriage when you're having a conflict or some sort of disagreement with your spouse, and you have to first validate and mirror what they've said to you and then start inserting strategically the other parts, and then they're more receptive to what your opinion is because you acknowledged what they're saying. You didn't dismiss it as madness entirely (Interview 37).

One survey respondent feeling push-back when trying to present China's perspective on an issue:

I was [at] a roundtable [and pointed out China's concerns about the U.S. military]. I'm not sure whether the one of the former officers actually used the term

“naive,” but that was very much the tone of the (all too typical) pushback. It’s an example of how even trying to view security threats from China’s perspective is discouraged.

Institutionally, this can mean refraining from using certain words entirely, or in framing existing initiatives and programming as combating the “China threat.” Several respondents noted that they or their organizations refrained from using the term “engagement”, which was viewed as a “dirty word” (Interview 30), especially if they were interacting with members of Congress. One survey respondent noted, “The terms ‘engagement’ and ‘cooperation’ are widely seen to be terms to be avoided, and if used, will flag you as a marginal voice in the policy discourse” (Survey Respondent 158).

There is an asymmetry at work with this dynamic. Our interlocutors that were less confrontational in their opinions often confessed the need to mirror more hawkish language in order to be taken seriously, but our more hawkish interlocutors did not confess the need to do the reverse. They tended to be fully comfortable in their positions and felt able to express them readily, without much concern for framing things to persuade the other side.

Implications for Policymaking

In the quantitative data and interviews, we observe a large range of viewpoints, yet nevertheless there is a persistent perception of pressure and groupthink among a significant portion of the foreign policy community. The experimental results, combined with the interviews, also suggest there is some degree of self-presentation bias at work. Some professionals, especially those that feel a stronger a pressure to conform because of their views, career stage, place of work, identity, or career ambitions, express a need to present themselves as more hawkish on China than they might actually be. This may not come in the form of actually falsifying their policy views in public, but in more subtle ways— choosing when not to speak up about an issue, avoiding certain words,

and framing policies in more confrontational ways to be seen as serious and persuasive.

Though this is more difficult to prove definitively, we suspect this results in a degree of *pluralistic ignorance* among foreign policy professionals, where individuals collectively believe the community is more hawkish than it is. This was certainly our experience as researchers—in looking at the data in Table 2 and experiencing the interviews, we were consistently surprised at how moderate and diverse the views were in the community. Indeed, only 23% of respondents believed the policy of engagement was a failure, and only 31% endorsed the notion of containment. It is noteworthy that the two most commonly referenced names in our interviews were those of former Congressman Michael Gallagher and the Trump administration’s former Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger. The viewpoints of these individuals tend to dominate the conversation, even in rooms they are not in. But their policy ideas are by no means representative of the population of foreign policy professionals.

Many of our respondents expressed concern that these social and professional dynamics lead to a degree of *threat inflation*, whereby certain issues take on outsized importance in the discourse, and may even be factually misrepresented. A number of interview subjects pointed to a pet issue where the public narrative was inaccurate—China’s social credit system, debt diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative, transnational repression and overseas police stations, or the PLA budget, for example (Interviews 02, 03, 33, 53 among others). Many noted how when they interacted with people in government, certain threat narratives were demanded, and more nuanced information would be dismissed (Interview 53). Several interview subjects noted the inherent difficulties in combating threat narratives or trying to “rightsize” threats, given the uncertainty:

One thing that immediately came to mind was there was and is a campaign against US municipalities signing deals with the Chinese SOE CRC for metro railcars, and the argument was that these could be mobile spy devices. Now, I

tend to think if you were the Chinese and you wanted to spy, you got a lot of other ways to do it rather than hooking up spy boxes and sending them on subway systems. Nonetheless, that was a big thing. The problem is you can say you think it's unlikely, but you can't say it's not possible. It's like an atheist on the existence of God. You can say you find it highly improbable, but you can't say it's not. So there's an asymmetry there (Interview 30).

Several respondents attributed certain aspects of threat inflation to the needs and budgetary interests of the American military (Interviews 02, 04, 05, 52):

There have been claims that China's military spending is dramatically higher than they state... approximately three times higher than what they say. There's a realm in which that could maybe be true, but that doesn't align with what I see. I think there are a lot of reasons why, for example, China can build things at a much cheaper rate than we can. ... So I think a lot of that is being rhetorically used to paint China as even more powerful than it is, which I think is concerning (Interview 02).

People are trying to push a specific policy. And let's use an example, reinvigorating our military, improving our industrial capacity so that we can have the ships and the weaponry that we would need for a great power conflict. That's essential for us to do, but it's very hard to get Congress to do anything. And we're in such a bad situation here that I think what happens is people amplify threats to make them seem more threatening than they are. Case in point being the whole idea of an invasion of Taiwan by China like that's coming imminently... ...why does everyone on Capitol Hill want to make that trip to Taiwan to showcase how tough they are on China? If they honestly thought there was going to be a war, I don't think they'd go there.... I hear this as well, "Yeah, but it's inconvenient to say that there's not going to be war in 2027, because we need changes made right now" (Interview 52).

Relatedly, many interview subjects expressed concern that conclusions about certain aspects the China threat, notably Xi Jinping's timeline and intentions about Taiwan, were taken as truth with little in the way of actual hard evidence (Interviews 25, 30, 33, 52 among others). One subject described this:

There's a lot of hypothetical speculation. I think the most significant of all of these is the now very concrete perception in the minds of so many people that

there is an imminent invasion of Taiwan as in that is a plan. There are many people who believe there is a date (Interview 25).

Again, as before, not all of our survey respondents or interview subjects expressed concerns about threat inflation. Indeed, those who favored a more confrontational approach would contend that the U.S. government continues to underestimate the nature of the threat posed by China (Interviews 46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 53). Those closer to the median of our sample would provide a modest assessment. One subject noted, “We were probably way too short of the mark from a security threat perception standpoint for a very long period of time. Now in a lot of ways we’re well beyond the mark” (Interview 25).

Notably, a minority of respondents felt pressure away from confrontation. For example, some survey respondents reported being asked to be more “moderate” or “tone it down” in regards to their rhetoric (Survey Respondents 078, 084). This experience appears to more noticeable for individuals working within international institutions. As one survey respondent noted, “Within the global development community, I think there is an unwritten pressure to support ‘cooperation’ with China on key development issues such as global health or climate change” (Survey Respondent 109). Others noted how similar pressure existed during the free trade era, during which China hawks were the individuals who felt marginalized (Interviews 19, 52).

Conclusion

Our results complicate the notion that an overarching ‘consensus’ has taken hold among foreign policy and national security professionals. Most of our participants reported unfavorable views of the Chinese government and its behavior. These attitudes are principled and predicated on specific concerns about Chinese behavior ranging from domestic repression to economic protectionism to military coercion towards U.S. allies

and partners. Even more diverse, however, is how these professionals assess these concerns at the policy-level. In both our quantitative and qualitative data, we observe a wide range of preferred approaches spanning diplomacy, competition, and confrontation.

Nevertheless, our results demonstrate that concerns about ‘consensus’ or ‘group-think’ should not be dismissed outright. Some of their classic ingredients are present—feelings of pressure to conform, a degree of self-censorship, and a need for self-preservation (Janis, 1972; Wohlstetter, 1962; Duelfer and Dyson, 2011; Jervis, 2013). Our results suggest a significant distortion in the ‘marketplace of ideas’ (Kaufmann, 2004), and that the China discourse in American foreign policy circles is unhealthy and even toxic for some individuals and in some issue areas. This appears particularly acute for people who sit outside dominant narratives and cultural norms in the foreign policy community, such as among women, racial and ethnic minorities, and younger professionals. While we do not observe evidence of widespread preference falsification, some people do appear to engage in various self-presentation strategies that might make them appear more hawkish and confrontational than they really are. Combined, this dynamic might produce a degree of pluralistic ignorance in the foreign policy community, where people overestimate the level of consensus, inflate the level of threat, and believe collective opinion to be more confrontational than it really is.

At a personal level, we benefited greatly from hearing perspectives from a broad range of foreign policy experts, including the ideas of individuals with whom we might disagree, and with whom we would not have normally interacted with in social and professional settings. It was hard to come out of this project and not have more complex, nuanced views of U.S.-China relations than when we started. We would close by noting that Janis (1972)’ central prescription for improving foreign policy decision-making is to encourage group members to raise doubts and to question their own

assumptions, not just those with whom they disagree. Rigorous intellectual debate is essential to good foreign policy-making, and we hope this paper inspires more.

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