Evolving Threat Narratives:  
The Case of China’s Transition from Foe to Friend during Rapprochement  

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ABSTRACT

This research endeavor attempts to better understand the nature of American threat narratives, how narratives evolve, what drives the change, and finally, what it all means for perceptions of threat to the US. The *raison d'être* of this study is to understand the implications of bias on evolving threat narratives and threat calculus and ultimately determine its impact on perceptions of friend and foe. The case study of China during the years of rapprochement is enlightening as it helps inform many of these questions around American threat perception. Contrary to popular opinion, changing American perception of external threat may not be caused primarily by actions of the threat actors. Instead, American perceptions change as threat narratives evolve based on phenomenon located on the American domestic front. To a large extent, threat narrative creation is shaped by domestic sources of bias and transparency with the former introducing elements of subjectivity and the latter elements of objectivity.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This research attempts to better understand the nature of American threat. The purpose of this study is to understand the implications of bias on evolving threat narratives and threat calculus. The case study of China during the years of rapprochement is enlightening as it helps inform many of these questions around American threat perception. Contrary to popular opinion, changing American perception of external threat may not be caused primarily by actions of the threat actors. Instead, American perceptions change as threat narratives evolve based on factors on the American domestic front. To a large extent, threat narrative creation is shaped by domestic sources of bias and transparency with the former introducing elements of subjectivity and the latter elements of objectivity.
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Not only we but all the people of the world will have to make our best effort if we are going to match the enormous ability, drive, and discipline of the Chinese people. Otherwise we will one day be confronted with the most formidable enemy that has ever existed in the history of the world (Griffin, 2014, 237).

Richard Nixon—Diary entry from February 1972, the same month he made peace with China

The most fundamental method of work... is to determine our working policies according to the actual conditions. When we study the causes of the mistakes we have made, we find that they all arose because we departed from the actual situation...and were subjective in determining our working policies (Cooper, 1972, 223).

Mao Zedong—“The Thoughts of Mao Zedong”

And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 176).

Biblical verse—John 8:32; adopted by Allen Dulles as the CIA’s motto

Part I. Prologue

When China transitioned from enemy to friend of the United States under the guiding hand of President Richard Nixon in 1972, American threat narratives around China were in a state of immense flux. After more than two decades of hostile narratives, China moved into the unprecedented position of ally. The shroud of secrecy surrounding this departure only added to the mystique of how and why the two countries drastically altered the terms of their relationship. Between Henry Kissinger’s secret advance party meeting, covert messaging vis-à-vis respective allies, the famous Ping Pong Diplomacy, and Nixon’s culminating visit, the United States and China normalized relations in the most unorthodox of manners.
After a rapprochement that shocked the world, no one could have envisioned how this change would impact the long-term relationship between the two countries. Within the larger geo-strategic picture, the Soviet Union may have provided the impetus for this transition; however, the eventual Soviet demise pushed the Sino-American relationship into uncharted territory. Highlighting the uncertainty around the very nature and longevity of American engagement with China, President Nixon shortly before his death told New York Times columnist William Safire, “we may have created a Frankenstein” (Browne, 2015, C2). This ambivalence at the end of Nixon’s life on China’s readiness to become an ally is indicative of a larger trend within American thought that encapsulates the many reservations and vacillations over time on views of China with respect to security.

This incredibly complex and momentous occasion of rapprochement is worth exploring because of the lessons that we can learn regarding how the US views threat as well as its own insecurity. The rapprochement with China offers a unique glimpse into a dramatic shift in American security narratives from those of hostility and fear to those of partnership. Also, a whole host of sources of domestic bias and transparency influenced the journey as China moved from threat to partner. The details of rapprochement in the 1970s, its significance, as well as the meaningful events that contributed to its manifestation will be discussed later in the introductory chapter.

Many questions exist around the precise reasons for China’s transition from American enemy to friend at this particular moment in time as well as others in the tempestuous Sino-American history. During the rapprochement of the 1970s, was it virtuous motives that drove Nixon to bring China to the table of nations? Was it
America’s concern over a rising China (Griffin, 2014, 237)? Was it a confluence of mutually friendly acts and hints at peace on the part of both countries at a fortuitous moment in time (Kissinger, 2011, 220-225)? Was it the reemergence of the China Lobby that had been so powerful in the 1930s and 1940s? Or, finally, was it solely a Realpolitik balancing act against the Soviets who had become estranged from China (Brzezinski, 2012, 19)? In all of these scenarios, a certain level of subjectivity may have crowded out the more objective security narratives and precipitated such change. Emotions may have trumped cold-hard facts or, on the contrary, the fog of emotions might very well have cleared to more plainly reveal the threat truth that had been present for years and merely masked by inherent biases.

The role of evolving threat narratives around the American portrayal of China from the 1940s through the 1970s helps to inform how China transitioned from enemy to friend. Moreover, it sheds light on the larger picture of how the US has historically seen its security with respect to China. The series of events leading up to rapprochement is intriguing because of the implications that can be gleaned around how America perceives its own insecurity. Delving into the specific security narratives helps to paint a picture of threat inflation and deflation, changing perspectives, and policy transition. The storylines of insecurity encapsulate sentiments of the times and help outline the prevailing threat mindset. Understanding the threat narrative evolution and the role that actors and ideology play in furthering and detracting from these narratives could inform how the concept of threat, often believed to be objective in nature, is actually a highly subjective construction.
The manner in which the US adopted a quasi-friendship with China in the 1970s after so much hostility in the previous decades is significant because of how quickly the perceived threat of China dissipated. From the late-1940s until the mid-1960s, nearly all American threat narratives around China pointed to an extremely hostile, unpredictable country prepared for war and bent on testing American limits. Was this threat level artificially elevated due to subjective narratives in the 1950s and the departure from this mindset in the 1970s merely a return to a more objective view of threat?

Setting aside the reasons for the departure for a moment, the threat narratives in the US during the late 1960s astoundingly morphed into friend narratives centered on balancing with China against the Soviets, China’s desire for high-level diplomatic dialogue, and even a slowing of Chinese nuclear weapon production. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a warming-up period in Sino-American relations reminiscent of the 1930s and early 1940s when the desperately pro-China, China Lobby guided American diplomatic dealings with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Government. Following WWII, however, America saw China as capable enemy intent on conflict. This post-war view of China evolved to that of a weakening country, albeit potential ally, caught up in the midst of a debilitating Cultural Revolution. Narratives of an injured China then quickly progressed once again into those of a strategic friend in several short years. In totality, the 20th century was a highly turbulent and transitional time for American notions of both insecurity and security with respect to China.

The belief today that Nixon’s engagement with China, the same ilk employed by the following eight US administrations, would help spur liberalization in China is being questioned. President Barak Obama’s Asian “pivot” – designed to both comfort
American allies in the region as well as reinvigorate America’s power in Asia – appeared to question engagement in light of containment. Moreover, Presidents Obama and Xi shared state dinners and met at global diplomatic events while challenging each other in the fields of cyber security, free travel in the South China Sea, and currency manipulation. President Trump has adopted a similar stance where he travels to China and hosts Xi at Mar-a-Lago, but still openly criticizes Chinese economic and military actions. In one of the most public examples of emerging threat to American interests, China continues to expand its island network in the South China Sea while the US continues to exert its right to free travel in international waters by travelling inside the requisite 12-mile boundary for sovereign territory. Both countries are waiting for the other to blink. Diplomatic niceties are set to collide with those tensions lying just below the surface. With increased attention on the strategic importance of China today, a potential China “rethink” is in order to review policy solutions that span the spectrum from dusting off early Cold War containment approaches to continuing along a refreshed engagement strategy (Browne, 2015, C1-C2). The spectrum of potential solutions and policy prescriptions differs extensively and, not surprisingly, are concocted by a wide variety of China-hands, think tanks, and policy wonks.

A Sino-American relationship which moves between friend and foe and oscillates on various issues at different times is almost as transitory as the changing of seasons. It is a relationship best characterized by the frenemy moniker. Perhaps these threat orientation changes are tied less to the threat truth, or actual conditions, that China poses and more to subjective manifestation of competing threat narratives within the US. The influence of human agency, ideology, and the domestic environment on both the subjective creation of
threat narratives as well as the interpretation of the narratives could be more impactful than the changing capabilities or intent of a foreign state. Moreover, the distinction between threat narrative and artful rhetoric on threat is in the eye of the beholder.

Exploring China as a security case study during the rapprochement years sheds light on the larger, meta question around how the US sees its own insecurity. It allows us to focus on how the US looks at threat, the time horizon of this view, and the factors that alter this outlook. The rapprochement case study allows for an examination of threat and the narratives that influenced this change within a larger Sino-American security discussion. Abstracting a layer higher from China in particular, we can see how the US sees threat more holistically. This country agnostic view focuses on how the US interprets insecurity more broadly. Thus, the overarching goal of inspecting China during rapprochement would be to better understand the larger implications for how the US fundamentally sees threat while still grounding itself in the actual events of a case study that provide specific details.

As far as the roadmap for this study, Part I will examine the research question. Following the discussion of research focus, it will move into the methodology for how the research was conducted and why this particular approach was adopted. In order to ground the methodology and case selection, the conclusion of Part I will focus on the rationale for selecting the case of China rapprochement. Part II will concentrate on the theoretical underpinnings of the study and dive into the notions of threat and threat narratives. Part III is the substantive portion of the study and will examine the historical Sino-American relationship as a way to contextualize the period of rapprochement. The latter half of this section will delve into the actual threat narratives around China during
the distinct periods of evolving enemy narratives and evolving friend narratives. It will also explore the sources of bias as well as transparency during these periods. This part will end with a conclusion section designed to summarize the overall findings with respect to the original research question. Finally, in the Epilogue, there is an implications perspective around how we can better understand threat narrative construction and evolution with respect to China today. This section will problematize how threat around China is constructed in modern times in an attempt to better understand the American threat psyche and how sources of bias and transparency are currently influencing the playing field.
1. Introduction
A. Research Question

As a young intelligence analyst for the US Government, I was intrigued by how sources of subjectivity crept into macro assessments on the future threats posing the nation. While the US intelligence apparatus is by far the best the world has ever seen, the melding of secret and public intelligence within the landscape of domestic politics often introduces elements of bias that the nation’s leaders must then make decisions upon.

Quadrennial reviews for federal agencies such as the Department of Defense and Homeland Security often attempt to rank top threats to the US in the upcoming years. As with any sound budgetary exercise, these top national threats are the basis by which resources are then allocated. The potential fallacy of this exercise, and one that caught my attention and has been the center of my pursuit over the past several years, is how sources of bias and transparency can influence the very threat narratives that the US Government professes and which ultimately baseline threat assessment and calculus. It is in this space of threat narrative construction, evolution, and sources of bias and transparency that the story begins.

My primary research question is simple: are US threat narratives changing? [yes or no] Several sub-questions designed at going more in-depth are: why are they changing and how do changes influence notions of threat? This study’s raison d’être is to better understand, from the US perspective, the implications of subjective and objective notions on threat narratives in the calculus that ultimately decides if a country is foe or friend. Said another way, how are sources of bias and transparency introduced to the threat picture?
Threat appears to resemble a flickering light, waxing and waning due to reasons that may not always be tied to objective notions of insecurity. Subjectivity in the form of internal and external factors plays a role in how this threat beacon glows brightly at times in which it may not be warranted through an objective lens alone. As the level of subjectivity to a threat picture increases through fictional or biased narratives, the more the notions of insecurity skew away from truth. On the flip side of the coin, the more transparency that is introduced with the stripping away of subjective narratives, the true, objective security narratives stand a better chance of presenting themselves. The challenge, of course, is in identifying when subjectivity is skewing the threat picture away from the actual conditions.

The crux of the argument here is that the further a country drifts from objective narratives of threat, the further that country moves away from the truth with respect to its own insecurity. I will explore this notion of truth further in the theory chapter (Chapter 2). If subjective narratives can be identified and minimized, it would go a long way in stemming faulty notions of threat. While this sounds like a tall task, the rapprochement with China in the 1970s provides some key lessons in how subjectivity crept into the security narrative construction. It also presents some reasons for how this subjectivity was eventually minimized. For example, increased high-level dialogue, improved intelligence, and a common cause went a long way in dispelling some of the subjective notions of insecurity that had gripped the US and its threat narratives around China in the prior three decades. In other words, measures focused on removing layers of interpretation, eliminating guess work, and building touchpoints for partnerships can
prevent what Mao himself called, “mistakes” when countries “depart from the actual situation…and were subjective” (Cooper, 1972, 223).

Rapprochement is an informative case because of China’s historical record of flitting in and out of the American threat picture with great variability. How subjectivity influenced the dynamic threat evolution even in light of relatively unchanged threat characteristics, could help to explain this phenomenon. Isolating one specific, momentous change in US threat perspective around China helps to explain how subjectivity often trumps objectivity in threat calculus. This research is focused on answering what do changing narratives and a prevalence of subjectivity tell us about US threat calculus? When it comes to threat, the US has traditionally had a short attention span. By delving into how China has transitioned into and out of the threat landscape, we will be able to learn more about how the US sees insecurity.

Stating that a certain level of subjectivity is inherent in all countries’ threat calculus is a not a tautology because many casual observers believe that threat assessment and narration is a solely objective endeavor. It is when the politicians and threat assessors themselves believe there is a high level of objectivity in their views, that fiction is introduced into the calculus. When the possibility of subjectivity is acknowledged and the players are cognizant of its role and influence, a greater effort is paid to identifying and minimizing cases of subjectivity; however, after periods of complacency, naivety, or even the more egregious cases of knowing subversion and manipulation, objectivity is professed at the peril of truth.

In a recent book on threat inflation, American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear, Stephen Van Evera provided several examples throughout history where American
threat calculus quickly and incorrectly fell prey to subjectivity. To say that inherent subjectivity has influenced American threat calculus and clouded threat narratives would not be an understatement; however, going as far as to say that American threat calculus is victim to more subjectivity than other states is more difficult to defend. Van Evera noted a threat calculus error where the George W. Bush Administration believed that Saddam Hussein had chemical and biological weapons and an active nuclear program. The Iraq threat narrative that was constructed in the US also had elements of Saddam’s ties to al Qaeda (Van Evera, 2009, xiii). While this threat narrative against Iraq had supporters within the intelligence and policy communities, it proved to be false with subjectivity playing a key role in the arrival at faulty conclusions.

Van Evera also notes that other countries, however, have similarly created threat narratives that were subjective and located in highly charged periods of history. He offered the case of Germany prior to WWI when threat narratives about its neighbors were created by many actors and amplified by newspapers and leaders. In 1904, the German naval attaché in London sent reports about Britain’s impending aggression that made Kaiser Wilhelm believe Britain would attack in the Spring. In 1909, Chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen believed and spoke of an imminent attack from Britain, France, Russia, and Italy (Germany’s ally). Finally, General Friedrich von Bernhardi, Germany’s top publicist, amplified these threat narratives of Germany’s imminent encirclement by belligerent enemies when he wrote to the masses, “France aims solely at crushing Germany by an aggressive war” and menacing “Slavonic waves” will attack from the East (Van Evera, 2009, xiii). These pre-WWI German threat narratives highlight the presence of subjective (and baseless) threat narratives which
create a reality of war that in turn spurs the creation of subsequent supporting threat narratives. It is almost as if it only takes one or two biased or faulty threat narratives that can steer a nation down a path towards a fictional interpretation of threat reality. A disinformation campaign can paint reality in the absence of other, “accurate” information.

Looking specifically at China during the “Era of Mao” as a case study and using actual CIA intelligence estimates on China, we can begin to dissect potential subjectivity within the US Government that may have inflated threat. Subjectivity had many possible sources: the China Lobby, anti-communist movement, and the CIA’s covert operations to name a few. Inspecting the national security threat narratives put forth by the US Government that helped to sustain threat narratives in the 1950s as well as support the subsequent shift from foe to friend in the late 1960s and 1970s is critical to understanding this threat calculus and the inherent biases. Knowing that the Chinese threat beacon dimmed in the late 1960s and early 1970s even while many indicators of its objective threat changed only slightly is illuminating. The threat truth around China at this time, with the benefit of hindsight, was that its relationship with the Soviets was failing, its cultural and political concerns were weakening, and it was trying to ally with the US. This reality however had begun as early as the 1950s. Even with these changes occurring in the Soviet-relations and cultural arenas, the Chinese military was continuing its nuclear testing through the mid 1960s as well as maintaining its large army. It was a period of conflicting narratives that should not have been a foregone conclusion either way on whether China was a menacing threat or an impotent, isolated state.

To better understand the connections between threat narratives and threat reality, as defined by national security policy towards that country, I have examined threat
narratives during a period of dramatic change in American national security policy. Not many shifts in American national security policy outstrip that, in both level of significance and speed to change, of rapprochement with China in the early 1970s. The change from enemy to friend status for China was so abrupt and consequential that a closer examination of the prevailing threat narratives sheds light on how the threat picture was turned upside down in a few short years.
B. Methodology

I have employed discourse analysis to explore American threat narratives. My case study looks specifically at American threat narratives around China during the period of rapprochement. I narrowed the scope of text evaluated to official discourse in the form of declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) from the period of 1948-1976.

The matrix below helps to frame the substantive area stratification of threat narratives around China while time boxing the periods of narrative prevalence in official discourse. By organizing these narratives in such a framing construct, I was able to isolate sources of subjectivity during different periods. I was also able to see if and how the narratives changed during the different periods and identify potential factors that contributed to threat evolution in an inter-period sense. Notional threat narratives are included below in the framing matrix.

Table 1. Framing Matrix

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<tr>
<td>Military</td>
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<td>Threat narrative 6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threat narrative 2</td>
<td>Threat narrative 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Threat narrative 3</td>
<td>Threat narrative 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Threat narrative 4</td>
<td>Threat narrative 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threat narrative 5</td>
<td>Threat narrative 10</td>
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Several operational questions are important to address at the outset. The most significant is around how I identified what counts as a narrative. While I have already limited the potential narrative genres in this study to those of military, economic, and political nature, a more defined approach to identify the presence of an actual narrative is necessary within those larger substantive areas. Several potential options existed to
conduct the discourse analysis and “identify” a narrative. I could have looked for keywords or phrases or utilized textual analysis software such as http://atlasti.com to conduct word and phrase counts. I could have also interviewed authors of the official discourse in an attempt to try to unpack the assemblage of these documents. Finally, there was the option to compare older drafts of NIEs to their follow-on NIEs in the same substantive areas to gauge change. This final option is the one that I selected.

As a way to define what constitutes a narrative, I developed a set of criteria. First, I elected to view narratives as those storylines that spanned multiple NIEs. As such, there must be an element of continuity in thought to present the idea as an engrained mindset. Thus, there is an element of traction embedded in this criterion since in general the NIEs were judgements composed every three to four years in each substantive area. If a certain storyline manifest itself in multiple NIEs, the logic is that the narrative had multi-year staying power of six to eight years. Second, in an effort to ensure a particular storyline is of significant importance, it should also appear in the “conclusion” section located at the beginning of the NIEs. Due to the nature in which NIEs are organized, a major conclusion in the NIE is representative of a substantial judgement by the community on an issue. These summary judgments generally appear in the beginning of the NIEs and are then supported by detailed analysis throughout the body of the document. While simple, these criteria allow for only those narratives with both staying power and paramount importance to bubble to the top.

I elected not to use a keyword or phrase frequency analysis primarily because it could have led to faulty conclusions based on word usage in an inexact manner. In other words, while frequency measures are often utilized in discourse analysis, the mere
presence of a keyword such as “USSR” in a document would provide a faulty picture if analyzed by frequency instead of how it was actually used. While many NIEs in the 1950s used “USSR” in the text, it was used in a context of partnership with China. However, even if the frequency of the “USSR” keyword remained the same in the NIEs of the late 1960s, it had a drastically different context—one of extreme conflict with China.

To explore these research questions and focus on a dynamic period of American threat narrative evolution, I chose the transitional period from the 1950s and 1960s when China was seen as an enemy by the US through the 1970s when China transformed into more of a quasi-friend. Using over 70 declassified National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on China (nearly 3,000 pages in *Tracking the Dragon: National Intelligence Estimates on China During the Era of Mao*) by the CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE), I charted security narratives and explored how these narratives progressed. With the advantage of hindsight, I was able to understand how closely these narratives aligned with the actual situation within China as well as the international arena. The foundational importance of these documents to my research lies in how they played an “essential role in helping US Government leaders formulate policy towards China” (Tracking the Dragon, ix). These documents truly form the basis for “official” American views on China during this period following WWII through rapprochement (1948-1976) and provide valuable insight into the narrative evolution.

The intelligence estimates are generally designed to explore the three critical areas of the Chinese military, economy, and political system. The estimates were written as separate assessments every four to five years to cover each of these areas. This four to
five-year span was commonly the length of the period for which the judgements were valid. On some occasions, an estimate was produced sooner than this regular frequency in cases of radical changes in threat perception or at the behest of the President. The estimates written along these three substantive areas conveniently served as a way to organize my research design and track the narrative progression of thought along these three spectrums. For example, when comparing and contrasting Chinese military threat narratives throughout this period of transition, I used the following NIEs:

- 1964 NIE “The Chances of an Imminent Chinese Communist Nuclear Explosion”
- 1967 NIE “China’s Strategic Weapons Program”
- 1972 NIE “China’s Military Policy”
- 1974 NIE “China’s Strategic Attack Programs”

These NIEs present the threat narratives around China’s nuclear program that span the time when the Sino-American relationship changed and illustrate a progression of thought on China’s nuclear threat. They collectively depict an evolution in the nuclear narrative on China during this period.

I used discourse analysis methodology to inspect these texts along with interviews of relevant China experts and intelligence community players. I utilized the theory of norm dynamics as a guiding framework to organize the emergence, acceptance, and internalization of friend and foe narratives at these important junctures in time. This was not a quantitative analysis of how certain narratives “won out” against other narratives, but how security narratives emerged and consolidated to move China from enemy to friend as defined by policy changes during rapprochement.

Discourse analysis allowed for careful evaluation of texts in a given period and provided structure for the research. Lene Hansen’s discourse analysis research design
helped inform how to structure my analysis. Her book *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* provided a thoughtful overview of how to select sources and time periods as well as employ discourse analysis as a productive methodology. The following diagram depicts the four overarching areas of focus for this research design.

Figure 1. Research Design

**Research design for discourse analysis (Hansen, 2006, 75)**

Question of Selves

Before employing the discourse analysis methodology, several key research questions had to be answered. The first was around the choice of Selves or “how many states, nations, or other foreign policy subjects one wishes to examine” (Hansen, 2006, 75). Since this research focused on the American perspective of threat, there was one “American Self” which would be represented by the CIA in the form of the National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIEs).

The intelligence analysis under inspection in this research was limited to those estimates produced by the CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE). The classification of these estimates was at the TOP SECRET and SECRET levels; however, all have been declassified in this volume due to the Freedom of Information Act and the required 25 or 50 year waiting period. A very limited amount of the material in the estimates remains
redacted today and was masked on the pages. While the estimates were written by ONE, they represent a level of socialization among the entire US Intelligence Community. These estimates were generally requested by the President or National Security Council and written in a six to eight week period by ONE. The initial draft was presented to the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) who then socialized it with the US Intelligence Board (USIB). If objections to judgements were raised by other agencies, these objectives were noted in the final draft. This process presented a multi-level bureaucratic system that placed the onus of the draft on the CIA with the possibility for light dissention from the DIA, INR, and NSA (Tracking the Dragon, 2004, x).

During the period of this study, ONE was comprised of ten individuals on the National Estimates Board and twenty on the National Estimates Staff. Together this group produced roughly fifty estimates a year. While this group had extremely high security clearances, it was often sealed off from high-level White House policy decisions such as sensitive options under consideration by the President. When ONE was given information about policy courses to help with directional judgements, these estimates were classified as Special National Intelligence Estimates or SNIEs. (Cooper, 1972, 224-225). SNIEs were “short, tightly focused papers…designed to provide consumers with policy-relevant analysis needed under a short deadline” (Richelson, 2008, 376). While NIEs were more open-ended requests for intelligence, SNIEs were more focused in nature to address a specific policy concern.

**Question of Texts**

The second research question was around type of texts that would be examined or the intertextual models. The first model is official discourse; second is “wider political
debate, oppositional political parties, and corporate groups”; and the third is popular culture (Hansen, 2006, 74). I employed the first model of official discourse. Official discourse in the form of NIEs has a certain level of objectivity due to the nature of confidentiality by which they were written. There was no expectation for public examination or wider critique until at least 25 years later. While the inspection of other textual genres from non-governmental experts such as academia, think tanks, or the media would be valuable to help paint a potentially more comprehensive picture of the various threat narratives in the US around China, the selection process for choosing those narrative producers or voices and corresponding narratives could present selection bias challenges. With the wide range of political orientations of different think tanks, academics, and the media, selecting certain threat narrative producers and their threat narratives to track and analyze would be an imperfect exercise at best. Focusing on Model 1 (official) text allowed for a bounding of threat narratives which traditionally have a very large impact on threat calculus and thus policy orientation and decisions.

I have focused on CIA documents as the source of truth on threat narratives professed by the US Government because of the Agency’s considerable role in influencing Executive Branch decision making during this period of study. While the military’s intelligence apparatus was strong during WWII, many of its assets became part of the CIA in the 1950s. Furthermore, the State Department during this period was less concerned with the security details in the 1950s and 1960s and more concerned with its new diplomatic role and building relationships. While the State Department’s intelligence wing, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), as well as the military’s DIA would become robust intelligence services in and of themselves, the CIA’s mantel of leadership
as the intelligence hub for the US at the beginning of the Cold War is the primary reason for concentrating on Agency material.

NIEs are the best-known intelligence products and examine, or estimate, military, economic, and political trends so that policymakers understand the implications of the trends and their evolution (Richelson, 2008, 375). According to the Congressional Research Service, NIE’s “represent the coordinated judgements of the Intelligence Community, and thus represent the most authoritative assessment of the [Director of National Intelligence] with respect to a particular national security issue” (Richelson, 2008, 375).

NIEs have been criticized as being consensus documents of sorts (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). Because they may not have expressed all of the competing views present in the Intelligence Community (IC), the level of corporate judgment that they represented for the IC has been called into question. Additional criticism revolved around the assessments being too high level and not offering the intriguing details (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). From time to time, dissenting views were expressed and attributed to the responsible party, but these call outs were few and far between.

As a matter of organization and housekeeping, the NIEs are administratively numbers as to correspond to a country, substantive area, and year. In the late 1950s, this numbering system was implemented as a way to categorize the effort for quick reference. The first set of digits corresponds to the country where, for example, the USSR is 11 and China is 13. The second set of numbers refers to the substantive area. An example here is 1 for space and 2 for atomic energy. The third set is the year the estimate is produced.
(Richelson, 2008, 375-376). A prime example of an estimate used heavily in this study is NIE 13-2-60, which translates into an estimate on China, titled “The Chinese Communist Atomic Energy Program” in the year of 1960. The numbering system is important as we get into the narrative chapters to show the sequencing of the estimates.

Delving deeper into the construction of these NIEs, estimates are judgements based on what intelligence analysts know at the time. As the famous American Intelligence Officer Sherman Kent (after whom the US Intelligence School is named) once said, “estimating is what you do when you do not know something with exactitude or confidence. In discussing large or complex topics, formal intelligence Estimates necessarily have to delve into a realm of speculation, a dense process of trying to separate out the probable from the possible from the impossible, and of providing answers to difficult but important questions” (Tracking the Dragon, 2004, xi). Estimates are not predictions of the future, but “judgements as to the likely course of events” (Richelson, 2008, 375). However, while speculative in nature, these estimates are more than current intelligence that is meant to be digested quickly and perhaps forgotten. NIEs are long range estimates and documents of record that represent a view of one country by another that are intended to stand the test of time. These NIEs are “contributions to institutional and perhaps national history… and written for historians as well as policymakers” (Tracking the Dragon, 2004, xii).

**Question of Time**

The third discourse analysis research focus concerns the selection of the time period under evaluation. This decision is critically important to the bounding of research. While the metaphorical aperture must be cast wide enough to capture the full story, there
are always limiting considerations of manageability. The “temporal perspective” for my research focused on the years during the heart of the Cold War when China transitioned from foe to friend during rapprochement. In addition, the temporal bounding of study is also predicated on the research material in the declassified collection on China spanning from 1948-1976. This Tracking the Dragon volume offers a consolidated and focused view of the IC’s perspective on China during this threat transition period. While additional NIEs exist, the CIA chose these estimates as the most representative of American thought on China and the threat that it posed over the 28-year period.

The time period covered in this special collection is also advantageous because it marks the beginning of the modern US intelligence system as designed by the National Security Act of 1947. As a new intelligence structure, the CIA would routinely produce forward thinking, multi-year estimates. Moreover, the second half of the 20th Century is a worthy starting point because it marks the birth of the People’s Republic of China with Mao’s victory over the Nationalists. This allows for a focused US view of Mao’s China at the start of this collection of intelligence estimates. The estimates represent American thought on China during Mao’s reign. The endpoint is also significant because it captures the moment when China moves into the friend status and encompasses the American policy shift from containment to engagement with China that would, in a multitude of variations, last until today.

**Question of Events**

The final research question from a discourse analysis perspective was around the idea of events or threads. For example, in David Campbell’s 1992 discourse analysis study of American security policy “Writing Security,” he looked at two events – the war
on drugs and the construction of Japan as a threat to US security – during one period or temporal perspective (Hansen, 2006, 80-81). Campbell thus chose two events: war on drugs and Japanese threat. The number and type of “events” that I chose are three-fold (military, economic, and political) and align to the general areas in which NIEs were written. These three threads are also indicative of the primary areas in which threat is generally evaluated.

The elaborated discourse analysis research design for this study is below.

**Figure 2: Elaborated Research Design**

![Elaborated research design based on Hansen's framework](image)

**Interviews:**

I conducted structured interviews with several types of experts: intelligence analysts, China hands, and trade experts. The purpose of this research was to better understand the prevailing security narratives of the time. My hope was to supplement the actual narratives of threat and friend that appear in the estimates with some of the reasons why these narratives were developed and perhaps sidelined. The goal was to gain the commentary behind the scenes and fill in any of the missing pieces that a historical review of texts could leave unanswered. My interviews allowed for both a positivist
approach to validate hypotheses and also an interpretivist or social constructivist approach to understanding the “meaning of action or preferences” (Martin, 2013, 109-110). Thus, more structured questions targeted hypothesis verification while the open-ended questions looked at qualitative process tracing (Martin, 2013, 110).

In addition to abiding by the ethical treatment of my human subjects as outlined in the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I paid special attention to the elite type of subjects that I interviewed (Brooks, 2013, 45). Beckmann and Hall note that while interviewing elites, it is particularly important to anchor the interview quickly as to not be drawn quickly off topic. They also suggest finding “background or toe-hold” respondents or periphery actors that will agree to serve as references to the main actors or heavy hitters. They describe this technique as “snowballing respondents” where subjects will open their Rolodex to help the interviewer get to those actors who can uniquely shed light on the primary topics of interest (Beckmann and Hall, 2013, 201-202). I employed this technique when I started talking with Richard Immerman, former Deputy Director of National Intelligence at the State Department. After our interview, Immerman then referred me to his former boss Thomas Finger who was the former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC). The connections continued and helped to build a robust view of how senior intelligence officials viewed threat and China.

**Justification for This Case and Time Period**

I selected the time period of the 1960s to the 1970s because it provides a rich example where a major threat to the US transitioned, in a relatively short period, to a quasi-friend status. While China never achieved the friend status enjoyed by other
countries, such as NATO partners, there was a true change in status from enemy to ally in the early 1970s. Moreover, this period provides stark threat narrative examples in the 1960s which clearly contrast with friend narratives in the 1970s. The highly dynamic early 1970s when security narratives on China began to transform is illuminating because it offers a view into this threat transformation of a major country in the eyes of the US.

A second justification for this case selection is the relatively recent declassified nature of the CIA China collection in the “Era of Mao” that offers a revealing view of this period from a highly influential source on American policy. While offering a semblance of objectivity, the CIA’s Tracking the Dragon volume presents a collection of the US Government’s most comprehensive and informed thought on China. The “informed” nature of the CIA authors is premised on the fact that they had access to information that others threat narrative producers in the public space were never privy to. This collection of over 70 documents and more than 3,000 pages offers a rare glimpse into the narratives around China that drove decision-making for both the periods of enmity and friendship between the US and China. While the vast majority of estimates in the volume’s 28 years were categorized as hostile, the highly informative estimates from the tail end of this period present a set of new narratives around cooperation. Since the Top Secret and Secret material is generally only released after a 25 or 50 year period to minimize loss of classified intelligence and collection methods, exploring contemporary cases of threat narrative transition would present major issues with access to estimates because they would not be available to the public for many years.
Value Add to the Discipline

This research looked at a critical period of American threat perception change with respect to China. By focusing on the CIA’s threat assessments of China during this period, the actual, at-the-time highly classified threat narratives that influenced policy makers were evaluated to paint a picture of the official threat landscape in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These primary sources have only recently been declassified and their inspection offers insights around the American mindset going into rapprochement with China. Moreover, many believe that the CIA’s estimates serve as the closest approximation of an “objective” baseline thought in security narratives around Chinese threat (Cooper, 1972, 225). This notion is that the Government is immune to subjectivity and bias. However, even with this commonly believed idea of objectivity in the Government, the resulting threat reality did not always align with the threat truth. Exploring this discrepancy will be the bulk of the subsequent chapters.

Since these documents were written in confidentiality and with the belief that their classified nature would keep them generally immune from scrutiny, they represent views on China by the Agency, its internal leadership, and perhaps political leadership during this period. The evaluation of these previously classified narratives extends the frontier of our knowledge of threat and friend narratives during a formative period of the Sino-American relationship from which many of the modern security narratives have originated (North Korea, Taiwan, human rights, economic growth, nuclear weapons, Asian community and cooperation). In addition to providing a highly informative survey of the US Government threat narrative picture of China, this study provides a rigor and framework for explaining why the narratives transitioned.
C. Why is China an Important Story?

There is something about China that has captured the American imagination. China has become a fixture in the puzzle of the American national security landscape. While the threat from China is more appropriately described as a flickering light over time, in moments of diminishing threat – or dimming in keeping with this threat beacon analogy – the US and China have attempted to share tokens of goodwill or even cooperation. The shifting between periods of hostility and strategic partnership over the past two and half centuries continues today.

The Sino-American relationship toggles between moments of friend and enemy or supporter and detractor at the diplomatic, economic, military, and national mood level at various times. For example, moments of diplomatic or cultural niceties have occurred at state dinners or the Olympics while at the same time cyber angling or South China Sea land arguments are in full swing. The vacillation confounds the casual observer and is indicative of a larger, often disjointed, relationship. There is certainly a level of frenemy that characterizes the relationship. For example, in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} Century, East Coast Americans were enamored at the prospect of helping Christianize China, while on the West Coast, job-loss fearing Americans were mobbing Chinese immigrants, killing them, and shipping them back to China. In addition, the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century showed a US Government that was starting to side with China over its key Asian ally Japan while at the same time not officially allowing Chinese to immigrate into the US. Even when the 1930s saw high levels of American funding going to the Chinese Nationalist Government and Pew polls showing significant American support for siding with China against Japan,
the US national exclusion law against Chinese immigration remained in place well into the mid-1940s.

Today is no different in the US with respect to competing notions of insecurity with respect to China. The US and China are each other’s largest trading partners. China holds considerable US debt and China remains a vital market for US growth. While China continues to test the cyber limits against the US and usurp land in the Pacific once held by American allies, the US refrains from taking military action. Moreover, Presidents Obama and Trump have employed a disjointed policy towards China with harsh words for President Xi one day and then hosting State Dinners and acting as if Sino-American relations were at their apogee the next day. To put it simply, the US does not know if China is a friend or enemy and perhaps this construct of limiting the options to one or the other is outdated. In other words, the friend and enemy dialectic of black and white that Carl Schmitt spoke of is outmoded. Perhaps notions of insecurity and security could be fostered by the same country for different issues at the same time. The answer to the question of whether China is a friend or enemy should be: yes.

Even the creation of cultural generalizations – ethnocentric views – about Chinese by Americans and how these tropes have transitioned is illuminating. Americans have viewed the East more broadly as exotic and attractive while still supplying danger from abroad in the form of disease or attack. A lack of cultural understanding has also provided a level of suspicion in the US around Chinese intentions. As in the Cold War, the black-out on intelligence in the 1950s and 1960s made it very difficult for the US to understand the inner thoughts of Chinese leadership or even basic economic, military, and cultural goings-on within the country.
Americans used conflicting tropes on China from the beginning of the Sino-American relationship. These contradictory storytelling devices would contribute to the highly irregular and vacillating threat pictures around China. For example, in the early years of the US-China relationship, Americans characterized Chinese as drug addicts, weak in mind, backwards, and tied to outdated traditions. However, at the same time, American fears around job loss at the hands of Chinese immigrants stemmed from the top-notch Chinese work ethic and ingenuity as demonstrated by their grinding and entrepreneurial efforts on the rail roads and gold mines. Then in the early 20th century, China was seen as the new frontier for Christianity, Democracy, and Western values in Asia. Americans saw China as a land of opportunity and a way to make the largest country in the world look and act like the US. Even during this period of hope and enthusiasm for the Chinese to be the beacon of American values in Asia, the Chinese were prohibited from immigrating to the US through the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The historical contradictions between friend and enemy abound.

Perhaps the “Red China” trope during the Cold War was the first time that a monolithic view on China existed in the US. This period of American thought alignment on China was, however, short lived as the rapprochement of the 1970s ushered in a period of mixed strategic thought on China where it was viewed on one hand as a political ally in Asia against the Soviets, while on the other remaining an enemy on the flash points of human rights and Communism. Thus, the changing nature and inherently bifurcated view of China has long characterized the Sino-American relationship as one of hot and cold since its inception two and half centuries ago.
China is an incredibly important case with respect to US threat calculations because of its highly transitional nature. China has not been an enduring friend or enemy of the US and its position has ebbed and flowed with respect to threat. Whereas the Cold War provided the longest period of hostility, the rapprochement of the 1970s provided a rare and swift push to the friendly position in the relationship.

Perhaps the explanation for this episodic and unsystematic threat picture of China lies in how the US fundamentally sees its own insecurity due to China. The incoherent threat picture of China from the time of America’s founding indicates a haphazard view on China at worst and a short attention span at best. Moreover, it indicates a heavy weighting of subjective threat narratives that individuals and groups have fostered along the way. Whether the causes lie in a subjective determination of China in the hearts and minds of America’s leaders and populace, the threat that China has posed to the US has flickered bright and dim for the past two and half centuries. At times when the threat beacon shown its brightest, subjective biases played a key role in getting us to that point. This subjectivity could be likened to a fog of emotions that clouded an objective view of the actual conditions. Similarly, when the threat receded or dimmed, world events as well as internal events played a critical role. Interestingly enough, the capabilities and intent of China could be viewed in a much more gradual transition in contrast to its corresponding rapid threat status changes. Putting a finer point on it, it may have been less around what China had done that had changed its characterization of threat and more about how the US viewed China based on its internal biases and changes on the domestic front.

Part III of this study goes into comprehensive detail on the Sino-American relationship; however, the following pages provide a high-level view of the relationship.
in order to contextualize the dynamism within the American threat picture for why the China case was selected. The following section serves as a brief overview on the relationship to be expounded upon later.

At the time of America’s founding, China was a major power on the cusp of decline. China treated the US, as it did other Western nations, with disdain and routinely called it a barbarian state. The US was not on equal terms with the Middle Kingdom and therefore was part of a larger tributary system from the Chinese perspective. China viewed itself as the center of the universe and all other outlying states were destined to support the one, Middle Kingdom that was designed to rule them all. Even in the Cantonese trading system, all Western trade was limited to the one trading city of Canton. As Chinese power began to recede and Western powers tested the limits of this decline, relations began to move full circle from Western states being the tributary states, to China assuming a subservient role.

America struggled to stand on its own two feet in the years following its independence. The reemergence of British threat in the War of 1812 highlighted this vulnerability. The US in its early years was not in a position to dictate terms to many countries in the world especially not the once powerful China— even if it was more of a paper tiger in the waning years of the 18th Century. Fortunately for the US, China was not a blue-sea naval power and would not project its power much further than its own borders. As the wheels began to come off of the Chinese Empire in the early 1800s, the West started to impose its trading will.

Great Britain and the US had a strong desire to trade and grow their global reaches, the first with a mighty, well-trained Navy and the latter with a scrappy naval and
merchant corps. Opium would be a game-changing commodity for both countries to expand their trade and capture the giant Asian market. It also served to flip the trade imbalance with China and counter the massive amounts of tea heading into both countries. In an effort to stem this silver flow into China, opium was an ideal commodity to push upon an immense country with a weak government and faltering military deterrence. As the British imported opium from India and the US imported it from Turkey, China’s opium demand spiked as did the profits for both Western states. Americans, as well as the British, began to see the Chinese no longer as a powerful empire which could dictate the terms of trade, but as a malleable, decrepit state with a massive opium demand and a rudimentary defense.

Starting in the late 1830s, the British and Americans began to impose their will on China with the Opium Wars. By this time, America was beginning to gain its sea legs with respect to international trade and affairs. After China’s last-ditch effort to halt Western encroachment failed with its defeat in the Opium Wars, China was forced to open its ports, cede key coastal cities, and strike from its repertoire the term barbarian used for Westerners. This was China’s entry into a century of humiliation at the hands of Western powers (Christenson, 2015, xv).

From 1842 until the 1940s, the US did not view China as a national-level threat and even treated it as a frail state to be used for America’s bidding. Indeed, the US even adopted a caretaker mentality of sorts where it attempted to help China. This new American mindset on China was ardently ethnocentric and sought a Christian, Westernized image of itself. A ground-swell movement within the US to help China was led by the China Lobby. This lobby was composed of missionaries, business interests,
and those Americans with ties to friends and family who had lived and worked in China at the height of the opium trade. This group took it upon itself to see China succeed but only in a way that mirrored the American way of life.

A complicated security narrative emerged around China in the 1800s. Americans viewed it as a state lacking sovereignty, hooked on opium, and incapable of welcoming modernity and future salvation unless it became Westernized and Christianized. However, even with the prevalence of this negative view of China, a righteous, religious narrative based on helping China also emerged. Many Americans believed that it was up to the US to help the world’s largest country lift itself up and become a Western, Christian, democratic beacon in Asia.

The domestic narratives on Chinese immigrants within the US were also complicated in the mid to late 1800s with competing notions of awe and praise on one side and fear and anger on the other. At first, the Chinese immigrants were welcomed into the US because of the immense need for labor due to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad as well as the California Gold Rush. As the Chinese Empire was entering a period of darkness, many of its citizens flocked to the US for opportunity. Those Americans who wanted to impart Christian values embraced the influx of impressionable immigrants. The Chinese were particularly strong laborers who supplied a critical labor resource at a vital time in American history. Many American leaders praised the Chinese for their work ethic and credited them with helping to complete the gargantuan feat of completing the railroad. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, some Chinese returned home with their savings but many others settled
in the US. For the ones who stayed, the American perception of them began to quickly erode.

The most prevalent, negative counter narrative that began to emerge in the US in the 1870s about the Chinese immigrants centered on the prospect of them taking American jobs. This fear festered in the US. American mobs would eventually attack Chinese immigrants and force many to leave. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 would round out this anti-Chinese sentiment in the US. In a dramatic change in views of Chinese immigrants, the positive narratives around the Chinese in the US in the 1850s and 1860s as a resourceful and helpful people quickly transitioned to ones of stealing American jobs and even of a people incompatible with American values. It would be the first time in America’s history that an entire people would be prohibited from entering. Rivaling the forced opium trade in the early 1800s in China, this act was an equally egregious stain on Sino-American relations at the hands of Americans.

This growing disdain for Chinese in the US, however, failed to dampen the competing desire of many American missionaries and their China Lobby friends to save China from itself. A series of missionary crusades to China began in the 19th Century and carried into the 20th Century to mold it more in the image of the West. The appeal of this Christianized, Western likeness began to grow in the early 1900s with the rise of Sun Yat-sen, a Christian leader bent on leading China with democratic principles. The torch of his Nationalist Party was then passed to Chiang Kai-shek who also was a Christian and even dressed as Westerner. At the diplomatic level, China was moving closer to an ally of the US and notions of insecurity from China were diminished in the early 1900s.
In respect to the American psyche, China was also looking more like a friend to the American people. Support was growing beyond the missionaries and China Lobby members. Spurred primarily by one colossal cultural event, a groundswell of American support for China moved across the populace and crosscut demographics. Pearl Buck’s celebrated book *The Good Earth* published in 1931 seized the hearts of the American people and encouraged mass support almost overnight for the Chinese people. It inspired support for the Chinese people in almost a kindred spirit way between Chinese peasants and poor Americans struggling through the Great Depression. Born in China, Buck had sentimental views of the Chinese. These views would be held by many members of the China Lobby in the first half of the 20th century to include President Franklin Roosevelt.

China was even viewed as the positive alternative to Japan in Asia in the 1920s. While Japan had been the recipient of President Teddy Roosevelt’s Japanese Monroe Doctrine allowing for Japanese expansion in Asia, Americans had started to shift towards their new friend of China. The early 1900s saw China beginning to embrace Christianity, Western dress, and even some democratic principles. Japan on the other hand still had an emperor and was ambitiously growing its empire. In a choice between the two nations, the US started to shift towards China both diplomatically and in the hearts of the American people (1942 Gallup Poll) (Bradley, 2015, 299).

Even with the diplomatic support of Sun and Chiang and mega cultural events such as *The Good Earth*, America still prevented Chinese from immigrating to the US for five decades (1882-1943). Not until the Magnuson Act of 1943, was the Chinese Exclusion Act repealed. To say the least, it was a time of competing narratives around China in the US. The US had a soft spot for China and was grateful to it for helping to
build the locomotive lifeline across its vast terrain, mine its gold and silver, and settle the West, but it would prohibit Chinese from crossing its own borders once job fears materialized. Americans saw the Chinese living in China as drug dependent and backwards in need of spiritual salvation, but at the same time viewing those Chinese immigrants within the US as industrious, hardworking, and detrimental to American values. It was a time chalk full of competing and contradictory narratives around China as a country as well as Chinese immigrants. A lack of coherent American policy ensued as well as a flimsy threat picture of China and its immigrants.

An interesting part of the story is that both China as a state and Chinese immigrants did not change considerably in the 19th and first half of the 20th Century. Yes, China had evolved from a declining empire to a fledgling republic, but it was consistently weak in its last years of as an empire as well as its early years as a republic. China remained throughout this period a very weak country while its immigrants for the most part demonstrated a hardworking mentality. What spurred the altering of narratives around China and Chinese immigrants were American views, cultural events in the US, and American policy.

While the rise of Mao Zedong was a homegrown phenomenon, internal American wrangling only helped to elevate the threat that he posed. Many short-sighted, and blinded-by-ideology China Lobby members saw Mao as a flash in the pan nuisance. Mao, however, overachieved against all American leaders’ expectations. Mao’s Communism was yet another source of evil that the US felt obligated to confront. One of the staunchest China Lobby supporters, President Franklin Roosevelt, was most disillusioned by the potential of China’s tilt towards communism. Perhaps swayed by hopeful
disbelief, many American leaders continued with the ill-fated support of a Christian, Western China with Chiang at the helm. This miscalculation would spur the rise of China as a new threat to the US. The China Lobby introduced a fog of emotion around Mao’s China that prevented a more accurate view of the actual situation on the ground in China. In the late 1940s after its victory over Chiang, Mao’s China was cast as, and thus perceived as, the most threatening it had been to the US since America’s independence. The China Lobby’s influence eventually began to melt away as well as the missionary desires to help China. The American threat beacon on China was shining the brightest of the entire two and half century Sino-American relationship. Narratives of insecurities posed by China were rampant in the US.

China’s move into a threatening position in the late 1940s is significant because it was the beginning of a re-emergent China. While the flickering of danger by China in the previous century centered on the American ability to trade in China or from hardworking immigrants taking American jobs, the Era of Mao introduced a new type of China threat. This flickering of the Chinese threat that would take us through the next seven decades was much more focused on a threat to both American national interests in the Pacific as well as national security. This transition from threat to economic and cultural security in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to national security threat in the mid 20th century was significant. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the threat beacon as bright and would not dim until the rapprochement of the 1970s.

The flickering threat picture would once again brighten in the late 1990s partly due to the Soviet demise as well as a Chinese troop build-up. However, this threat beacon would once again dim in the 2000s with the advent of major terrorist attacks on the US.
Between the US redirecting its attention to the proximate threat of radical Islamic terrorists, the US preoccupation with threats from China faded once again. Moreover, China and the US entered into a strategic partnership in the early 2000s and a semblance of solidarity against terrorists followed. It was again a highpoint in Sino-American relations and reminiscent of, although not achieving parity with, the FDR-Chiang alliance prior to WWII or Nixon-Mao rapprochement.

In the last five years, the China threat has begun to flicker brightly once again. The flickering has transitioned to a steady glow. American troop draw downs in Iraq and Afghanistan have allowed the US to refocus on a China threat. China has also done its fair share to make its threat beacon shine with increased wattage. Between its launching of its first aircraft carrier and pursuit of a blue-sea navy, its building up of islands in the South China Sea and territory grab, its growing naval footprint and port expansion worldwide, as well as President Xi Jinping’s largest restructuring of the People’s Liberation Army since the 1950s, China has signaled that it is a growing threat not only to US interests and allies in the Pacific, but also throughout the world (Page, 2016, China’s Xi Bets Big on a Global Military, 1; Page, 2016, China’s Naval Footprint Grows, 1). China’s military restructuring currently in progress would transform the force from the large, slow Soviet style force designed to defend from invasion to a more nimble, expeditionary force capable of projecting power outside of the mainland (Page, 2016, China’s Xi Bets, 1). The threat beacon of China shines brightly today in the US and sufficiently rivals the perceived threat intensity posed by China at the start of the Cold War.
D. Why Look at the Rapprochement of the 1970s?

The question naturally arises around why choose the rapprochement of the 1970s when the American threat picture of China has changed five times in the past sixty years. A notion of China as an eternal American frenemy has considerable historical support but other threat shifts pale in comparison in terms of magnitude and speed of the shift. Moreover, examining all of these threat transitions would be difficult to manage by sheer volume of information. Focusing on one of these major shifts in threat perception such as the 1970s rapprochement sheds light on why the threat narratives evolved. It also helps explain at a higher level how the US sees threat more broadly.

An in-depth look at the formative period of the 1950s through 1970s when this modern-day relationship was forged offers some powerful insights into how to approach the relationship today. While the rapprochement of the 1970s is certainly not Day 0 in US-China relations, it has formed the basis for the modern-day relationship. Moreover, while the strong personalities of the individuals involved in this transition from enemy to ally in the 1970s is critically important to how the events unfolded, attributing world-altering decisions and dramatic national security changes to personalities alone appears to be at one level a bit of a cop-out and at another an over simplification of what transpired.

Looking at how the China threat was portrayed by the US Government through the threat narratives of the time shines a highly focused spotlight on a case where enemy-friend status shifted quickly. National security threat narratives provide a moment in time depiction of threat melding objective and subjective notions with the personalities and inherent biases of threat narrative produces and threat narrative consumers (i.e. President and National Security Advisor). Delving into these threat narratives provides
the actual contours of threat and friend perceptions that ultimately manifest themselves in policy change such as that of the early 1970s between the US and China.

With the current US-China relationship potentially growing more tense by the day, looking at a period when the China threat moved from extremely intense to more benign will help to identify indicators of positive change. These notions of friend outstripped those characterizations of threat once upon a time; examining how the narratives transitioned provides insights to assist the US in a return to its relationship-heyday with China. Focusing on the threat narratives around China during this moment of history when American threat calculations altered 180 degrees offers insights into how such a threat narrative orientation could produce positive results today between the two largest economies with the two most potent militaries. The stakes could not be higher and nor could the rewards.

The replacement of enemy threat narratives with friend narratives in the 1970s rapprochement is not as much the puzzle as is the reason for why they transitioned. The fact that narratives of danger around China in the 1950s and 1960s were jolted out of the conventional American understanding in the 1970s is not in dispute. The puzzle is around the role subjectivity played in contributing to this jolt to construct a new reality. Were subjective, inflated narratives simply cleared up by removing sources of bias or did new friend narratives creep in to supplant them? Moreover, was a subjective fog simply removed that contributed to friend narratives replacing enemy narratives or did China’s actions (objective measures) account for the changes to American threat calculus? My hypothesis is that it was more of a clearing of bias-induced, faulty perceptions of China threat than it was Chinese actions that changed the American notions of China threat.
This introductory chapter covered a lot of ground. It examined the research question and purpose of the study. Next, it outlined the methodology by which this study was conducted. Finally, it laid out the case for selecting China and the period of rapprochement. How the US has viewed China with respect to security has been so dynamic that this pursuit has revealed important lessons on American threat calculus. We now turn to the theoretical underpinnings of the study that provide a torch to better understand American threat.
Part II.

2. Theory

A. What is Threat?

Threat is amorphous. Not only is it a complicated notion that it difficult to define, but it has many interpretations based on individual perception. Threat exists at a personal level as well as at the national level. Threat also spans the national divide and can represent a danger to culture or religion. While it has many substantive locations (personal, national, religious, cultural, gender, sexual orientation), it becomes reality through the inherent subjectivity by which it is imagined. Threat need not be confined to one substantive area, however, and can manifest itself in a combination of areas such as religious and national at the same time. Part of the reason for this ambiguity around the notion of threat is that it varies based on the referent object by which it is imagined. As the referent object changes, so does the interpretation of threat.

In addition to the referent perspective which changes from person to person, there is a temporal perspective of threat. Notions of what actually constitutes threat has changed over the centuries. In this temporal view, threats to the crown were paramount centuries ago while personal threats were often overlooked. Even more of an anachronism, today’s threats such as those to the climate, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or cyber would have been unthinkable or unknowable two millennia ago.

Threat could be described in a slide rule (or slipstick) construct where the slide moves along multiple axes of 1) time, 2) points of view of groups and individuals, 3) and existential through limited nature. Just as a slide rule allows calculations such as exponential, square roots, logarithms, and trigonometric functions, when one slides the
center stick, threat calculations change with respect to personal, national, religious, and cultural perceptions. Threat can be as large and all-encompassing as to life itself in an existential sense and as small and limited as threats to victory in a sporting scenario.

One illustrative example of a confluence of threats at a multitude of levels is the Thirty Years’ War which devastated much of Europe in the 17th Century. Claiming nearly eight million casualties, the war started as a feud between Catholics and Protestants. Religious threats against Protestant princes by the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, sparked the war. Ferdinand attempted to force Catholicism upon Protestant groups and these groups believed that the threat was worth fighting and dying to prevent. While the altercation began in response to a religious threat, national and cultural interpretations of threat soon crept in when the Catholic nation of France, among others, fought against Ferdinand in order to oppose the Hapsburgs. Perceptions of national threat appeared to outweigh religious threats for some leaders. This conflict resulted in such devastation to entire swaths of Europe that the ensuing famine and disease forced many individuals to recognize personal threats and flee to what would become the United States. They fled from threats to their personal safety, religious security, and even economic security. Threats at the personal level were just too high for these individuals to stay in their own country. This conflict, which completely ravaged Europe, had elements of threat at the religious, cultural, national, economic, and personal level.

From a threat perspective, the Thirty Years’ War is particularly interesting because the rationale for fighting was different for many of the adversaries. The Protestants fired their muskets against the religious threat of Catholicism, while the French swung their swords against the national threat of the Hapsburg monarchy. These
were the “spoken” threats by which the leaders rallied their people, their armies, and
undoubtedly themselves when they became introspective from the astounding longevity
and harrowing scope of the conflict. Their self-pronounced threats solidified their
support and served as their anchor by which to continue the struggle. Their battle cries
were based on these threat narratives. Although it was a single conflict, the perceived
threats by which the different sides—and even those individuals fighting under the same
banners—responded to and fought against were starkly different. A notion of unspoken
threats existed where leaders told their armies one thing (i.e. religious persecution) and
believed another (i.e. self-preservation).

The idea that threat is malleable supports the notion that influence, perception,
and social construction play a large role in threat reality. Threat reality is how threat is
interpreted in the eyes of the beholder. Threat reality is the output of the social
construction mixing bowl when one adds domestic sources of influence and the variable
of interpretation. Domestic sources present themselves at the system level while
interpretation is generally at the individual level. Since most people are not on the front
lines of the threat calculus or able to witness the key foreign or domestic actors or actions
up close, much of how threat reality is constructed is through how those few in-the-know
individuals influence the great many through words and actions. The subjectivity of this
process cannot be overstated.

As was the case with the assorted leaders in the Thirty Years’ War, threat can be
defined in many ways by those at the helm. How threat is labeled by leaders, pundits, or
generally anyone with influencing access (authors, newscasters, academics, politicians,
movie stars, and even athletes) to the greater populace is important because it is in large
part how threat is understood. Even today in politics, threat can be characterized at the most severe level as “existential” at one end of the spectrum and “limited or confined” at the other. For example, the threat from terrorism in recent years against the US has often been labeled as existential when viewed as a large, capable army of radical Islamists attempting to end the American way of life. This view of threat paints an absolute vulnerability to American existence. On the flip side, threat from terrorism has also been defined as a more limited threat to the US in the sense that only a relatively few, generally inept “lone wolves” make their way into the US to set off inert bombs or fall into FBI sting operations. Political administrations, cable news networks, and even think tanks often latch on to one of these terrorism threat narratives and profess the narrative to the public. As with most sets of extremes, the objective threat truth or actual threat situation usually lives somewhere between the two poles.

Regarding the concept of truth, it must be acknowledged that as a political science term it lives on shaky ground. Truth with respect to political science is not something that can be proven in an empirical sense. Truth has normative underpinnings and is value-laden. In this study, I will use the word truth to denote the actual conditions on the ground when considering another country’s threat to the US. The term is based on Sherman Kent’s attribution that a truth can exist for threat analysis. What Kent believed was that the actual conditions or accurate portrayal of another country’s strategic stature or threat was knowable. The manner in which truth is used in this study is different than reality which is how the world is interpreted.

Truth in this study is most similar to “scientific realism” which adopts a scientific approach to defining the “real” (Hacking, 1999, 79-80). Scientific realism explains truth
in the world by noting, “physics aims at the truth, and if it succeeds, it tells the truth” (Hacking, 1999, 80). As Kent believed that intelligence analysis employed scientific method, his search for threat “truth” aligned closely with “scientific realism” in the acknowledgement that a truth can exist to be found or proven. Kent said that intelligence research is “capable of giving us the truth, or a closer approximation to truth…like the method of physical science” (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 160-161).

This raises an interesting point about the difference between threat reality and threat truth. It would appear that a knowable, objective threat truth could exist. After all, this threat truth has been the holy grail for the professional American intelligence apparatus for the past half century. Illustrating this point, CIA Director Allen Dulles adopted biblical verse John 8:32, “and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” as the CIA’s motto. While intelligence seeks the truth or objective state of the actual situation, sources of corruption – either at the hands of the enemy to hide the actual conditions or domestic bias – often mask this view (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 175-176).

The notion that through scientific methods, the exact truth about another country’s intent and capability can be known represents the epitome of an objective notion of threat. In some cases, where material capabilities are the driving factor of the threat, the number of divisions, tanks, or missiles would seem knowable. These material capabilities either exist or they do not. The problem is that foreign leaders’ intent to use these military devices is often difficult to judge objectively. What these other human beings think and feel and how they would employ foreign military might is truly the great unknown even though many well-intentioned analysts would offer their opinion as fact.
Thus, the difference between threat reality and threat truth can best be described as threat reality being the threat as we know it to be or the “as is,” while threat truth on the other hand is the objective position of threat or the accurate location of threat. This distinction between reality and truth is similar to how Ian Hacking in his book, *The Social Construction of What?*, discussed the distinction between that which is “socially constructed” and that which is “real” (Hacking, 1999, 22-29.). Hacking’s socially constructed notion would mirror threat reality while the conception of real would represent truth. Hacking notes that adjectives such as “objective” and “real” are constantly debated by social constructivists. Those in the constructivist camp often believe the use of truth and real to be “free-floating” constructions in nature (Hacking, 1999, 25). However, even constructivists do acknowledge the presence of this “scientific realism” or scientific truth that has been previously discussed. Mao Zedong also weighed in on this distinction between an often-times faulty reality and the actual conditions by noting that mistakes are made in the national security arena because we as humans depart from the actual situation (Cooper, 1972, 223). This “real,” actual situation, or truth often differs from the socially constructed reality where the latter is reflective of the subjectivity and influences of the world around us.

An example which helps to draw this distinction between threat reality and threat truth is from the American-Soviet missile divide during the Cold War. The missile gap was professed by American intelligence to be 1000-1500 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) for the Soviets compared to only 100 ICBMs for the US. This missile gap of greater than 10 times was American threat reality and was what American force planners used in military armament and policy decisions. It was the threat reality based on threat
assessments and narratives. The actual conditions however showed that the Soviets only had four ICBMs—less than one half of one percent that which American intelligence assessors believed to be true (Van Evera, 2009, xii). The threat truth was that the US missile capability was greater than 20 times the Soviet missile capability and no actual missile gap threat existed. Threat reality always trumps threat truth because threat reality is what is used for force planning, military budget decisions, and policy execution. Threat truth is what is on the other side of the curtain and what is only sometimes accurately assessed and understood.

Just as threat is the opposite of safety, insecurity is the negative of security. The notion of threat goes hand in hand with the notion of insecurity. These conceptualizations of threat and security have changed over time. The most significant change in its evolution has been the widening of the concept to include many different substantive areas. As previously noted, this has expanded the concept to areas such as climate change and sexual orientation that were once well outside the discussions on threat and security. The evolution and history of this definitional transition is important to understanding the taxonomy inertia of the times.

Diving into its etymology as well as the history of its widening as a concept, security is derived from the Latin securitas, and root securus, which means “without a care” (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 5). Security is the condition of being free from threat in both the physical and psychological perspectives (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 5). Traditional national security conceptions have been based on the protection of the state against external threats; however, today many additional notions of threat exist in addition to the national level (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 7). Even the traditional
requirement for national security threats to originate outside of state boundaries has yielded to a more expansive view to encompass any threats originating internally or externally to the state, people, or environment.

Following WWII, Arnold Wolfers wrote a seminal piece on the notion of national security called “National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol.” He problematized security and delved into its ambiguity (Baldwin, 1997, 8). Wolfers noted how national security was more encompassing than merely defending a geographically defined territory from objective, external threats. Wolfers said that “security is a value, then, of which a nation can have more or less and which it can aspire to have in greater or lesser measure” (Wolfers, 1952, 484). Wolfers continued that an objective and subjective component is inherent in any view of security where a nation must assess a target level of security. Not only external factors, but internal factors such as domestic groups, national character, tradition, preferences, and prejudices will influence this amalgamated view of security (Wolfers, 1952, 485-488).

Wolfers’s position represents a nod to this value-based or subjective view of threat and security. It represents one of the deep-seated dichotomies of security perspectives. The more restrictions to civil liberties, freedoms, and foreign interactions that a country imposes, the more insular and in some case more secure the country becomes. The question is “at what cost?” More liberal societies that provide for individual liberties unfortunately open themselves up to threats by the very nature of trusting in the inherent good of individuals.

Barry Buzan expanded the notion of security further in the late 20th Century to include not only military and economic factors, but also social, political, and
environmental concerns (Kay, 2006, 3). Buzan helped to move the needle away from the view of traditionalists that threat had to be restricted to the military dimension, but encompassed five areas of: military, political, economic, environment, and societal (Buzan, Weaver, Wilde, 1998, vii). From the early 1990s with his People, States, and Fear to his Security: A New Framework for Analysis in the late 1990s, Buzan noted that not only must these five dimensions of security complex theory be considered but the old traditional military-political system of state-centricity was already outdated as the guiding construct from which to conceptualize these dimensions (Buzan, Weaver, Wilde, 1998, viii).

Buzan, however, did note the negative implications of simply “tacking” the word security on all items as it would dilute the true nature and compromise intellectual rigor. Security is a difficult term to define because of its sponge-like nature by which political issues meld to it conceptually. Often times political causes, and more appropriately those champions of the causes, employ the threat label in order to provide the particular issue with legitimacy and greater attention. The term security has experienced increased application not only to national, religious, or human concerns, but it has more recently seen applications to water, land, cyber, and the environment. Those individuals who oppose the expanded usage of security have noted that the over usage of the term has diluted its very nature. The problem with its over usage is that in its banality comes a lack of specificity.

Threats today are commonly referred to in everyday life from the office environment to the sporting fields of friendly strife. A coworker could be a threat because she knows how to present a topic effortlessly in front of a crowd. A soccer player can be
a threat because he possesses a highly accurate left footed shot. Both of these scenarios representing threats to the loss of a job opportunity or sports victory are relatively benign but nonetheless employed with great frequency. Buzan spoke of a group of “wideners” to the traditional conception of security that included, in addition to himself, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wilde, and Richard Ullman (Buzan, Weaver, de Wilde, 1998, 2-3). The wideners would be proponents of increased scope in the usage of threat and security (albeit most likely not the threat of a left-footed soccer shot!).

A vocal opposition to Buzan and other wideners was led by Stephan Walt and the traditionalist or “narrowers.” Walt suggested that moving away from military and political guardrails in the security construct would detract from intellectual coherence which would make it more difficult to draw conclusions (Buzan, Weaver, de Wilde, 1998, 3-4). The traditional security perspective professed and defended by Walt has remained engrained in the US Government’s view of threat. Especially in the CIA as a more externally focused organization, the threats it assessed during and after the Cold War remained strictly traditionalist in nature. The US Intelligence Community continues to heavily weigh traditional national security views of threat higher than those widener dimensions of human, environment, gender, religious, or political security. In the traditional and realist notions of threat embraced by the US Intelligence Community, one country’s interpretation of another’s capability and intent to inflict harm forms the basis of its perception of threat from that country.

Sherman Kent, the father of American Intelligence and former head of the Central Intelligence Agency’s assessment division known as the Office of National Estimates (ONE), noted that a country’s “strategic stature” and views about itself and towards
others [intent] dictated how it would act in the international arena. He said, “I have urged that if we have knowledge of Great Frusina’s [Kent’s hypothetical great power] strategic stature [Kent’s term for the totality of a nation’s capabilities – military, political and economic—to act on the international scene], knowledge of her specific vulnerabilities, and how she may view these, and knowledge of the stature and vulnerabilities of other states part to the situation, you are in a fair way able to predict her probable courses of action” (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 163). In other words, if you can determine a country’s capabilities and intentions, you can make a fair assessment of that country’s threat towards you. Moreover, Kent believed that knowing what Great Frusina has done in the past and what its current situation was would help you better understand its intent (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 164). Thus, understanding capabilities and intent would get you closer to the truth about a country’s actual threat. The truth about threat was not an abstract term to Kent nor was it a guess; it was an objective, scientifically derived depiction of actual harm. Subjectivity had little place in this conception of threat. Kent limited the playing field of threats to the external, state centric kinds.

As previously noted, Kent likened the study of intelligence to scientific methods in social sciences. Thus, the pursuit of truth about another country would be gained by employing intelligence as a scientific method. Kent noted, “research is the only process which we of the liberal tradition are willing to admit is capable of giving us the truth” (Shulsky and Schmitt, 2002, 160-161). While Kent viewed intelligence analysis as an objective pursuit resulting in truth, subjectivity generally creeps into the equation in the form of interpretations and perceptions used to fill the knowledge gaps. The intelligence community found it easier to assess threat against those actors who displayed intent and
capability than the wideners’ perception of threat that included inanimate sources of threat such as earthquakes and non-actor based threats.

Contrasting this traditionalist view, Ullman continued the widener reorientation of how to look at threats as the Cold War and state-centric models began to show cracks. Ullman provided a “redefinition of threats” moving the national security threat definition from solely military threats to that which: “1) threatens drastically and over a relatively brief span of time to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state, or 2) threatens significantly to narrow the range of policy choices available to the government of a state or to private nongovernmental entities (persons, groups, corporations) within the state” (Ullman, 1983, 133-134). In this sense, threat was enlarged to include actions which even restrict a nation’s set of policy options.

As the Cold War ended, momentum built against the traditionalist notions of national security perspective centering on states and military force. In their book Seeking Security in an Insecure World, Dan Caldwell and Robert Williams discussed a new paradigm of looking at security and threats. A myriad of threats from non-state actors began to impact states as well as individuals (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 9). They looked at how the definition of security and threat could be broadened to include not only human intent to inflict harm, but also natural agency. Altering the traditional military “capabilities” factor of threat, they replaced it with a military and non-military “potential to cause harm” (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 10-11). They even noted the limitations of only looking at intentional behavior versus unintentional behaviors when evaluating threat. To illustrate this point, they compared the Soviet Union’s policy for its deployment of missiles in the 1970s and 1980s in Eastern Europe to the accidental
nuclear power explosion in Chernobyl in 1986. While the Soviets intentionally moved their SS-20 missiles throughout Eastern Europe which produced a threat to Eastern European countries, the Soviet nuclear plant which contaminated an entire region ended up being much more of a threat. Because of the traditional definition of threat that was reliant on establishing a clear military intent, the building of the Chernobyl nuclear reactors was not seen as a threat nor was the ensuing meltdown. It was characterized as an accident after the disaster and thus the folly in an overly restrictive definition of threat becomes all the more evident (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 10-11). By expanding the definition of threat, a more comprehensive view of insecurity comes into focus.

In addition to broadening the definition of security and types of threats, Caldwell and Williams extended these notions to include individual or human security. This argument centered on the belief that looking at security from the perspective of the individual is the more appropriate lens since the state was founded to protect the people. This argument has strong support in the liberal perspective which questions the state that often in authoritarian regimes makes the people serve the state instead of the other way around (Caldwell and Williams, 2006, 12-13).

This inspection of security from the individual’s perspective is similar to Thomas Hobbes’ individualistic notion about threat several centuries earlier when he noted that threats to security were not immaterially different if they came from another nation or from within. In order to deal with any type of threat, people ceded their rights to the state in return for protection from threat (Ullman, 1983, 130-131). This tradeoff between personal liberty and state security lies at the crux of the liberal debate for how threat should be categorized and interpreted. Thus, while a bullet from the gun of a neighbor is
just as dangerous as a bullet from a warring nation, there is something substantially different in how a government responds to keep the peace.

Whereas Hobbes believed that the world was in a state of war between individuals, German philosopher Carl Schmitt believed the state of war, and thus threat, was between groups or nations. Leo Strauss noted that Hobbes professed a world in which everyone is the enemy of everyone else while Schmitt noted that all behavior in regards to security is due to a friend and enemy calculation at the group level (Schmitt, 1932, 90). Schmitt’s understanding of the enemy and threat were more in line with the realist perspective of state on state versus individual on individual.

Schmitt discussed the friend-enemy relationship as a framing method by which to evaluate threat. He characterized the antithesis construct of friend and enemy as similar to good and evil in morality, beautiful and ugly in aesthetics, and profitable and unprofitable in economics (Schmitt, 1932, 26). His friend-enemy dialectic spanned the spectrum from non-threatening to threatening. According to Schmitt, “the political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. In its entirety the state as an organized political entity decides for itself the friend-enemy distinction” (Schmitt, 1932, 29-30). The enemy was viewed in a state-centric unit of analysis as well as the decisioning criteria which lay in the hands of the state.

Sean Kay moved beyond the individual and state views of threat and professed yet another view of security that involved a global perspective of threat and the interconnected nature of not only states but individuals. He noted a globalization of security in the past several decades. Similar to Graham Allison’s nod to globalization,
technology transfer, and the “CNNization” that has allowed people to watch wars in their living rooms, the interconnected nature of the world is changing how threats influence states and individuals (Kay, 2006, 2-3). Today, threats exist from not only states and non-state actors, but also people, ideas, media power as well as nature in form of natural disasters (Kay, 2006, 4-12).

This section served to frame the expansive nature of threat as well as how it has been viewed as an idea. While a tall order to delve into how the term has been defined in the past, this survey paints a picture of how the definition has flared wider in an academic interpretation in recent years while remaining more conservative to the traditionalist view in the US Government. This section has also begun to outline the subjective nature of threat that moves us away from the actual situation or truth. Threat narratives are one of the chief reasons for how this subjectivity is introduced and will be explored in the next section.
B. What are Threat Narratives?

The study of narratives has grown in recent years and especially those narratives focusing on national security (Payne, 2014, 4). The research focus on national security narratives and threat inflation has turned into a cottage industry. Much of the study focusses on knowledge, the sharing of knowledge, and how that shared knowledge is perceived. President James Madison famously stated that, “the management of foreign relations appears to be the most susceptible of abuse, of all the trusts committed to a Government, because they can be concealed or disclosed, or disclosed in such parts and at such times as will best suit particular views; and because the body of the people are less capable of judging and are more under the influence of prejudices, on that branch of their affairs, than of any other” (Payne, 2014, 1). Thus, how an actor or government controls the dispensing of such knowledge in the form of threat narratives is critically important.

Mona Baker has described narratives as “stories we tell ourselves and others about the world(s) in which we live...[which] provide our main interface with the world” (Baker, 2010, 350). A narrative is a collective statement made up of a series of overt statements and intimations around a topic. These moments align to form a collective discourse that paints a story. Barry Buzan noted that the orientation around a topic based on the narrative could impact the various types of policy solutions that are selected. (Buzan, 2009, 199). For example, if security narratives on Cuba orientated around “disarmament” as opposed to the necessity of a “market economy,” the resulting policy solutions for Cuba would live in the weapon reduction space based on the directional narrative instead of economic and political space (Buzan, 2009, 198-200).
Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes also expanded the realm of security narratives by highlighting the selective nature of narratives as well as their likeness to metaphors. They noted that a metaphor “invokes a biological framework to account for and make sense of changes in international security studies scholarship…producing and naturalizing a narrative that, by privileging some facts while marginalizing others (Rowley and Weldes, 2012, 5). The intentionality by which narratives can be furthered adds a concerning level of subjectivity.

These theoretical underpinnings help us to address questions about threat narratives pertaining to why people believe front-page threat headlines in reputable papers like The Wall Street Journal. Say the headline reads, “Russian threat to the US highest since the Cold War!” Do people run for cover? Probably not, but the damage—or impact—is significant. Many Americans read newspaper headlines or hear radio and TV coverage about national security and then go about their day. For many Americans, the 10 minutes of world news roundup in the morning and at night forms the totality of their world view. Rodger Payne believes it has to do with how Americans en masse believe the experts because of their greater access to information (Payne, 2014, 1). Chaim Kaufman noted, “Government agencies usually have a large authority advantage in debate with anyone else. This is especially so in realms where they have an information advantage and do not face competing authorities of comparable stature” (Kaufman, 2004, 41). This notion can be applied to both government elites in the national security arena as well as highly informed newscasters, journalists, and academics who speak on topics with a certain level of inherent authority.
News headlines – and their underlying narratives which they support— stay with people in their daily travels and often serve as magnets by which bits and pieces of data often attach themselves to. Truing back to the “Russian threat” example, visual images over the past several years of Putin and Obama on CNN or in the New York Times staring each other down supports this narrative. Russia’s attempts in the past couple of years to exert control in Syria with its air campaign as well as its increased influence in Crimea with its backing of Russian-sympathizing rebels in the Ukraine adds credence to this narrative. Alleged Russian hacking of American email accounts and 2016 Presidential Election interference are the cherries on top of the narrative. With the supporting cast of stories, a holistic threat narrative around Russia is created like a snowball rolling down a hill. This snowball grows and increases in momentum. While Russia could be doing a lot that runs contrary to American interests around the world, the great leap to Russia now being the most significant threat to the US or sitting in its most threatening position since the end of the Cold War becomes a leap of faith based on an overarching narrative.

This leap, however, is made by Americans all the time for several reasons. First, the narrative comes from a reputable source or a source that individuals trust. Second, the human mind likes things to be neat and organized. If the threat narrative about Russia being a prime threat does not exist, there would be no neat cubby hole to store all of these one-off Russian threat stories. The human mind loves mnemonic devices to help categorize information. These aide-mémoire narratives help to do just that. Third, people are busy and are generally not going to try to refute this larger threat narrative statement. Their lives get in the way and as simpleminded as this paints most people, they are too busy to think differently than the threat narratives they are exposed to. If the old adage is
“you are what you eat,” a similar maxim here with respect to threat could be “you believe what you hear.” While, of course, this broad-brush generalization does not apply to all Americans, it does capture how threat narratives create a subjective threat reality that can run contrary to an objective threat truth.

Threat narratives can and often do collide with each other like pin balls. At the risk of using too many analogies, threat narratives even horse race against one another. Organizational inertia often pushes a specific threat narrative against others. Actors or organizations concentrate their resources on growing their narrative’s publicity against other alternative threat narratives. Even when a particular threat narrative may begin to fade, the subjective nature of its existence may continue even past its prime. For example, in the 1990s, the United States Military Academy was in a true state of flux with respect to articulating who the enemy was. It promoted conflicting threat narratives both in how it trained its future military officers in the classroom and on the firing ranges. Even as late as the mid 1990s, the Soviet Union was still the formative threat against which the US Military Academy trained its cadets in military scenarios. The targets on the firing ranges by which cadets perfected their marksmanship skills were still the green cardboard cutouts called “Ivans,” and force planning and tactical maneuvering were set for a major land war in Europe with the Russians. This was the practical threat narrative that training was geared towards. However, the new academic literature and Academy classroom discussions were pushing a rising threat narrative: China. Books like *The Coming Conflict with China* (Bernstein and Munro, 1998) were assigned reading. Even the senior National Security Seminar course included a case study on China (National Security Seminar, SS 483, Selected Readings, 1999). With the Soviet threat narrative still en
for military training purposes and the China threat narrative growing and
monopolizing the academic discussions, the US Military Academy also had to reckon
with the fact that many of the US military operations at the time were focused on threats
in failed states in the Balkans and Africa. Operations Other Than War (OOTW) was a
threat narrative all to its own and rounded out the triumvirate of threats with the Russia
and China threat narratives during this period. The US Military Academy – the tip of the
spear for American national military strategic thought and training – was conflating the
threats and painting a dizzying picture of American threats by which its leaders needed to
respond.

The larger point in discussing threat narrative evolution at West Point in the
1990s is to show that even in institutions where security and threat cognizance is at a
premium, threat narratives often appear in a jumbled, incoherent manner. For those
cadets preparing to lead America’s armies into battle in the 21st Century, these three
threat narratives served as buckets by which to categorize events, stories, and learnings
into. Eager cadets understood that threat could be parsed into the enduring threat of the
Russians, future threat of China, and the difficult to understand and prepare for failed
state threat. These threat narratives represented the threat reality by which the future
American military officers were exposed to as they were commissioned into the fight
against America’s enemies. With the advantage of hindsight, the growing threat truth of
the late 1990s for the US was actually radical Islamic terrorism. Although the Russians,
China, and OOTW were the threat realities of the 1990s, the radical Islamic terrorism
narrative did not appear with any regularity during the decade but would monopolize the
threat that the next twenty West Point graduating classes would face.
The storylines of threat are created, augmented, and either solidified or undercut by a multitude of actors. These narratives provide insight into how and why a country moves from friend to foe or vice versa and can offer clarity on changes within the international environment. Threat narratives help to outline the contours of a country’s threat or friend status. A cacophony of threat narratives, as well as individual voices, exist both in the public and government spheres when painting a country’s “true” threat status. Indeed, pundits debate these views in the media canvas of books, television, and the internet, while intelligence analysts conduct a behind the scenes analysis and debate which results in national security assessments. Both perspectives on threat carry their own merits and together present a robust view of perceived threat from a foreign country.

To say that public threat narratives do not influence government threat narratives would be naïve. In fact, even government assessments cite public, mainstream books in their analysis. However, only on rare occasions of disclosure are government threat narratives fully divulged to the public. More often than not, high-level summaries are presented only in annual reviews or Congressional testimonies by agencies such as the DIA, CIA, or White House if at all.

Since threat narratives are produced by a multitude of actors such as government, media, academia, and think tanks, the merits and ideological biases of specific threat narratives are hotly debated with some becoming more common and recognizable than others. For the threat narrative producers and those who follow their discussions, the debates are rich and the players are well informed. For the majority of people who sit on the side lines, however, certain threat storylines are routinely accepted at face value as the high-level summaries or sound bites that become the public’s reality of a particular
country’s threat to the US. In these situations, the public rarely critiques or challenges the narrative and almost blindly accepts it. These storylines that are fed by pundits become both the perception and reality for Americans around threat.

Political scientist William Connolly has written extensively on perceptions and how we understand reality. He has said that television “predigests” what people watch and then relays to the audience those perceptions already organized by others. The “talking heads” of newscasts often pretend to report issues as they are, but more often than not, present material that is colored by their own biases or that of their institution (Connolly, 2002, 24-25). Similarly, threat narratives that are pitched to the American public by the media, or to government officials by the intelligence community, are predigested interpretations of threat and therefore reflect an inherent bias. Just as television can serve as a forcing mechanism and venue to impart predigested thoughts, threat narratives can similarly shape perceptions and thought to construct a reality around national security.

Hacking’s work around social construction is illuminating when applied to threat narratives. In many ways threat narratives help to bring a new, perhaps even wholly unknown, concept to the fore. Hacking offered an example of the child viewer of television to demonstrate how two unrelated nouns (child and viewer of television), which previously were not a known entity, moved into the realm of a collective idea through social construction. It became a coherent concept, an object of research, a focal point for world conferences, a marketing audience for products, and even a protected group by which security regulations and devices were created to protect against violent and dangerous TV content (Hacking, 24-28, 1999). By virtue of social construction, a
previously unknown term or idea had built a following through a crescendo of public activity as to engrain itself into everyday usage. The time period for this movement from zero to household consciousness is amazingly brief based on the highly connected nature of people today.

Understanding how threat narratives emerge, gain traction, and either engrain themselves or whither on the vine is important to comprehending this evolution of threat reality. The evolution of threat narratives informs the movement of a country from threat to ally status. This changing threat status phenomenon informs the important question of why countries shift between friend and foe. The potential explanations for this transition in threat status are manifold: a foreign country’s actions or change in its capabilities, perceptions of change, political contestations at home or abroad, or some combination of each. Threat narratives characterize these explanations and play a significant role in shaping a country’s status. While this appears to conflate different epistemological premises of the creation of threat narratives with the objective relationship between those narratives and threat reality, the construction of threat narratives and resulting formation of threat reality appear to coincide. To presume that there is something distinctive between threat discourse and threat itself discounts the constructive nature by which threat is codified into reality.

The domestic influence on threat narrative creation acts as an incubator to spontaneously produce new narratives on insecurity. Alan Wolf’s *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat* noted that US domestic factors, more so than Soviet factors during the Cold War, directly led to the rise and fall of the Soviet threat and production of threat narratives. Bureaucratic politics in the Pentagon, rivalries between different branches of
government, and foreign policy and economic disagreements between the elites built threat narrative around the Soviet Union that were more subjective in nature than what could be attributable through an objective-scientific method professed by Sherman Kent (Wolfe, 1984, 6-10).

Theories of threat inflation also focus on the influence of domestic actors and their narratives to influence national security policy change. Figure 3 below shows a simple model of threat inflation put forth by Jane Cramer and Trevor Thrall where elites perceive and communicate notions of threat which then compete within a marketplace of other notions of threat (Cramer and Thrall, 2009, 2-3).

**Figure 3. Threat Inflation**

Whereas the US Government threat assessment portion of the narration ends with the influencing of the policy makers, this model continues with influencing of the public and the policy creation. The US Government threat assessment influences the *elite threat perception* which then influences the rest of this model. This model is important for it starts with an objective truth about threat (actual conditions) and then has several layers of perception, narration and communication, influence, and interpretation before the national security policy is realized. It lays out the multiple touchpoints of subjectivity in the threat calculus prior to policy creation.

The narrative in and of itself is a convention that allows for an inherent interjection of subjectivity. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson stated in *Metaphors We
“Live By”, there is a constant contradiction between myths of subjectivity and objectivity in how humans see the world. They noted that since the time of the Greeks, “there has been in Western culture a tension between truth, on the one hand, and art, on the other, with art viewed as illusion” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, 189). In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes noted that absurdity in the “use of metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, 190). In this sense, narratives are the metaphors and tropes that humans both created and use to understand threat.

This is not to say that all threat narratives are intentionally deceiving in nature and embellish an objective state; however, the creation of a convention to help the understanding of a threat and couch the issue in a contemporary landscape introduces the possibility of subjectivity. Even Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* noted that empiricist tradition calls figurative speech and rhetoric as an enemy of truth where “all artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, 191). It is therefore critically important to use clear and precise language, and even this standard is murky as it attempts to remove interpretation. The reality is that even in the pursuit of objectivity, subjectivity is a part of the equation based on how humans “understand the world through our interactions with it” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, 194).
C. Theoretical Torches to Inform

To help explain the evolution of threat and friend narratives around China during the era of rapprochement, there is no single theoretical perspective that can describe why threat narratives changed. Instead there are several theoretical torches that help to light the way on how and why these threat narratives could have transitioned. First, realism provides a theoretical perspective as to why balancing narratives began to flourish during the engagement period of rapprochement. Second, theories of domestic politics help to explain the impact of the actual players, ideologies, and politics involved in the decisions at the highest level. Third, constructivism helps on several levels to assist in the iterative nature of threat narrative production and how the figurative needle of a particular threat was moved. Within the constructivist perspective, dynamic norm theory helps to frame the lifecycle of threat narratives as well as how multiple views can shape a singular voice. Also, the constructive nature of both the actors within their environment as well as the US within the international system allows for the consideration of identity that is omitted from realist views.

Realism

Kenneth Waltz said that a “key proposition derived from realist theory is that international politics reflects the distribution of national capabilities” (Waltz, 2000, 27). The paramount importance of material power in international relations was popular in much of the intellectual debate during the Cold War. Also central to the realist perspective is the notion that the international system is anarchic and that states are the unit of analysis. Waltz noted that the balancing of power between states is a reoccurring phenomenon and that balances disrupted will ultimately be restored (Waltz, 2000, 27).
These concepts of power and the continuous necessity to align and re-align with others for safety represent the hallmarks of realism and balance of power theories.

At the most basic level, states balance with others against a prevailing threat (Walt, 1985, 110). The triangular relationship between the US, USSR, and China during the Cold War represented this balancing at several levels. Directly following WWII, the Soviets and Chinese aligned with each other to balance against the US. While ideological similarities should have made this relationship between Stalin and Mao an easy, stable, and productive relationship, debate from the start over land and who was the true ideological champion of Communism made the relationship more of a pragmatic, balancing maneuver than a friendly alliance. However, once the Soviets and Chinese reached irreconcilable differences in the summer of 1969, China’s desire to balance with the US against the USSR became a necessary step. The notion of friend was quickly adopted for the sake of strategic necessity. Moreover, Stephen Walt summed up the American position by employing Henry Kissinger’s belief that in triangular relationship, it was better to be aligned to the weaker side because you could exert more control (Walt, 1985, 111).

The notion that the US would align with China in a balancing maneuver against the Soviets helps to explain several of the CIA’s transitional NIEs during the late 1960s and 1970s. The CIA noted that China had begun to perceive the Soviets as a greater threat than the US (NIE 13-76). This momentous change in alignment against ideological lines both disrupted the triangular balance of China and the USSR against the US, and restored a new balance with China aligned to the US against the USSR. Equally pragmatic from the US perspective, this newfound relationship with China was thought to
lend a helping hand in negotiations in Vietnam as well as Korea. The geo-political chess board of the Cold War was playing out in the triangular relationship between the US, USSR, and China and the move by both China and US to align during rapprochement can be explained by realism and balance of power theories. Moreover, how the US interpreted China’s 1) aggression against the USSR in 1969, 2) adoption of a defensive military posture with respect to the US, 3) slowed nuclear weapon production, and 4) retreat from its hawkish remarks on Taiwan all helped the US Government assess a reduced threat as well as extend an olive branch to balance together against the USSR. The Sino-Soviet relationship was of such critical importance to the US that full NIEs were written on this very subject in 1949, 1958, 1960, 1965, 1966, 1969, 1970, and 1973. These estimates are rich in their discussion of Chinese thought with respect to the Soviets and vice versa. The desire to balance at the state level was of considerable importance.

**Domestic Politics**

The reasons for employing multiple theoretical perspectives to help explain evolving threat narratives is manifold. Exploring American threat narratives with only realist or neorealist theories, which focus on state-centric or systemic interpretations, would leave an incomplete picture. According to Waltz, systemic theories emphasize the causal powers of the structure of the international system in explaining state behavior. The “structural” focus in this sense is the international structure and not the domestic structure (Wendt, 2013, 8-11). Since this study focuses on American threat narratives around China, not accounting for domestic views or the composition of the US intelligence community apparatus would be a major omission. Finally, realism is vague on how state interests change (Del Sarto, 2003). The changing nature of state interest
could be addressed by both theoretical perspectives of domestic politics as well as constructivism.

Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf explain how in domestic politics theory, two models exist for how societal preferences are translated into the political process: elitist and pluralist models (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996, 295). Elites (decision makers, policy influencers, and opinion leaders) or bureaucracies could exert immense power on policy decisions. Interest groups, whether those focused on public interest or ideology, similarly influence policy (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1996, 283, 301). In the case of the CIA, both elite and bureaucratic implications come to mind in its influence of policy.

Many domestic politics scholars have furthered the notion that change in policy decisions, even in the international arena, can be attributed more to domestic issues than anything foreign countries do or intimate. When looking at the threat posed by China against the US and the associated narratives around China threat, examining this notion that China’s actions could have been less impactful than the American domestic players of the time is intriguing. As noted earlier, Wolfe’s *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat* noted that US domestic factors, more so than Soviet factors during the Cold War, directly led to the rise and fall of the Soviet threat. Wolfe believed that rather than Soviet action, American domestic issues led to the rise of the Soviet threat (Wolfe, 1984, 6-10). Jack Snyder, also a domestic politics advocate, noted that statesman shape national security rather than the environment (Katzenstein, 1996, 27). He went on to note more recently that the reason the US focused on the Iraq threat in 2002-03 was primarily due to increased polarization of the American party system and values as a “wedge issue” more than anything that Iraq had done (Snyder, 2009, 52).
As a key domestic player in threat narrative production, the CIA falls into a unique location for influencing policy. While it is nested within the government and its DCI was appointed by the President [DCI position no longer exists and was replaced by the Director of National Intelligence in 2005], it is somewhat immune to and insulated from public scrutiny because of the classified nature of what it produces. While its security debates, findings, and publications are classified, its leadership is still responsible for accurately predicting and informing US Government leadership of threats. Thus, its information directly impacts policy decisions and actions that dictate reality. During the period of this study, the CIA held an important role of policy influencer. Because of this monopoly on strategic, forward-looking information, the CIA exerted this “immense power” on policy decisions that Kegley and Wittkopt described.

Since the CIA’s estimates are the primary resources for this study, understanding the personalities of the DCIs would be incredibly important to providing a full picture behind the CIA’s leadership at the time of these various threat estimates. While the CIA prides itself on insularity from partisan politics, cross-walking CIA leaders with political orientation of the Administration could be fruitful in not only providing context for the threat narratives, but also decoupling geo-political timelines and events from the personalities in office.

Based on relevant NIEs, the threat narratives around China were most dire in the 1950s and early 1960s. The DCIs at this time of heightened threat were Walter Bedell Smith (1950-1953), Allen Dulles (1953-1961) and John McCone (1961-1965). Dulles, an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) veteran, was replaced by Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs. McCone, a Republican, was appointed by Kennedy and resigned during the Johnson
administration. Understanding more about the personality of these individuals, their relationship with the President, as well as their tenure with the CIA could be revealing when exploring the threat narratives produced during this period of significant China threat.

William Raborn (1965-1966) and Richard Helms (1966-1973) served as DCIs during the transitional years for Chinese threat. While Helms served during rapprochement with China, he was released by Nixon for not blocking the Watergate investigation. He was replaced by James Schlesinger for a short stint in 1973. William Colby was a career intelligence officer and served from 1973-1976 at the height of China’s friend status with the US. Much of his tenure, however, was focused on the Yom Kippur War and the fall of South Vietnam. Colby’s term as the DCI lasted through the last NIE in the Tracking the Dragon volume.

When looking at the DCI’s during the two decades from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s, the group spanning from Smith through Colby was an interesting mix of career intelligence officers and political appointees, Democrats and Republicans, and anything but “yes men” to the President. Dulles, Raborn, and Helms all left office under negative circumstances and the 1970s involved an investigation of the CIA. The leaders’ personalities certainly impacted the CIA’s threat narratives around China and is important to exploring the narrative evolution. Similar to Wolfe’s notions of domestic politics impacting the rise and fall of the Soviet threat, domestic politics in the form of dynamics in the President-DCI relationship as well as foreign policy and economic disagreements between the elites is critical to the fall of Chinese threat in the early 1970s.
Constructivism

The reason for not stopping with the realist and domestic politics theoretical lenses for explaining evolving threat narratives is the unsatisfied need to address change. Constructivism allows us to view the narratives in the iterative nature in which they are formed as well as how states interact in a social setting. To help explain the iterative nature of threat narrative evolution, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s norm dynamics theory shows how new ideas are shaped. To help explain the social setting that existed between the US and China in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Peter Katzenstein’s *The Culture of National Security* adds value in explaining social interaction between states and heads of state. While realism treats states as unitary actors and does not look inside the state, and domestic politics reserves itself to a domestic focus, the interactions between senior Chinese and American leaders as well as identity changes of China during the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution also plays into reasons for threat narrative changes. Change in identity is precisely what Katzenstein attributes as a cause for changes in national security interests or policies of states (Katzenstein, 1996, 60).

Finnemore and Sikkink’s *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* describe a framework for how norms are created in a social setting (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, 10). At first glance the similarities between norms and threat can appear vast, however, both are socially constructed concepts that apply to countries in an international environment. Moreover, there are evolutionary, or lifecycle, similarities between threat and norms and the importance of timing appears paramount to both.

Finnemore and Sikkink note three stages in the lifecycle of international norms. Stage one is *norm emergence* where entrepreneurs attempt to influence others and
framing is highly important. The second stage is norm acceptance, or cascade, where socialization of the new norm takes place. Critical to this stage is the use of organizational platforms to further the norm’s acceptance. Finally, the third stage is internalization and how the norm engrains itself in the social interaction. In addition to the three stages, Finnemore and Sikkink note that some norms fail to reach the tipping point and never succeed. The norms that do succeed however can attribute their success to prominence and a world-time context (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, 909). The example they provide is around women’s suffrage and the creation of the norm. Not only did the norm of a woman’s right to vote progress through specific stages, but it also had to pass through critical gateways at just the right moments in time to succeed.

In addition to the similarities between norm creation and threat narrative progression, the utility of Finnemore and Sikkink’s three-stage framework offers a unique way to track the threat narrative exposure over time. When looking at national security threat estimates, the discussion around particular threats is often discussed at varying lengths and levels of certainty. Confidence levels are added to demonstrate the level of certainty that the assessors have in their judgements. Often in the CIA’s NIEs, threat narratives will progress in not only depth and volume of discussion, but also level of confidence of the judgment. For example, the progression of China’s threat based on fission and fusion weapons throughout the 1960s showed this three-step progression. NIE discussions ranged from uncertain mention in the late 1950s to confident, longer discussions throughout the 1960s as the threat narrative grew. Not only did this threat narrative emerge, but it began to cascade over time, and achieve acceptance through
further amplifying intelligence as well as increased support from the sister intelligence agencies. The narrative came to life in an iterative manner.

The constructive nature of this threat emergence lies in the iterative nature of multiple assessments building on previous assessments. In the rare moments of disjuncture, or departure from the thoughts of the time, assessments are revised and collide with the accepted views of the past. There is normally a period of transition when assessments offer a “more likely than not” qualifier in the judgements that run contrary to previous thought. It is in this period of late 1960s through the early 1970s, narratives begin to transition in the areas of economic, military, and politics. Positions of strength for China moved to weakness, almost desperation, and positions of diplomatic unity with Communist governments dissipated while pragmatic ties to the US grew. In the diplomatic realm, it was a conquest of practical relations over the ideological.

Katzenstein’s *The Culture of National Security* attempts to explain why change happens at certain moments in the international arena while at others it does not. This is an important failing of realism that Katzenstein’s framework helps to address and is helpful in looking at why China transitioned to friend status in 1972, while it did not in 1952. Katzenstein notes that interests are developed through a process of social interaction. He asks the question of why the Soviets considered it to be in their interest to withdraw from Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, but not consider it in the 1950s and 1960s (Katzenstein, 1996, 2). He notes that while power is still important, issues dealing with norms, identity, and cultures are becoming increasingly important in explaining why states act the way they do at critical junctions in time.
Katzenstein introduced a new way of looking at how the environmental structure, identity, and interests of states impact national security policy. While he briefly acknowledges the impact of domestic politics, his model generally describes the international environment, identity and interests of states, and the resulting impact on state national security. The following diagram attempts to draw connections between these concepts and national security policy.

**Figure 4: Interaction Model (Katzenstein, 1996, 53)**

This model generally describes state interaction, identity, interests in the international environment, and the international environment’s impact on national security policy. The application of Katzenstein’s changing state identities and interests to China in the 1960s and 1970s is around China’s break-up with its Soviet ideological ally. To a certain extent, this created a loss of identity of a pan-Communist block and replaced it with interests of survival for China to align with the US. From the US perspective, this
period of the early 1970s, the identity of world policeman was retreating with the withdrawal of Vietnam. This began to impact the interests of the US which also resulted in the olive branch being extended to China. As Katzenstein noted, changes in state identities “both generate and shape interests” (Katzenstein, 1996, 60).
Part III.

3. How Did We Get There?

A. America’s Early Ventures into China

The early Sino-American relationship was based on a transitioning power dynamic. The US was a growing power expanding its reach at the expense of a proud but declining empire coming to grips with its changing role in the world. China was attempting to hold onto its past glories as the Middle Kingdom with its Mandate from Heaven while the US was learning how to flex its newfound muscle. It was a classic example of power transition theory. One cannot help but to see the irony several centuries later as the tables begin to turn between the two nations (Levy, 2009, 26). China’s meteoric growth since Deng’s reforms in the late 1970s contrasts starkly with America’s more moderate growth of late and declining global assertiveness. This Chapter will explore the Sino-American relationship from its beginnings through WWII. What the CIA has called the Era of Mao will constitute the substantive period of threat narrative evaluation and will be covered in the subsequent chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6). The goal of this chapter is to provide the historical background to contextualize the threat narratives in the US during the Era of Mao.

The opium trade in the early 19th Century played a central role in shaping the early relations between China and the United States. Beginning with the British monopoly of the India-to-China opium trade, the British East India Company had nearly total global control of the commodity. Operating in the original 18th Century Chinese system which restricted foreign trade to a single port of Canton, the “Canton trade” system was the extent of Western interaction with the Chinese. However, with the decline
of Chinese power and its inability to restrict foreign nations from trading on new terms, the tributary system that China controlled for centuries was replaced by an open entry trade system that Western powers operated with impunity (Fairbank, King, and Goldman, 2006, 195-201).

Eager to secure their own share of trade with the Chinese, Americans rode the British coattails as they started to make inroads into China. With Indian opium declared off limits to Americans by the British, Americans explored other trading options with China such as ginseng, South Pacific seal skins, and Hawaiian sandalwood. American demand for Chinese tea helped spur a significant trade imbalance with US silver heading to China. Americans needed a product that the Chinese would purchase in bulk and found their answer in Turkish opium. While still avoiding the British monopoly of Indian opium, the Turkey-to-China opium trade was soon run exclusively by Americans (Bradley, 2015, 17-19). A huge influx of industrious Americans tried their luck with the risky opium endeavor and many would become wildly wealthy.

One such American pioneer of the opium trade was Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s grandfather Warren Delano. At 24 years of age, Delano was hired by the American opium tycoon Samuel Russell who promised him riches if he would become an opium runner in China. He, along with the many other opium runners, amassed huge fortunes at a very young age but at the cost of introducing a drug dependency upon China (Bradley, 2015, 19-28). The story of Delano is important not only in illustrating how a particularly lucrative growth industry was sparked in America, but also in its larger implications in how a future American leader would profess to understand China. While having very little personal experience with China prior to assuming office, Franklin Roosevelt would
later claim that his grandfather’s opium running experiences in China provided him crucial insight into China’s character. For example, Roosevelt told his Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, “please remember that I have a background of a little over a century in Chinese affairs” (Bradley, 2015, 49).

Profits from the opium trade poured into the US at staggering levels and helped spark an American economic revolution in the mid-1800s. American families leading the opium trade such as the Russels, Lows, Perkins, Delanos, Cushings, and Forbes began to reinvest their profits into America. Many of the families would become household names in part because of their wealth from opium and how they later successfully invested it into the burgeoning United States. In fact, much of the wealth spurred by the opium trade is still apparent in today’s American landscape. The Russel Family purchased much of the land Yale stands on today with the Russel family trust still paying the budget for Yale’s Skull and Bones Society. The Low Family donated significantly to Columbia University, had the Low Memorial Library named in its honor, and provided the seed money for the first transatlantic cable. The Perkins family built the first American railroad – the Quincy Granite Railway – along with Boston’s Athenaeum and Massachusetts General Hospital. The Forbes financed railroads in Michigan, Chicago, and Burlington. The Cushings built America’s first textile manufacturing city of Lowell, Massachusetts (Bradley, 2015, 28-30). Lowell would be a spark for the American Industrial Revolution. The opium trade in China was inextricably tied to many of the beginnings of America’s economic success. In an ignominious manner, much of America’s early startup funding came by way of selling opium in China.
Based partly on the virtues of wanting to “help” the Chinese – perhaps subconsciously due to the guilt associated with introducing a drug dependency – many Christian missionaries from the United States began to catch rides on the trade vessels to begin to proselytize the Chinese in the early 1800s. From the American and British perspective, the missionary work to create Christianized, Western enclaves in China would also help their respective trade interests. With this ulterior motive, Western governments began to support such missionary endeavors with military force. Missionaries built schools, hospitals, churches, and lay the Western infrastructure in key port towns (Bradley, 2015, 22-23). The American and British military stood by to ensure the Chinese government would not try to block such development.

When China began to push back against the large opium trade as well as the proselytization in the late 1830s, the British quickly responded with force. From a position of military weakness, China offered an ultimatum to England, its primary antagonist, to stop its opium trade or it would “decapitate” any foreigners selling opium in China. Queen Victoria answered ruthlessly by sending the British Navy to China in what would become the First Opium War. The Chinese defeat was swift and the resulting Treaty of Nanking provided Britain with not only five ports and Hong Kong, but also freedom from Chinese law within all of its trading posts (Bradley, 2015, 23-26). Chinese today regard this defeat by the British as the beginning of its “century of humiliation” when it was bullied by Western powers (Christenson, 2015, xv). The period from 1842-1943 has also been called the “treaty century” because of the many unequal treaties that Western powers would sign with China (Fairbank, King, and Goldman, 2006, 204).
In 1844, China would grant the US similar rights to the British in the Treaty of Wangxia. This treaty gave the US five “New Chinas” which for all intent in purpose became American territories (Bradley, 2015, 27-28). What would start as five ports each for the Americans, British, and French through separate treaties would grow to a network of more than eighty Western port cities. These ports resembled one another with key characteristics such as a large waterfront, many warehouses, and a large local workforce (Fairbank, King, and Goldman, 2006, 201). American opium traders, missionaries, and diplomats began to flow into China. China’s rapid subjugation to the US and Britain was monumental because only half a century earlier, China would not even allow Western governments to have diplomatic relations with the Middle Kingdom and would only refer to Westerners as barbarians. Moreover, a half century earlier China had the strength to back up these convictions. Times rapidly changed and China’s stubbornness and naivety led to Western manipulation.

Adding to China’s humiliation, the Second Opium War began when China tried once again to reassert itself against Western domination. It began in 1857, when China refused additional demands made by the Americans, British, and French such as allowing Western ambassadors to be stationed in Beijing, exempting foreigners from duties, and rescinding the prohibition of opium. When China refused the demands, the Western navies invaded and destroyed the seat of Chinese authority in Beijing’s Summer Palace. The resulting treaty provided religious freedom to Chinese Christians, delivered more ports for trade, and allowed foreign ships on the Yangtze River which would open up the heartland of China for additional opium trade (Bradley, 2015, 31-32). While the British and French conducted the lion’s share of the fighting against the Chinese in the Second
Opium War, the US and Russia benefited handsomely from some tacit participation by receiving the spoils associated with the most-favored nation status by the Chinese (Meyer, 1994, 260).

If there were gradations of relations between China and those Western powers gobbling up its seaports, the Sino-American relationship was least inimical because the US exercised an element of restraint that Britain and France failed to muster. For example, in 1862 President Abraham Lincoln sent Anson Burlingame to China to negotiate terms of Sino-American relations. Burlingame allowed for China to have consuls in American ports, for Chinese immigrants to work in the US, and for China to receive most favored nation status in the US. Burlingame even traveled to Europe in an attempt to convince others to provide these concessions to the Chinese (Meyer, 1994, 262-263). Although small in scale, this goodwill was an attempt by Lincoln to treat China in a friendlier manner. This diplomatic interaction between the Lincoln Administration and the Chinese would be the first true signal of attempted partnership or at least compassion, albeit within a dynamic of inequality, between the US and China. It would be a symbolic harbinger for what was to come from the Sino-American relations where Americans and the future China Lobby dictated the terms of their kindness.
B. American Views on China in the Late 19th Century

While many Americans traveled to China in support of trade, missions, or new diplomatic roles in the mid-1800s, Chinese were immigrating in droves to the United States. The building of the Transcontinental Railroad along with the California Gold Rush brought thousands of Chinese into the US. While not all Americans focused on the downside to this influx of Chinese in the US, animosity towards Chinese immigrants grew to a boiling point in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act. In America’s first century of existence, all immigrants regardless of nationality, religion, or ethnicity were welcomed; however, for the first time with the Chinese Exclusion Act, the borders became closed to an entire people (Bradley, 2015, 42).

Based on the American experience in the early to mid-1800s with Chinese during the opium trade and missionary work, a narrative existed at home about the Chinese people as “inefficient, lazy drug addicts” (Bradley, 2015, 42). However, when Chinese immigrants came to the US, their actions and demeanor were inconsistent with this narrative. The Chinese in the US were industrious, hard-working, and saved their earnings for the future. Many American leaders even attributed the success of the Transcontinental Railroad to the Chinese workers. California Governor Leland Stanford wrote to President Andrew Johnson saying, “without the Chinese it would have been impossible to complete the western portion of the great national highway” (Bradley, 2015, 42).

The praise of Chinese immigrants only lasted a short time as fear mongering crept in around the success of the Chinese. US Senator George Hearst said about the Chinese: “they can do more work than our people and live on less…they could drive our laborers
to the wall” (Bradley, 2015, 42). Another US Senator, James Blaine of Maine, said those “who eat beef and bread and drink beer…will have to drop his knife and fork and take up chopsticks” if Chinese are allowed to stay in the US (Bradley, 2015, 43). Riots followed in 1885 in Wyoming, Washington, New Mexico, Utah, and Alaska as Chinese were rounded up and told to leave. In one of the most egregious cases in Rock Springs, Wyoming, 700 Chinese men, women, and children were attacked by the Knights of Labor. Their homes were burned, some were killed, and the rest were forced to leave town. In Douglas Island, Alaska, 100 Chinese were placed onto a boat and sent back to China. Many remaining Chinese moved into Chinatowns across the US and Chinese integration into American society halted (Bradley, 2015, 44-46). Americans viewed the industrious Chinese immigrants as threats to their economic security and took it upon themselves to deal with this threat.
C. The Appeal of Westernized, Christian Leaders in China

If the 19th Century was a period of American domination of China in the form of unequal trade treaties as well as maltreatment of Chinese immigrants at home, the early 20th Century began as an attempt by the American conscience to “help” China. Although plenty of missionaries attempted to help Chinese at their individual levels in the 1800s, American leaders took up this mantle in the 1900s. This self-indulgent assistance that the US wanted to provide China was to recreate the former glories of the Middle Kingdom in the image of America. James Bradley wrote that American leaders and missionaries propagated a “mirage” of a China that wanted to be saved by the West. This path to redemption lay in a Christianized, democratic future (Bradley, 2015, 37-39). The first half of the 20th Century was America’s failed attempt at converting China into its own likeness. The China Lobby in the US would lead this charge to save China from itself, Japan, and even Mao.

Charles Denby, the US Ambassador to China in the late 19th Century, said that “the educated Chinaman, who speaks English, becomes a new man; he commences to think” (Bradley, 2015, 39). Admiral Alfred Mahan, one of the greatest naval minds in American history, also demonstrated an all too common ethnocentric mindset of the time when he said that America should instill its Christian values in China now when it is weak so that “time shall be secured for [the Chinese] to absorb the ideals which in ourselves are the result of centuries of Christian increment” (Bradley, 2015, 39). It was apparent that from American leaders to missionaries, the task of building a new China was paramount.
The approach that American politicians and evangelicals took was “if you win the leaders, you will win China” (Bradley, 2015, 39). However, before the US could win the leaders, it had to cultivate leaders in a wildly chaotic time in China’s history. In the early 20th Century, the Manchu dynasty was crumbling with the Boxer Rebellion undercutting the final remnants of its authority. Americans and other Western powers once again stepped in militarily to put down an anti-foreigner uprising. After the Chinese defeat, China paid an indemnity of $300 Million to the Western victors. In another show of goodwill similar to the times of Lincoln and Burlingame, the US returned a large portion of its share to be used for Chinese education (Meyer, 1994, 266). Puyi, the Last Emperor of China, was five years old in 1911 and had lost control. A new-comer Sun Yat-sen was proclaimed President of the Republic of China on January 1, 1912 (Bradley, 2015, 90-93). Sun would be called the George Washington of China.

Sun was a revolutionary who founded the Nationalist Party under the principles of Nationalism, Democracy, and People’s Livelihood (Bradley, 2015, 86). Even more significant from the American perspective was that he was a Christian. As a civil war started in China between competing warlords, Sun escaped to Japan where he married Chingling Soong, the second daughter of a very rich Chinese Christian publisher named Charlie Soong. This fateful connection with the Soong family would drive the Nationalist movement for the next three decades.

Charlie Soong, the patriarch of the family, had studied Christianity in the US and received a degree from Vanderbilt in the 1880s. He converted to Christianity and noted the prevalence of Bibles in the US. Upon returning home to China, he would build a large publishing empire based partly on the sale of Bibles in China. He would eventually
become one of the richest men in China and bankroll much of Sun’s political rise (Bradley, 2015, 88-91). Soong, with his publishing connections around the world, tapped into his marketing network in the US to convince Southern Methodists to support Sun. As Bradley described the *China mirage*, evangelical Christians in the US were enamored at the thought of the world’s most populous country having a Christian leader. Understanding the important cultural touch-points of Americans and how to influence them, Soong was able to sell the idea of his friend Sun to them. Soong articulately pitched Sun’s three principles of Nationalism, Democracy, and People’s Livelihood as derivatives of Abraham Lincoln’s “of the people, by the people, for the people” (Snow, 1968, 413; Bradley, 2015, 91). This was the hook, line, and sinker moment for American support of Sun.

The early 1900s were a complicated diplomatic time in the Sino-American relations because of the American support of Japan. During the Presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, an unofficial Japanese Monroe Doctrine existed for Asia (Bradley, 2015, 75). Teddy Roosevelt had unofficially given Japan *carte blanche* in Asia. This tacit understanding provided for a Japanese take-over of Korea. The tilt towards Japan by the US at the expense of China continued following WWI when President Woodrow Wilson allowed Japan to assume the former German colonies in China (Bradley, 2015, 96).

However, this American narrative that chose Japan as an ally over China in the Asian theater began to erode in the 1920s for two primary reasons: the ascension of Chiang Kai-shek and the publication of Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*. The confluence of these developments began to nudge Americans away from Japan and into the waiting arms of China. The only reason that the US did not move faster in its leap towards China
in the 1920s was because Japan was a major consumer of American oil and steel. In fact, the US was Japan’s largest supplier of its oil and steel (Bradley, 2015, 123). It was a soul-searching period for those leaders in the American Government with the respect to Asia. While their hearts were with China, their rational minds (and economic considerations) were with Japan.

Henry Stimson, the Secretary of State for both Presidents Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, best exemplified the straddling of this American position towards Japan and China. After Japan invaded Northern China, his decision to not recognize Japan’s acquisition of the territory in Asia did not go as far as an embargo against Japan to stop the flow of oil and steel, but it did send a stark message to Japan that the Japanese Monroe Doctrine of Teddy Roosevelt would no longer be supported (Bradley, 2015, 123-124). Neither the Chinese nor the Japanese were happy with the new American position of fence straddling.

Following the death of Sun, a period of wrangling ensued between two rising stars in China: Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist revolutionary Mao Zedong. The Russians arrived in China at this time to court both men and form the United Front that would stand up to a growing Japan (Bradley, 2015, 97-105). Chiang was aligned with the elites in China while Mao led the peasants. A natural fit for Chiang was the Soong family because of their network with the Chinese elites as well as their symbolic leadership mandate through Charlie Soong’s daughter’s marriage to Sun.

While Mao was consolidating power with the peasants, Chiang attempted to consolidate support among the elites via a marriage to one of China’s most powerful and influential families. The marketing and publishing genius of the Soong family was
instrumental in a landmark state wedding between the youngest Soong daughter, Mayling, and Chiang on December 1, 1927. This event cemented the powerful and wealthy Soong family with Chiang and was a mutually beneficial alliance between the wealth-seeking Soongs and the power-seeking Chiang. Chiang even divorced his first wife shortly before the wedding to Soong and sent her to the US (Bradley, 2015, 105-107). This Western-looking, Christian state wedding was a calculated move by the Soong-Chiang alliance to tug at the heart strings of the American people and leaders.

Capturing America’s imagination, the wedding would become a highly publicized event in the United States. Since it was a Christian wedding with the bride and groom donning Western attire, Americans began to relate to Chiang. Moreover, the new publisher of Time Magazine Henry Luce, who had been raised in China by his opium trading American father, was so captivated by the Christian wedding of the Chinese leader, that he had the wedding photo on the cover of Time Magazine. Millions of Americans saw the photo and read the article (Bradley, 2015, 111-115). American leaders including Roosevelt and Stimson had found their man in Chiang and would support him over Mao and Japan over the next two tumultuous decades.

If Chiang had captured the support of the American leaders, Pearl Buck’s famous book The Good Earth captured the hearts of the American people. Published in 1931, the book resulted in fresh support for the Chinese people and helped foster an understanding that Chinese peasants were similar to Americans struggling through the Great Depression. Buck had been born in China and had sentimental views of the Chinese. In Buck’s book, the main characters of Wang and O-Lan railed against big cities and poverty and called for a return to farming and simplicity. Americans during the
difficulties of the Great Depression could relate and felt that they understood the Chinese people from this story (Bradley, 2015, 116-117). Americans and Chinese were almost kindred spirits—or so it seemed in the eyes of many Americans. The book had a powerful impact in helping to shift American sentiment from anti to pro-Chinese in a short period. While Buck would win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction because of this book, its content changed the way the American people thought about the Chinese in real life.

By the 1930s, the American narratives of China had shifted almost entirely away from the traditional understanding of China as a devious, backwards country full of opium addicts which was sending its people to take over American jobs, to that of an increasingly Christian country whose values mirrored those of the US and whose assistance the US was almost morally obligated to provide. Further illuminating this narrative evolution was the change from adversaries to allies in several decades. While the late 1800s saw the US fighting a war with China in the Second Opium War and banning Chinese from immigrating to the US, as well as putting down the Boxer Rebellion in the early 1900s, only several decades later the US had begun to turn its back on its ally and significant trading partner Japan in favor of China. The evolution in the Sino-American relationship was considerable and would introduce a bias for subsequent American views on China during WWII. This shift to China and more specifically the Christian, Western Chiang interpretation of China would be so whole-hearted and hopeful that even when signs pointed against its prospects of success, the US still continued down the path of futility with its doomed partner.
D. The China Lobby and WWII

The *mirage* of Chiang’s imminent victory over Mao in the 1930s was championed by many Americans to include Franklin Roosevelt. The Chiang-Soong alliance in China concentrated on its relationship with Roosevelt in an attempt to solicit funding for its fight against the Communists. Chiang’s Finance Minister and brother-in-law, T.V. Soong, had a special relationship with Roosevelt as well as his senior cabinet members and personal friends to include Henry Morgenthau. Morgenthau would routinely approve multi-million dollar loans to Soong in an attempt to keep the Nationalists afloat (Bradley, 2015, 155-156).

In addition to the senior members of the US Government who believed in a Christian, Westernized China under the Chiang, the China Lobby was supported by many public figures who were born in China like Buck and *Time Magazine*’s publisher Luce. The Christian public relations arm was similarly led by two men who were born in China to missionary parents: Frank and Harry Price. They translated Sun’s *Three Principles of the People* into English and lobbied in the US for the American embargo of Japan (Bradley, 2015, 183). It was the implementation of this oil embargo several years later that led Japan down the fateful path towards Pearl Harbor. The China Lobby railed against both Japan and Mao in an attempt to see a victorious China led by Chiang.

The China Lobby would come to Chiang’s defense against both the Japanese in WWII and again following WWII in his fight against Mao. The ties between Roosevelt and Chiang could not be closer in the early 1940s. As an example, the five cent US Stamp in 1942 had both Lincoln and Sun on the front. T.V. Soong and Roosevelt personally reviewed the image together and posed for public photos while doing so
(Bradley, 2015, 294-295). Showing the strength of pro China sentiment in the US, a 1942 Gallup poll showed that 62% of Americans thought the US should defend China from Japan while only 25% thought defending England from Germany was a priority (Bradley, 2015, 299). This American sentiment was fresh off of The Good Earth effect as well as the China Lobby’s influences. Noted historian Barbara Tuchman believed that the China Lobby had done such a comprehensive job in imparting its view that Chiang should succeed against the Japanese and Mao that she said, “probably never before had the people of one country viewed the government of another under misapprehension so complete” (Bradley, 2015, 299). The China Lobby was such a powerful force in the US in its advocacy for Chiang that an entrenched bias would carry into the post WWII years. The subjective view on China professed by the China Lobby would cloud objectivity for years to come. This fog of emotion that the Lobby impressed upon the threat narratives on China would hang over US threat calculations for the next several decades.

Prior to the end of WWII, the US Government had eyes and ears within China that passed nuggets of intelligence back to Washington. Notwithstanding the China Lobby and Roosevelt’s bias to Chiang’s success, the intel from China about the actual situation on the ground was representative of the threat truth. The waning years of WWII was the zenith of sound American intelligence on China. Keen military and State Department eyes and ears on the ground in China benefitted the US Government and resulted in well informed narratives. In what was called the Dixie Mission, the US had an observation base outside of Communist controlled Yan’an. Twelve American intelligence agents in the Mission worked hand in hand with Mao and Zhou Enlai against their common Japanese enemy. American officers and Chinese leaders bonded by sharing
movies such as Charlie Chaplain’s *The Great Dictator* where they could commiserate over their common fight against Fascism (Griffin, 2014, 200).

For a short period following WWII, a Foreign Service Officer by the name of John Stewart Service continued to provide a clear and accurate voice on the situation in China. Having worked with both Mao and Zhou during the Dixie Mission, Service understood and reported accurately on this political and security landscape. Service was able to pass the truth of the Chinese Communist’s strategic stature and intent back to Washington. Rising to the Second Secretary, Service reported to the State Department and White House that the Communists were a cohesive group while the Kuomintang Nationalists continued to be an incompetent group following the inept leadership of Chiang Kai-shek (Griffin, 2014, 200-201). In a report from 1944, Service noted that “while the Kuomintang has lost its early revolutionary character …one cannot help coming to feel that this [Communist] movement is strong and successful” (Service, 1944, Report No. 1). Further buttressing this view, journalist Edgar Snow after meeting Mao and Zhou similarly reported in his book *Red Star over China* that the Communists were a cohesive group, champions of the poor, even though they lacked resources (Snow, 1968, 35-37, 412; Griffin, 2014, 53-58). The United States had eyes and ears in China and, even more importantly, the security narratives that were passed back to Washington reflected a semblance of an insider’s, objective view of the actual situation.

This would all change in the post WWII years for a multitude of reasons.

The issue of China threat from the American perspective was politicized from the start in the post WWII period in large part due to the notion that America had “lost” China. Truman was pilloried for losing China and subsequent Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson as well as the intelligence apparatus were extremely cautious in all China related matters (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). This overarching black-eye of losing China, an impatience to fix the situation, and fear of making it worse through the Sino-Soviet partnership would dramatically influence American Government views on China. This is the lens by which to understand American views on China threat narratives during this post-war period.

This section delves into the China threat narratives professed by the US Intelligence Community (IC) following WWII. Engaged in a collective manner, these narratives represent a turn to “enemy” in American strategic thinking on China during the early years of what the IC referred to as the Era of Mao (National Intelligence Council’s Tracking the Dragon, 2004). These narratives, presented by the CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE) directly to Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, would influence policy decisions on China in the post WWII world. Their impact on the American perception of China cannot be overstated.

As discussed earlier in the methodology section, the narratives outlined here are segmented into the three substantive areas of political, economic, and military. I will apply the norm dynamics theoretical framework to chart the emergence and acceptance of the Agency’s narratives. I will also discuss the narratives on China that existed in the public space to demonstrate a divergence, when applicable, in views and story-telling.
This distinction between the threat narratives derived from “public” intelligence versus “secret” intelligence is an important one. Often narratives derived from secret information carry more currency with policymakers than those born from public information (Turner, 2005, 52-53; Richelson, 2008, 12). H. Trevor-Roper noted “secret intelligence is the continuation of open intelligence by other means… [Secret intelligence] is to complement the results of what for convenience we may call “public” intelligence; that is, the intelligence derived from the rational study of public or at least available sources. Intelligence is, in fact, indivisible” (Richelson, 2008, 11-12). By public intelligence, I am referring to the knowledge base created by think tanks, academia, and pundits. Secret intelligence is of course that which the government has a monopoly on. In reality, secret intelligence should supplement public intelligence and not supplant it.

While the previous chapter provided a historical context of Sino-American threat narratives, this chapter will focus on those particular narratives that manifest themselves during the post-war period. If threat narratives from the American perspective on Asia in early to mid-20th Century centered on a rising and belligerent Japan as well as destabilization spurred by the Chinese civil war, the narratives during the Era of Mao were indicative of a threat consolidation emanating from China itself. Relations between the United States and Mao’s Communists continued to deteriorate following WWII and the palpable nature of this hostility grew in the 1950s. A period of “enemy” threat narratives were ushered in by the IC. Mao had defeated America’s ally in Chiang Kai-shek and the United States continued to rebuke Mao by only recognizing Taiwan as the one true China. Moreover, America had embarked upon an existential war on international Communism and China represented one of its two pillars. Further
exacerbating this souring Sino-American relationship, Moscow and Beijing moved into both an ideological and strategic relationship by signing the *Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance* in early 1950. China’s support for North Korea in the Korean War intensified this hostile Sino-American relationship. The Korean War demonstrated the potency and unpredictability of China’s military which was capable of standing up to the US in a regional conflict (Kissinger, 2011, 146). As the second half of the 20th Century unfolded, China began to dominate the threat landscape in the United States with its enemy status rivaled only by the Soviet Union.

The threat narratives sketched by the CIA on China in the 1950s and early 1960s show the emergence of an incredibly hostile, capable China. The storylines congealed around five distinct narratives on China: 1) intent to fight American influence militarily in Asia even to the point of all-out war, 2) rapid push for nuclear weapons, 3) growing economic success, 4) balancing with the Soviets against the US, and 5) effectively stabilizing its governance structure and popular support. The first two narratives fall into the military threat perspective, the third an economic sense, and the final two represent the political angle. While separated into the distinct substantive areas of military, economic, and political, the five narratives roll up into a meta narrative around China. This meta narrative was one of China as a stable, capable (both militarily and economically) enemy intent on military conflict with the US and in strong partnership with the Soviets. More succinctly, China had become a highly dangerous threat to the US in the post-war years. Based on a discourse analysis of Agency documents, the following represents the primary threat narratives that the CIA passed to America’s leaders during this post-war period.
Table 2. Enemy Threat Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foe Period 1948-1966</th>
<th>Threat Narratives on China</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substantive Locations</td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Bent on actively fighting American influence in Asia even if it leads to all-out war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Significant push for Nukes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>3. Economic Rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>4. Strong Sino-Soviet Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Rising political support of Mao and stabilization of Communist regime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These five threat narratives appear in multiple NIEs and SNIEs in the 1950s and early 1960s. Moreover, they appear in the “conclusion” section of the documents highlighting their importance. The growth of these narratives represents a trend towards this larger meta narrative of a dangerous China. They illustrate the precise views that the CIA passed unfiltered and unencumbered to the President. The policy makers received these narratives as input to their policy prescriptions and, based on the Eisenhower Administration in particular placing considerable emphasis on these estimates, their impact was significant in the “hostile” years.

Applying Finnemore and Sikkink’s norm dynamics theory to the narrative evolution shows how the three stages of emergence, acceptance, and internalization manifest themselves in these narratives. This framework helps to show the transitional nature of the narratives from inception to crossing the tipping point of acceptance. While there is no strict frequency of narrative presence that equates to the emergence, acceptance, and internalization phases and its application is more conceptual in nature, the general rule followed was that emergence was represented by the first instance that the CIA spoke of the narrative in the conclusion section of an estimate. Acceptance and internalization were represented more loosely by subsequent iterations and more robust discussions of the view in ensuing NIEs as well as, when documented, increased levels of confidence in
the CIA’s judgement on that view. Using this norm dynamic theoretical progression, the inception and growing prevalence of a threat storyline is similar to a snowball rolling down a hill in its initial creation and increasing size. In the case of threat narratives, this would be initial emergence, scope, and frequency of the narrative.

A. Military Narratives

1. Actively Fighting American Influence in Asia

   A central narrative that the CIA furthered in the post WWII years was around China’s intent for active military confrontation with the US in Asia. This storyline emerged at the end of the 1940s in stark contrast to the narrative, present as late as 1945, of China as an ally of the US in the mutual fight against Japan. American leaders had previously brokered partnerships between the Communists and the Nationalists to fight alongside one another and the US against Japan. Before the conclusion of WWII, the relationship was strong between the US and Nationalist Government with even the US and Communist Government on speaking terms. In some cases, even American intelligence units such as the Dixie Mission collaborated with Mao’s troops towards the end of WWII. China in the 1930s and 1940s was a budding republic, tilting democratic, with some socialist inclinations – a scenario not all that different from many countries of the time. However, in five short years following the end of WWII, China had become an arch enemy of the United States. The threat picture skewed 180 degrees as did American policy.

   The CIA believed in an overarching willingness and desire of China to fight American influence militarily in Asia in the 1950s. This desire was not painted as a lukewarm inkling, but rather as a passionate desire for China to confront the US even if it
meant all-out war. The narrative was more than a characterization of hostile rhetoric alone from Mao, but one of a true military dimension with follow through. It is one thing for a leader to spew hawkish rhetoric, but quite another when a capability exists along with intent. The CIA believed this threat to have teeth. The CIA saw this desire to confront the US in three hotspots. Korea and Taiwan were the initial flash points of Sino-American contention while Indochina (primarily Vietnam, but also Laos and Cambodia) eventually simmered to a similar level of confrontation.

A narrative of actively fighting the US began to emerge in 1949 in the first NIE on the post-civil war world. This assessment titled “Probable Developments in China,” devoted an entire section to “Imminent problems for the US arising out of developments in China.” The CIA believed the situation was about to go from troublesome to severely dangerous over the following few months with “possible incidents involving US armed forces, officials, and nationals, sharpening of the Communist-Nationalist struggle for Taiwan, Chinese Communist designs for Hong Kong and Macao…and the expansion of Chinese Communist influence throughout the Far East” (ORE 45-49, 3). CIA fears grew as the “CCP has indicated its interest in uniting one billion Orientals in a Communist Asia” (ORE 45-49, 7). The CIA was betting on China’s design to confront the US militarily in Asia. The CIA believed it had a fairly good handle on China’s intent to both forestall American designs in Asia and form its own Asian communist sphere of influence.

By the early to mid-1960s, this narrative had gone from accepted to internalized as the CIA believed that “China regards the US as its primary enemy” (NIE 13-9-65, 1). The Agency concluded that the principle aims of China were, “to eject the West,
especially the US, from Asia…, to increase the influence of Communist China in Asia, to increase the influence of Communist China throughout the underdeveloped areas of the world” (NIE 13-9-65, 1). This judgment is considerable for the magnitude of its reversal from earlier in the 1940s when Nationalist China’s principle aim was to curry American favor and continue to have the US fund its future and provide political, economic, and cultural direction. We will now turn our attention to the sub narratives of this larger narrative around confrontational.

**Korea**

The Korean War played a significant role in the emergence of this narrative of China’s predilection for armed confrontation with the US. While the CIA had acknowledged China’s intent to confront the US, the Korean war demonstrated China’s capabilities to actually fight in a military conflict. In 1950, the CIA explored China’s motives for intervention in Korea. It noted that the “Chinese Communist decision to commit troops in North Korea…would not have been taken by Communist China without Soviet sanction or possibly direction. It must therefore be assumed that both parties consider the anticipated benefits to justify the acceptance of the calculated risk of precipitating a general war” (NIE 2, 3). While the Agency was initially skeptical of China’s commitment to send ground forces into Korea, once Chinese troops passed the Yalu River and entered Korea, the CIA believed that China would fight the US in a full scale war. Through China’s intervention in Korea, China had “accepted a grave risk of retaliation and general war…[and] would probably ignore an ultimatum requiring their withdrawal” (NIE 2, ii). The belief was that once China had decided to invade Korea (with Soviet guarantees and nudging), it had made the mental leap to engage directly with
the US. Furthermore, once China entered into direct confrontation with the US, the CIA’s line of thinking was that the Soviets would defend China should it need support. The principles of escalation and Soviet backing in Korea undergird the narrative that China was willing and able to fight the US in a military conflict.

Korea was the first foray into the new post WWII world of conflict between the US, China, and the USSR. While North Korea attacked South Korea in June 1950 to begin the war, the Chinese attack in October 1950 would set in motion an expanded conflict that would last three years and push all participants to the brink of a larger war not confined to Korea. Soviet support of China bolstered China’s resolve to confront the US with military troops in Korea. The advent of this war was significant for it set in motion a period of direct Sino-American conflict in the Asian theater at the beginning of the Era of Mao that would last the better part of two decades.

Taiwan

Just as the principle fighting in Korea subsided in 1953, the CIA’s narrative around China as a confrontational opponent of the US began to move into the second stage of norm dynamics: acceptance. This became clear with the issue of Taiwan’s independence from mainland China in the early to mid-1950s. As time passed, Chiang’s island retreat took on added significance from merely that of an exiled government to that of a distinct country. The CIA believed Mao’s patience was wearing thin and that military action was imminent.

As early as 1951, the Agency deemed that Chinese intent and capabilities existed to attack Taiwan. It stated, “Chinese Communists have indicated their firm intention of capturing Taiwan in order to complete the conquest on Chinese territory and eliminate
the last stronghold of the Nationalist regime. The Chinese Communists have the capability for mounting an amphibious attack on Taiwan” (NIE 10, 2). This wording in particular is very important because it speaks to the intent and capability of China which is how the agency assessed threat as a function of the two factors. The CIA did note however that while the US 7th Fleet remained in the area, an imminent attack was unlikely to occur based on American deterrence (NIE 10, 2). This logic was characterized by Douglas MacArthur’s view of Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” (Bolton, 2017, A19). The CIA believed nonetheless that Mao was waiting for the US to blink and then he would seize Taiwan. The US would merely have to move its fleet for a moment and China would be united under Mao. A series of probing antics by Mao designed to see how the US would respond to Communist China’s aggression against Taiwan would reinforce this narrative and help internalize it. The First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954 and 1958 were reflections of China’s desire to see how far it could push the US. These events served to buttress the Agency’s narrative of Chinese aggression.

By the end of the militaristic decade of the 1950s though, the Agency’s view began to transition once again and a new narrative emerged around how far China was willing to push the US militarily. It believed that China no longer wanted to risk a major military showdown with US over Taiwan, but was likely to avoid full scale invasion and limit its assault to attacking offshore islands such as Quemoy. By the late 1950s, the US believed China’s intention was not to risk war with US any longer but to prevent the “two China” solution from becoming status quo (SNIE 100-9-58, 1). Even this evolution in the narrative from the late 1940s to late 1950s is significant because it highlights America’s changing threat perceptions that China had begun to exercise limits and caution to the
extent it was willing to avoid direct conflict with the US. While the narratives around
China’s hawkish nature in 1950 reflected a lack of restraint, by the end of the decade the
Agency was beginning to temper its judgment and thus narrative. The idea of Mao’s
restraint would be revisited in how the CIA looked at the utilization of Chinese military
resources in Vietnam.

**Vietnam**

In 1951, the CIA deemed China to have the capability and intent to support the
Viet Minh. It explained, “Chinese Communists at present have the capability of
intervening effectively in Indochina…Direct intervention in strength is almost certain to
occur whenever there is danger either that the Viet Minh will fail to attain its military
objective of driving the French out of Indochina” (NIE 10, 2). Even bolder, the Agency
deemed China capable of “securing” Hong Kong from the British at any time and
simultaneously attacking Korea, Indochina, Tibet, and Burma (NIE 10, 2). This section of
the 1951 estimate was defined as “Immediate Chinese Communist Threats to US Security
Interests” and reflected the emerging fear that a Chinese multi-prong attack was
imminent not only in Vietnam but in much of Asia. It also highlights the larger hawkish
narrative of China wanting to confront the US militarily.

Some 15 years later, a 1966 estimate stated that China seemed likely to provide
not only logistical and engineering resources to North Vietnam, but would also move
infantry troops into North Vietnam as a precautionary step (NIE 13-66). There was
certainly a sense in Agency documents that China was planning to contest through
military force American plans in Asia. Even as late as the mid-1960s, it still believed that
China would employ combat troops in Asia to confront the US. By this point, the
narrative of confrontation had reached a level of internalization in the norm dynamics continuum. This progression is interesting because even though the CIA believed that China was beginning to retreat from its hawkish invasion stance with respect to Taiwan, it still viewed Vietnam as an expeditionary endeavor for China similar to Korea a decade earlier and thus ripe for military conflict. While China did not send combat troops to Vietnam, it did supply the Viet Minh with equipment and Chinese troops acting in a support function. As the 1960s progressed, this narrative evolved toward China’s desire for confrontation against American power with decreasing emphasis on direct military to military combat.

Looking at the body of discussion in its entirety around China’s intent for military conflict with the US, this narrative by the CIA – even with its decreasing emphasis on direct military confrontation throughout the 1960s – ran contrary to some of the publicly held views on China’s confrontational nature outside of its borders. Many publicly held views conflicted with the CIA narrative of Mao’s intent to fight the US militarily in Korea, Taiwan, and even Vietnam. The expeditionary nature of the Agency narrative in particular diverged from contemporary views of China at the time in the American public space. Many of these views held that China was still broken, recovering from WWII and civil war, and could not even think to look outside of its borders. The expeditionary nature of the Agency’s narrative also diverged from the earlier precedence of Mao’s military tactics when fighting the Nationalists when he drew his enemy into the heartland to wait them out. The idea that China would fight expeditionary endeavors outside its borders ran contrary to its economics, historical precedence, and penchant for passive defense.
Public narratives of the time in the early 1950s noted a growing willingness of China to fight but that supplies and a defensive nature would preclude any genuine expeditionary threat to the US. A 1951 *Foreign Affairs* article by Hansen Baldwin noted that while Chinese soldiers had evolved in the past 20 years from their pacifist nature to demonstrate a willingness to fight, they severely lacked any and all military materiel to be taken seriously (Baldwin, 1951, 51-52). China also lacked any tangible sea or air power to project its will. Representing a common view of the time, he noted that the “Yellow Peril” of the past would not be rearing its head again (Baldwin, 1951, 52).

Several years later, Ralph Powell in a 1960s *Foreign Affairs* article, reinforced this public narrative that China could only muster an internal semblance of military endeavors and that expeditionary notions were not possible. Powell noted that Mao wanted to build a universal militia through his “everyone is a soldier” campaign. The thought was to create a “defense of steel” to draw the enemy into the “inferno and drown in the human sea” (Powell, 108-110). It was much more based on defense than expeditionary in nature to fight the US outside of China. Many pundits in the public wondered how China could be an expeditionary threat if its foot soldiers “were toiling over mountains or through swamps barefoot or in straw sandals or tennis shoes” (Baldwin, 1951, 52). In a stark contrast to CIA views, many of those in the public offered *public intelligence* on China that painted a lack of Chinese threat that was both devoid of intent for expeditionary endeavors (passive defense) as well as an utter lack of capabilities (straw sandals).
2. Push for Nuclear Weapons

While narratives around China’s nuclear ambitions had yet to emerge in the early 1950s, once they did, it was one of China as a gangbuster trying to achieve nuclear capability. The strong belief at the CIA that the USSR would provide nuclear weapons or at least the know-how to China emerged in the mid to late 1950s (NIE 13-58, 2). In its first mention of China’s nuclear program, the CIA noted that “although Communist China will almost certainly not have developed a missile or nuclear weapons production capability of its own by 1962, we believe that the Chinese Communists will press the USSR for such advanced weapons…[and] the USSR may introduce nuclear weapons into Communist China by 1962” (NIE 13-58, 2). The assessment was rife with anxiety that the USSR would try to level the playing field with the US in Asia and provide nuclear weapons to China. Describing Chinese nuclear research, the Agency noted that the “overall effort has progressed steadily since 1955 with the benefit of substantial amount of Soviet aid” (NIE 13-2-60, 1). It also thought that once nuclear know-how was attained, the Chinese would “almost certainly proceed to create an operational nuclear capability as quickly as feasible” (NIE 13-2-60, 3).

This narrative continued throughout the early 1960s appearing in a 1960 NIE titled “Sino-Soviet Relations” where it stated that the USSR was “aiding Communist China in basic nuclear research” (NIE 100-3-60, 10). The CIA also noted that the Soviets supplied China with “slightly-enriched uranium and heavy water for the research reactor in 1958” (NIE 100-3-60, 10). It offered an overarching narrative that China was rapidly pushing for nuclear weapons and the Soviets were assisting them in their goals. This was
an alarmist narrative for the CIA to pass to policymakers at a time when nuclear war was at the forefront of American leaders’ minds.

The narrative on China’s push for nuclear weapons transitioned into acceptance and internalization in the early 1960s with the writing of a dedicated estimate entitled “The Chinese Communist Atomic Energy Program” in 1960. The fact that the CIA was writing a dedicated estimate on China’s nuclear weapon goals and capabilities is indicative of this narrative achieving a level of internalization by the Agency. Moreover, with the nature of the estimates as an often-requested document by the President, this was most likely at the behest of Eisenhower (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). The interplay between the Presidency and CIA is key here. The very nature of the ask to write an NIE on nuclear China almost presupposes the nuclear threat and steers the Agency to outline the threat. An absence of corroborating data on such a Chinese nuclear capability could mistakenly be attributed to a dearth of information as opposed to the threat truth of limited capability and intent. The Agency noted China’s “concerted effort to develop the corps of scientists and technicians and establish the research facilities essential to the exploitation of nuclear energy” (NIE 13-2-60, 1). This estimate said that China had “a highly competent cadre of Western-trained Chinese nuclear specialists [with] their nuclear research effort expanded rapidly since the early 1950s and more than twenty nuclear research facilities established at institutes and universities” (NIE 13-2-60, 1). It called for China’s first nuclear detonation as soon as 1962 but as late at 1964 (NIE 13-2-60, 19). The CIA believed China’s nuclear capabilities were on the move and broadcast it as a five-alarm fire.
A slight variant of this narrative, or sub narrative, on China’s fervent desire to achieve a successful nuclear test began to emerge with the nuanced goal of a wholly native capability. The CIA started to foster this sub narrative of China building nuclear capabilities without Soviet support as Sino-Soviet relations began to sour. The CIA believed that China was “energetically developing her native capabilities in the field of atomic energy” (NIE 13-2-60, 1). The genesis of this sub narrative was its belief that the Soviets were providing nuclear assistance “at a deliberate pace, hoping to postpone the attainment of a native Chinese nuclear weapons capability as long as possible” (NIE 13-2-60, 1). To accelerate this nuclear weapon effort even without continued and earnest Soviet support, the CIA believed that China would shift funding and focus from economic development to its nuclear program. This shift was believed to support Mao’s intent to prioritize nuclear weapons over the economy. This storyline is also indicative of a shift in the CIA’s view that the Soviets were less likely to provide a bomb as it had originally thought several years earlier. This shift informs a larger narrative about the Sino-Soviet partnership which also started strong in the 1950s and progressively weakened.

China achieved its first successful atomic device detonation in 1964 (NIE 13-7-67, 3). CIA’s narratives on China’s nuclear ambition in the late 1950s and early 1960s characterized a story of China’s urgency in the nuclear arms race. While many countries were on a similar pursuit, China’s ambition was different from the CIA’s perspective because it was aided by the USSR – albeit varying levels of support – and there was frightening strategic value in China as a Soviet ally having weapons and defending Communism in Asia.
The CIA’s narratives on Chinese nuclear pursuits were fairly accurate when viewed with the benefit of hindsight. Much of the accuracy of this narrative can be attributed to China’s partnership with the International Atomic Energy (IAE) in the late 1950s. This partnership allowed for a level of international transparency among all countries in pursuit of nuclear endeavors. For example, the 1960 NIE on China’s Atomic Energy Program had photos of the IAE facility in Peiping. It even contained photos of the research reactor and cyclotron building (NIE 13-2-60, Figures 4-6,10). China’s membership in the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR) at Dubna, USSR starting in 1956 also provided a level of additional international transparency – although less than its work with IAE. Also, when new discoveries were made by Chinese nuclear scientists, it was not uncommon for China to publicly share their “top secret” news. For example, the CIA noted in 1960 that Wang Kan-ch’ang, leader of the Chinese scientists at Dubna and Deputy Director of JINR was credited with discovering a new nuclear particle (the anti-sigma minus hyperon) (NIE 13-2-60, 10).

Whether it was China’s involvement in international nuclear agencies or its immodest desire to demonstrate progress, the CIA was relatively well informed of China’s nuclear pursuits and progress. All said, this narrative that the CIA fostered around China’s nuclear ambition and progress accurately reflected the conditions in China and was unparalleled in the public space. Also, public narratives in this space were relatively nonexistent due to the lack of information. The difference in the availability of information around nuclear weapons was a large reason why the narratives by the CIA were more informed than the public and why the public shied away from commenting on Chinese nuclear threat (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017).
B. Economic Narratives

3. Economic Rise

The CIA painted a rosy picture of China’s economy in the 1950s. It characterized China’s rapid economic growth as that of a country rebounding and retooling its economy with a special focus on its industrial sector. After a disastrous civil war, it portrayed China as a nation on a swift trajectory to grow and compete. This threat of an economic resurgent China was significant for several reasons to the CIA. First, any economic success for China could be construed as success for the Communist model at a time when many countries were comparing the advantages of capitalism versus communism and horse racing the competing models. Second, the mere growth of the Chinese economy and focus on industrial and capital equipment growth was concerning because this sector in particular could be quickly retooled for military production in support of war. Finally, the stronger the Chinese economy and more engrained it became with Soviet and surrounding Asian markets, the greater the loss of potential trading opportunities for the US as well improved Soviet economic growth. Three sub narratives bubbled to the top of the CIA’s view of China’s growing economy: A) growth fueled by Soviets markets, B) Five Year plan was working, C) radical political and social changes would not disturb economic progress.

The CIA was highly concerned with economic opportunity that Soviet markets afforded a growing, production-focused Chinese economy. The narrative around a rapidly growing economy emerged in 1954 particularly around the new Soviet markets that China could sell into. The 1954 estimate had China’s economy growing by 20-25% in the following five years. China’s focus at this time was on the modern industrial sector.
particularly heavy industry and transportation with an anticipated 70-100% increase in five years (NIE 13-54, 1). For a population estimated at 500 million in 1954, China’s gross national product (GNP) was approximately $27 Billion or one fourteenth that of the US GNP (NIE 13-54, 4). While China’s relative GNP was considerably less than the US’ GNP, the CIA’s concern over China’s economic growth, fueled by closer trading with the USSR, was real. It painted this apprehension by calling out pre and post WWII export trends. In 1938 nearly all of China’s trade was to countries which were not in the Soviet Bloc of the 1950s. By 1952, 70% of Chinese trade was with the Soviet Bloc (NIE 13-54, 5). There was a belief that China’s new partnership with the USSR would open up markets to its budding industrial sector.

The Agency also believed that China’s First Five Year Plan (1953-1957) was successful in moving the needle towards an industrialized country with a high rate of GNP growth (NIE 13-58, 4). By 1958, the CIA had assessed that China’s GNP had grown to $65-67 Billion with a large proportion due to its rapidly growing industrial base (NIE 13-58, 2). Chinese GNP in 1958 had jumped nearly 150% since 1954 during the previous assessment. The CIA believed this high economic growth would continue. It judged that in the Second Five Year Plan ending in 1962, the annual GNP increase would be near 7-8% annually with an even larger proportion of the economy moving towards industrial work compared to 1957 (NIE 13-58, 12). These assessments would certainly have made policy experts pause at the magnitude of the projected economic growth of China.

Even as late as 1965, the CIA believed the Chinese economy would not be stalled. It assessed that “political and social problems within China are unlikely to prevent
economic and military development or to force a softening of Chinese foreign policy” (NIE 13-7-65, 2). While the Agency acknowledged the political and social setbacks stemming from the failed Great Leap Forward (1958-61), it interestingly noted that economic and military development would continue to increase and flourish even through the tough times. This assessment was made a year before the Cultural Revolution and the extensive problems that ensued.

In addition, many of the early American economic assessments on China in the 1950s rightly captured the uptick in production, but failed to notice Mao’s shift in the mid to late 1950s when he believes the economy was strong enough for the social changes in his pursuit of “true” Communism (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). China’s numbers were improving but China was also collecting and promulgating exaggerated numbers about its own economic success. Many of the regional ministers were providing inflated numbers to appear successful to Mao even when the production was abysmal. Not only did these numbers give Mao a false sense that China was ready for his Great Leap, but it also misled Americans who were able to collect, albeit rarely, the Chinese data (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017).

Several contrarian views to this rosy economic outlook for China existed in the think tank and academic world at the time especially around China’s ability to revive its economy so quickly. For example, a July, 1950 Foreign Affairs article by C.M. Chang painted quite a different picture of China than that proposed by the Agency. This view highlighted a post WWII China that had not only suffered through Japanese aggression but also its own protracted civil war. Chang noted China’s “ruined cities, wrecked highways and railways, broken villages, hungry, weary and destitute people” with
“widespread famine, drought and flood and war” (Chang, 1950, 551). Finally, Chang also listed a myriad of economic indicators that painted China as anything but threatening to the US: China’s economy was feeble in 1950, taxes were higher than in the Kuomintang days, the peasants’ produce was being collected by the state, and factories were not producing because of lack of raw materials (Chang, 1950, 562-563). Chang’s qualitative measures stood in contrast to many of the quantitative “guesses” that the CIA offered.

A second sub narrative existed in the public space about China’s economic woes with respect to the failure of the farming collectives. Wolf Ladejinsky, in his 1957 *Foreign Affairs* article, highlighted this view that China’s first Five Year Plan was not as productive as some may have thought (Ladejinsky, 1957, 101). While Chinese farmers were no longer at war and could now focus on farming, the resulting meager uptick in production was burdened by the utter failure of farming collectivization (Christensen, 2015, 1). With the Chinese population growing at 15 Million people a year in 1957, the collectives were not as productive as they needed to be to ensure food pantries were sufficient (Ladejinsky, 1957, 101). Ladejinsky noted that a fiction existed in China that the collectives were the “common interest” of the collectivized peasantry and the state and that it was “doubtful the government will find the answer to how to ensure peasant loyalty and raise agricultural production with a peasantry lacking incentive to produce” (Ladejinsky, 1957, 103). Thus, the public narratives that Chang and Ladenjinsky among others noted in the 1950s about the lack of both capability and incentives put the Chinese economy in a precarious situation and was a far cry from the CIA’s highly positive view. Although Mao declared that China had “stood up” in 1949, it was more aspirational than a characterization actual conditions. In reality, China’s economic boost did not arrive
until 1978 with Deng Xiaoping’s economic transformation (Christensen, 2015, 1). Judging by the secret intelligence bent towards a more productive and thus more threatening China, one must wonder if the public intelligence about China’s economic recovery was overlooked or even intentionally discounted.
C. Political Narratives

4. Sino-Soviet Partnership

The CIA was highly concerned by the blossoming cooperation between the Soviet Union and China in the 1950s. This was a raw time for American analysis on the USSR and China as only a decade earlier both countries were allies of the US in a war against Germany and Japan. In the triangular diplomatic construct that ensued, the US was the odd man out. Several key sub narratives presented themselves in the CIA’s framing of the Sino-Soviet partnership: A) the Sino-Soviet Mutual Defense Treaty, B) a belief that similarities trumped differences, and C) Western trade controls pushed China and the USSR closer together.

Mutual Defense Treaty

The Soviet Union had for years tried to exert influence and curry favor in China through brokering dialogue between Mao and Chiang. Following Mao’s victory, the USSR wanted to shape the budding Communist nation. The CIA narrative about this cozying Soviet-Communist China relationship began to emerge in earnest in 1950. This narrative of close Sino-Soviet cooperation was initially sparked by a defense treaty and its ensuing Soviet economic and military assistance. It was then buttressed by a mutual desire to eliminate Western influence from Asia and spread international Communism (NIE 10, 1). Demonstrating a considerable level of attention and concern by the CIA and a focus on this burgeoning partnership, the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union as well as the Agreement on Chinese Changchun Railway, Port Arthur, and Dairen were printed in their entirety in the 1952 assessment (NIE 58, 6-9). These concords showed how China...
and the Soviets were mending old wounds as well as preparing for a shared future. While the mutual assistance pact was seen by the CIA as a strategic defeat for the US, Port Arthur and Darien – which patched some of the most contentious historical issues between the Soviets and China – was severely alarming because of the lengths that American enemies had gone to align with one other. The implications for the US were vast and the Agency interpreted the improving of Sino-Soviet relations as detrimental to the strategic balance of power.

The CIA perceived the partnership as based on the “common objective of eliminating Western influence from the Far East” and grounded on both ideological and practical reasons (NIE 58, 4). Practically, both China and the USSR feared a “resurgent and non-Communist Japan” as well as an American presence in Asia (NIE 58, 4). The USSR needed an ally in the Far East and China required Soviet markets, military training and know-how, and capital equipment to build its military and economy. Ultimately, the defensive partnership was the basis for economic and political partnership. The Agency believed this partnership was consolidating in all strategic measures of military, economic, and political and the US would be without a seat in this balancing act when the music eventually stopped.

A 1951 *Foreign Affairs* article disagreed with the premise of this Agency assessment on close Sino-Soviet relations. Baldwin took the approach that although they had signed a treaty, the Russians would never allow the Chinese to achieve parity. He noted that while the Treaty of Friendship promised Russian equipment to one million Chinese soldiers, the “Russianification” of the Chinese Army would most likely never occur (Baldwin, 1951, 53). Baldwin noted that it “seems likely that the Russians would
prefer to keep China in dependent status with lots of Russian advisors and political personnel” as to ensure that Beijing would not become an “undesirably independent of Stalin’s brand of communism” (Baldwin, 1951, 53-54). While the CIA believed that pragmatism would unite the Chinese and Soviets, several counter narratives in the public space believed that Soviet anxiety and Chinese bravado would keep them divided.

**Similarities outweigh Differences**

Although the CIA noted that certain divisive factors to the Soviet-Sino relationship existed, it judged in the 1950s that the relationship would be characterized by a strong bond based on ideological ties and common objectives. The Agency put its stake in the ground that the relationship would not fall prey to catastrophic in-fighting. The CIA did caveat this judgment by saying that the partnership was not a perfect fit for either country and that problems did exist. For example, it stated that while the Soviets were driving towards a Communist world dominated by Moscow, China would not accept domination by the USSR. Notwithstanding this caveat, the CIA held that during the 1950s, Sino-Soviet solidarity would not be disrupted or significantly weakened (NIE 58, 5). The Agency believed that mutual assistance was too important for both countries to compromise its arrangement any time soon.

This sub narrative is important for it stands in stark contrast to the counterview professed by many in the American public regarding Mao’s intransigence. Similar to the contrarian views over China’s economy, a similar discrepancy existed in the strength of the Sino-Soviet partnership between what the public and CIA contended. In 1950, C.M. Chang presented a narrative that the Soviet-China partnership was weak, predicated on a Soviet desire for Chinese submission and complicated by Mao’s stubborn recalcitrance. It
was a narrative painting a weak Communist bond built on a shaky foundation. Chang emphasized the same idea that the CIA lightly expressed that China would not yield to the Soviets; however, the departure in judgment was that Chang believed the very nature of the relationship to be doomed from the start since it was not in Mao’s nature to yield to foreign dominance. Chang noted that the Chinese Communists resented the word “satellite” with respect to the Soviet Union and this was a point of discontent in the arrangement (Chang, 1950, 561). To corroborate this shaky Sino-Soviet partnership narrative, Edgar Snow’s *Foreign Affairs* article in the early 1950s also proposed the similar notion at the same time of Chinese intransigence with respect to the Soviets (Chang, 1950, 552).

Chester Bowles, also writing in *Foreign Affairs*, noted a parallel argument to Chang and Snow. Bowles attributed the deal-breaking differences between the USSR and China to the fact that they were in different places in their respective development. The Soviets were industrialized, rich in resources, and wanted to lesson tensions with the non-Communist world while the Chinese had a shortage of agriculture, a growing population, and still had a revolutionary fervor that encouraged heightened tension with the rest of the world (Bowles, 1960, 484-485). For these reasons, Bowles contended the two states were not compatible. Just as a teenager would generally not want to play with a toddler, the USSR and China were at different stages in their development and had many non-aligned interests.

It was a fundamental disagreement with Snow, Chang, and Bowles on one side believing that Mao and Stalin would not agree on much and their countries were at different stages, and the CIA saying that the relationship would persist based on what
each stood to gain if executed favorably. Snow, Chang, and Bowles based their argument largely on emotional and personality context, while the Agency focused on the pragmatic, rational actor notions of what each had to lose.

**Western Trade Controls**

The CIA believed that some actions by the West were unintentionally driving China and the USSR closer together. Western trade controls in 1951 accelerated Chinese trade to the Soviet Bloc thereby strengthening the Sino-Soviet relationship (NIE 58, 3). The Agency believed this was a self-inflicted wound. While Western alliances and embargoes were established to contain China, its effect would encourage Sino-Soviet partnership and economic collaboration. Although this is a fairly evident observation, the fact that the Agency was noting its impact on Sino-Soviet relations puts a finer point on how the relationship was strengthened between the Communist powers by self-imposed systemic arrangements causing negative implications for the US.

**5. High Stability and Domestic Support of Communist Regime**

In 1948, the CIA produced its first assessment on China where it professed a greatly improved efficacy of the Communist regime as well as a large-scale change in domestic support for the Communist government. Up until this point, American Government assessments were largely dismissive of the Communist movement and spoke glowingly about Chiang and the Nationalists to a fault. The reasons for this new narrative centered on the Communists A) becoming better organized and B) taking a conciliatory approach with former Nationalists.

In the 1948 assessment entitled “Chinese Communist Capabilities for Control of All China,” the CIA first noted that the Communists had, “high morale and excellent
leadership, repetitive and finally credible propaganda themes, plus a well-developed sense of purpose, have elevated the once materially weak Communist Forces to their present position of superiority in the civil conflict” (ORE 77-48, 1). This emerging narrative of Communist consolidation of power and support became an accepted narrative three years later when the CIA noted that the Communists were enjoying popular support and would “for the foreseeable future…retain exclusive government control of China” (NIE 10, 1). Internalization of this narrative appeared when the Agency noted that “by 1957 the Chinese regime will have increased its administrative efficiency and have further tightened its control over its people and resources” (NIE 13-54, 2). Moreover, it believed that “Chinese leadership is marked by the cohesion and stability of the party elite” (NIE 13-54, 3). The narrative that the Chinese Communists under Mao were stable, learning how to organize themselves and become efficient, and achieving popular support became a facet of most NIEs in the late 1940s and 1950s and represents a departure from only a handful of years earlier where Communists were characterized as weak and incapable of defeating the Nationalists.

The CIA emphasized how the Communists took a pragmatic approach with former enemies. As the Communists moved into areas formerly controlled by the Nationalists, their approach was “moderate and conciliatory, gaining them increased popular support” (ORE 77-48, 0). The CIA noted that as the Communists moved into these newly acquired cities, they “promise to cooperate with businessman, landlords, Nationalist troops, and appeals to the people of the city to maintain order, preserve the government apparatus, and remain on the job” (ORE 77-48, 6). The Communists
extended an olive branch to their enemies and it went a long way in converting ex-Nationalists.

In 1954, the CIA also noted that the prevailing winds would support Mao’s progress. First, by 1957, it noted “a substantial portion of China’s population will have matured under Communist indoctrination” (NIE 13-54, 9). Second, “national pride may be stimulated by propaganda extolling real and imaginary achievements of “new China”” (NIE 13-54, 9). Third, the Agency said that “during the period of this estimate, the regime will not have greatly changed the prevailing social customs and practices” (NIE 13-54, 9). This point meant to highlight that Mao would hold off on the more radical social changes during the period of transition. For the most part, many of these points were accurate. For starters, there was definitely a honeymoon period in the 1950s where any regime that provided structure and peace following a civil war would be perceived as an improvement from its predecessor. Even Mao’s pause of the Cultural Revolution until 1966 with radical disruption to the social structure was delayed to allow for political consolidation.

An opposing narrative to this CIA view that support for Mao and the Communism was rapidly ascending began to appear in the public space in the mid to late 1950s when Chinese farmer loyalty began to waiver. Ladejinsky noted in 1957 that it was becoming increasingly doubtful that the government would find answers to “how to ensure peasant loyalty and raise agricultural production with a peasantry lacking incentive to produce” (Ladejinsky, 1957, 103). It was as if the fleeting popular support that the Communists enjoyed in the late 1940s and early 1950s was dissipating quickly. The narratives in
public space again painted China’s growth in a more pessimistic light as well as China’s overall capabilities and thus threat to the US.

**Meta Narrative**

The collective nature of these CIA narratives of the 1950s and early 1960s paint a China that had quickly rebounded from WWII and its civil war. Not only had it aligned with the Soviets, but the relationship was characterized as one of growing strength and accommodation. The CIA’s narratives portrayed China’s economy as rapidly growing and its nuclear weapon aspirations as progressing with considerable help from the Soviets. China was even poised (both its intent and capabilities) to fight the US in Asia—namely with respect to Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The assessments of this time painted a collective picture of a country that the US should fear. These narratives began to emerge in the late 1940s and early 1950s and gained acceptance and internalization in the mid-1950s to early-1960s based on their multitude of appearances in the NIEs. Not only did the Agency produce a threat landscape from which reasonable policy and planning counterparts should have cause for worry, but also, by necessity, should devote considerable attention and resources to address.

**Why Such a Discrepancy between CIA and Public Narratives?**

Why then was the disparity so great between the narratives fostered by the CIA and those in the public space? Even more concerning, based on the hindsight that we enjoy today, some of the public narratives around China more closely approximated, over their government narrative counterparts, the actual conditions in China. This notion that public narratives were a more accurate representation of the actual conditions on the ground in China stands in contrast to conventional wisdom. Many people believe that
those in the intelligence and government space who have access to classified information profess the more “accurate” threat narratives or tell more objective stories about threat. Chapter 6 will attempt to deconstruct some of the forces of bias in the US Government during the 1950s and 1960s that led to this narrative subjectivity and the inflated threat picture and compare them to the sources of transparency that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The purpose of Chapter 6 will be to unpack the reasons for this bias in the 1950s and sources of transparency in the late 1960s and 1970s. Several of these biases in the 1950s reflected a staunchly anti-communist environment that both sidelined China-hands and limited the exposure of diverse views on China in the American Government. Covert CIA operations attempting to gain knowledge on China in this self-defeating environment generally ended in failure. These failures created an inflated threat necessitated by CIA desire for self-preservation. Finally, an inherently cozy policy and intel relationship between Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers encouraged group think and restricted naturally opposing, though often productive elements of friction that check policy-driven intelligence assemblage. A confluence of these biases inflated the China threat and insulated against opposing views of China more prevalent in the public space. All of these sources of bias will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The next chapter, however, will explore the narratives professed by the CIA during the 1960s and 1970s when American threat perception of China eased.
5. Evolution of Friend Narratives

The change was dramatic in the eyes of the CIA. The Agency had viewed China as late as the mid-1960s as a country on the rise which posed a substantial threat to the US. China had just tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964 and the economy was recovering rapidly from the ruins of the Great Leap Forward. Mao’s plans for succession were solidifying behind Liu Shao-chi. Diplomatically, relations with the USSR were improving as well as those ties to Communist governments in Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Vietnam and Indonesia were also trending in the right direction as far as China was concerned. While these narratives appeared to have staying power with China remaining an enemy force for the balance of the 20th Century, the CIA narratives changed rapidly starting in 1967 with a softer view of China.

As if a pendulum had swung in the opposite direction on the fortunes of China, these notions of Chinese progress and, in effect, danger to the US changed by the late 1960s. The Agency’s outlook on China had evolved from a growing power to that of a country in the midst of chaos. Its leadership structure and party apparatus were in disarray. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966, was wreaking havoc on society. Many of the diplomatic relationships abroad were starting to fray pushing China into an isolationist position. Most importantly to the diplomatic concerns, the Sino-Soviet partnership had soured to such an extent that major war was a distinct possibility between the two countries (NIE 13-7-67). The summer of 1969 was so dire from China’s perspective in the international system that better relations with the US had almost become a necessity (Kissinger, 2011, 213).
In this amazing turn of events, the CIA’s narratives in the mid to late 1960s transitioned from enemy to a less-than-hostile nature. While still not entirely friendly at this point, the narratives of the mid to late 1960s reflected a step-change in how the US viewed China’s strategic stature as well as China’s own intent towards the USSR. An opening of dialogue between the US and China in the early 1970s, coupled with improved intelligence, ushered in further changes to these narratives (Jervis, 2010, 159). The relationship between the CIA and the Presidency also matured with systemic changes implemented to check the CIA’s powers. The more benign, friend-oriented nature of the emerging narratives around China in 1970s stood in stark contrast to the two preceding decades of the CIA’s bitterly hostile threat narratives. Moreover, these transitional narratives of potential partnership began to entrench themselves as the US moved into rapprochement with China.

American government views on China changed for several reasons. One of those reasons was China’s own actions and overt policy changes regarding its relations with the Soviets, nuclear weapons, and desire to challenge the US militarily in Asia. Second, many of the past sources of bias that inflated threat perception within the US Government began to dissipate. Third, increased levels of transparency resulted from improved Sino-American relations at the most senior diplomatic levels, the development of a common cause or objective (Soviets), and improved US intelligence on China. To say that China’s actions in the late 1960s and early 1970s were not a considerable factor in the warming Sino-American relationship would undermine the extent of Mao’s desperation. But, to say that China’s actions alone changed the CIA’s views would undercut the point that sources of bias can drastically influence and even obscure the threat truth. It was
precisely the combination of reduced subjectivity along with increased transparency that complemented China’s overt actions and helped to transition narratives around China to a friendlier nature. Said another way, Mao’s overtures to the US in the early 1970s may have fallen on deaf ears if the sources of bias of the 1950s were present in the US Government in the 1970s. This discussion of bias and transparency will be the focus of the next chapter.

This transitional period in the mid-1960s with respect to the CIA’s assessment of China is fascinating because of its rapid reversals of threat narratives. China was a country in flux in the eyes of the Agency. The CIA acknowledged a level of uncertainty with respect to its predictions on China by emphasizing that the projected period for the validity of its assessments would have to be shortened in nearly all cases. Demonstrating this point on limited foresight was an assessment in 1963 that noted its judgements were valid for only two years (NIE 13-63, 1). This judgement period stands in stark contrast to nearly all estimates from the 1950s that had periods of judgment of four to five years. As a second data point of these shortened assessment periods, the 1969 NIE on Sino-Soviet relations limited its judgement period to three years because the rapidly changing environment (NIE 11/13-69). The landscape was changing so rapidly that assessments had to be produced sooner than what the Agency had done in the past and its judgements were valid for much shorter periods along with lower confidence levels in the validity of those judgements.

Adding to the complications of estimating the threat from China was the uncertainty around the longevity of Mao’s life. The CIA noted the unavoidability of vast directional uncertainties based on the possibility of a China without Mao. Many of the
assessments even caveated their judgements based on Mao staying in power for the duration of the assessment. The Agency often provided alternative views of the future based on who within Mao’s inner circle would assume the mantle of leadership. It was almost a “choose your own adventure” type story with the future dependent on the leader selected.

The following CIA narratives during this warming period with China paint the relationship as moving from threatening to ripe for reconciliation. Similar to the previous chapter, the matrix below attempts to ground the narratives in the substantive locations of military, economic, and political.

Table 3. Friend Narratives

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A. Military Narratives

1. Weakened Military

Starting in the mid-1960s, the CIA began to view the Chinese military as a shadow of its former self both with respect to intent and capabilities to harm the US. A military which the CIA had painted in the 1950s as offensive-focused, nuclear-saber rattling, Soviet-backed, and popular within the Communist leader hierarchy had vanished. Several factors contributed to this change in the CIA’s view. These factors are part of a larger narrative of China’s weakening military. The first sub narrative is around a strategic move by the Chinese military to take a more defensive posture based on a lack of Soviet backing and assistance. A second sub narrative was around the purging of the
top military leadership of Lin by Mao and the relegation of the PLA with the Communist
governing structure. Finally, a third sub narrative in the military space was the slowing of
the Chinese nuclear program and decreased likelihood of employing the weapons.
Viewed in a holistic manner, these story-lines painted the Chinese military as a long way
from the expeditionary force that stormed into Korea in the early 1950s.

**Defensive, More Cautiously-Minded Military**

One of the first military narratives that began to appear in the Agency’s
assessments was the PLA adopting a more defensive oriented posture. Contrasting the
more hawkish assessments of China in the 1950s and early 1960s, narratives of the late
1960s showed that China was not expected to commit combat troops to military activities
in Korea going forward. An April 1967 NIE noted that “Chinese military strategy places
primary emphasis on defense” (NIE 13-3-67, 1). A subsequent NIE noted that China’s
goal transitioned to “passive defense” with idea of “luring deep” either US or Soviet
forces into China for the start of a “people’s war.” The Agency assessed the PLA as
assuming more non-combat roles going forward in Asia (NIE 13-7-67, 1). The emergence
of this narrative was stark because it contrasted the narratives of China willing to commit
troops and resources in Asian conflict areas such as Korea, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam
in the previous decade.

This narrative of China’s lackluster offensive military intent and capabilities
began to gain acceptance in the following NIE where the CIA noted almost zero intent to
develop offense capabilities. The Agency considered China’s air and naval equipment
and aspirations as very basic with no intent to increase these capabilities in the future
(NIE 13-3-72, 3). The assessment is telling because air and naval capabilities and intent
are key to a potent expeditionary force outside of the borders of China. Another assessment noted that China’s “naval capabilities will still be mainly limited to offshore patrol and escort” (NIE 13-3-67, 2). With a decrease in this intent, the CIA characterized China’s military force as a diminished threat to the US and American interests in Asia.

Contributing to this diminished potency and offensive swagger of the Chinese military was the loss of Soviet military assistance and backing as the countries entered an increasingly hostile period in the mid to late 1960s. The Agency carefully watched the buildup in 1969 of troops by both China and the USSR on the Mongolian border. It assessed Soviet troop strength on the border as having grown from 15 ground divisions in 1965 to 30 in 1969. The Chinese, however, had kept nine divisions on the border with another 50 divisions further south playing on Mao’s strategy of luring the enemy into the heart of China. While both countries were postured for conflict, the CIA believed that unprovoked war by either country was unlikely especially since China had avoided major military confrontation since the Korean War (NIE 11/13-69, 3-6). Nonetheless, with this military posturing by both countries, China could not rely on the Soviets to honor their end of the mutual defense treaty and thus adopted a more sheepish posture with respect to the use of its military in external affairs.

**Relegation of Military**

When Mao removed the PLA’s top leadership due to conspiracy fears, the power of the military was emaciated. With the purge of Lin Piao, the PLA’s top commander, in September of 1971, the role and influence of the military had decreased dramatically in the Chinese governing construct. After Lin’s death, many of the top military leaders were demoted and removed from the PLA for their association with Lin. While the public
circumstances around Lin’s plane crash and death in Mongolia were uncertain, the CIA believed that he had been “purged” (NIE 13-3-72, 1; NIE 13-8-74, 3). It noted that the purge of Lin and top military brass had produced a “return to the pre-Cultural Revolution norm of the Party controlling the gun” instead of the military dictating terms (NIE 13-3-72, 1). The purge of Lin and the PLA leadership was also deemed to have important consequences for the “military morale, for military priorities, and for military policy” (NIE 13-3-72, 1). In one fell swoop, not only was the PLA sidelined, but funding for weapons and its expeditionary use abroad were quieted. Military production and procurement had been supplanted in a large part by economic activities (NIE 13-8-74, 3).

Demonstrated consistently throughout the NIEs, the Agency held a zero-sum view of Mao’s resource allocation for economic and military concerns. With the military falling out of grace, the economy would receive his prioritized funding allocation and attention. This resource allocation trade-off was front and center in many NIEs and was portrayed as a pendulum. When the military was out of favor, resource allocation favored the strained economy and the military remained in a desperate state. The Agency portrayed this bleak outlook of the Chinese military by saying there was, “little prospect for a significant increase in the mobility of Chinese ground forces; the air defense system will still be unable to cope with a major air attack; fighters will be at least a generation behind the US and USSR” (NIE 13-3-67, 2).

It was the perfect storm for the Chinese military. Its leaders were removed. The tactic of passive defense was solidified in Chinese doctrine. Its biggest ally, trainer, supplier of military materiel, and guarantor of operational flexibility in the USSR had
turned its back. Finally, its nuclear program slowed. From a US perspective, the threat of the Chinese military contracted.

**China Less Likely to Use Nuclear Weapons**

In a departure from previous CIA thought and narratives, China’s possession of nuclear weapons in the late 1960s was viewed as a tempering factor in its potential use of them. In 1967, the Agency believed that China’s nuclear program is “viewed by the Chinese as primarily for deterrence” (NIE 13-3-67). Several years later, it noted “China’s actual possession of nuclear weapons will not necessarily make it more willing to risk a direct clash with the US; indeed it is more likely to have a sobering effect” (NIE 13-69, 2). The Agency had softened its view of China’s use of nuclear weapons and believed that China was maturing its view on how nuclear weapons should be used in military conflict. This was a departure from the past CIA view that believed China would use the weapons as soon it had the capability and was backed into a difficult situation.

This more benign narrative around China’s strategic weapons program began to achieve acceptance the early 1970s. The Agency attributed much of its new outlook to “improved relations with the US and perceived constraints on the USSR due to the US-Soviet détente” (NIE 13-8-74, 3). It believed “the Chinese will continue to see it in their best interest not to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, either at the strategic or tactical level. The Chinese aim clearly must be to confine the conflict to the conventional level, where they feel they can make maximum use of the advantages in manpower” (NIE 13-76, 1). Perhaps the move from “inspirer of revolutionaries” around the world to an actual member of the table of nations helped to encourage change in how China viewed its nuclear capability. Whether Mao believed in this change in role or not, the CIA was
convinced in the late 1960s that China would not use nuclear weapons as a first strike option.

**B. Economic Narratives**

**2. Economic Stagnation**

The deleterious impact of the Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s and Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s had begun to severely hamper China’s growth in nearly all economic sectors. With its professionals sent to the farms, the cost to China’s economy was great (NIE 13-7-67, 8). The “lost decade” of the 1960s slowed China’s economic growth from the 1950s (Kissinger, 2011, 197). In 1967, the Agency assessed China’s ability to drive economic development as low. It noted China’s “probable extent of actual progress will remain in doubt, however, so long as fanaticism and disorder continue to infect China” (NIE 13-8-67, 1). The CIA thought that “assuming present levels of political turmoil, the economy will deteriorate” (NIE 13-5-67, 1). The 25% GNP growth rate over a five-year period assessed by the Agency in the 1950s was a thing of the past. Whereas in the past when the CIA worried about China’s growing economy, especially the industrial sector because of its readily convertible nature to military production, CIA concerns diminished with China’s economy in shambles. The perceived economic, and in turn military, threat had declined.

The Great Leap Forward was Mao’s social and economic attempt to quickly move China into a Communist powerhouse. He wanted to increase agricultural production through an almost complete mobilization of rural China into communes (Lilley, 2004, 94). Mao used physical force, namely excessive labor, instead of incentives to achieve this goal of increased production. Longtime CIA officer and US Ambassador to China in
the 1980s James Lilley described the Great Leap Forward as Mao’s attempt to build a “revolution in the countryside powered by the zeal and ardor of Chinese peasants” (Lilley, 2004, 94). Instead of what Mao had hoped to achieve, the results were loss of production, officials lying about production numbers, and food shortages that led to 20-30 Million Chinese dying from famine (Lilley, 2004, 94). The CIA noted that by 1960, facing “crippling food shortages, cessation of Soviet Aid, and a discouraged and disgruntled population, Peking had little choice but to pull back” (NIE 13-5-67, 3). By the late 1960s, the assessments further noted that Mao was forced to revive private plots, restore free markets, and decentralize communes (NIE 13-5-67, 3). The Great Leap Forward was a failure for the population and the CIA rightly noted the loss of support for Mao by the populace. This was one of the first times that that Agency had begun to question Mao’s support post civil war.

The US Government had received many reports about the famine and discontent from sources and through letters mailed outside of China. The commune system was proving disastrous and the US Government had a solid read on the situation as early as the mid-1960s (Lilley, 2004, 100). Interesting enough, some of the narratives coming from the public were less accurate on this topic than CIA’s narratives—and major change from the 1950s. One such example was Snow’s second book on China, *The Other Side of the River*, where he again showed the Chinese peasants as hardworking as he did in *Red Star Over China*; however, he also depicted them as building a “new, happy, and prosperous China” (Lilley, 2004, 94-95). This could not have been any further from the truth as he failed to mention the famine, riots, and farmers moving to the cities to find work (Lilley, 2004, 95).
The Cultural Revolution started in 1965 and impacted both the social structure and economy of China. As early as 1967, the CIA noted that “economic activity in China, especially in the industrial sector, is being slowed by the Cultural Revolution” (NIE 13-5-67, 1). The Cultural Revolution was Mao’s encouragement of Chinese youth to rid Chinese society of “bourgeois goods and ideas” that started the bloodletting (Lilley, 2004, 137). The Red Guards started the bloodletting by enforcing this anti-intellectual mantra and attacking professors and the affluent. The Red Guards were against “economism” or the use of money to influence workers (Lilley, 2004, 138). Mass executions ensued and the idea of a successful economy was antithetical to a bunch of renegades. Mao began to reel-in his “shock troops” in the late 1960s but it was not until the early 1970s that the PLA had returned power back to the government (Lilley, 2004, 137-141). In addition to the many deaths, China’s economy suffered greatly from Mao’s social experiment in the name of revolution.

The Cultural Revolution also impacted the economy through a general lack of direction from the top levels of the government. The CIA noted that the “purge of the party and general confusion about who is in charge have weakened the direction and control of the economy” (NIE 13-5-67, 4). In a telling figure, the Agency reported that while Premier Chou En-lai maintained day-to-day operations of economic bureaucracies, “only 3 of his 15 Vice Premiers remain in good political standing” and “of the top level economic administrators, only Chou and Li Fu-chun seem to be currently acceptable to the Maoists” (NIE 13-5-67, 4). The ability of the government to make economic decisions was severely handicapped by the fear of being deemed as anti-communist in views and decisions. The overall tailspin that the Great Leap Forward and Cultural
Revolution inspired made the US Government less apprehensive about a Chinese economy as it had been in the 1950s and early 1960s.

C. Political Narratives

3. Weakened Sino-Soviet Partnership

The 1966 NIE entitled *The Outlook for Sino-Soviet Relations* characterized the relationship between the socialist partners as abysmal. The Agency believed that the two sides kept a façade of partnership primarily because the Soviets believed such a break would be very costly to the larger Communist movement. The Chinese, however, seemed to place less emphasis on the need to keep the relationship strong (NIE 11-12-66, 1). The Agency noted the weakening of the Sino-Soviet relationship reflected favorably on the prospects for improving Sino-American cooperation. From the CIA’s perspective, a failing Sino-Soviet partnership would be an important precursor to an invitation for closer American ties to China.

As if echoing the Agency’s assessment that China would be amenable to stronger Sino-American relations due to a weakening Sino-Soviet partnership, a now-famous *Foreign Affairs* article in the late 1960s appears prescient. In 1967, as he was gearing up for his Presidential campaign, Nixon wrote an article that extended the proverbial olive branch to China. He stated, “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors” (Kissinger, 2011, 202). Nixon believed that the US had to help China change its ways to “induce it” to stop its “imperialism” and “foreign adventurism” (Nixon, 1967, 121). Continuing this mindset in his inaugural address, Nixon again offered open lines of communication and “a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry
isolation” (Kissinger, 2011, 209). The weakening of Sino-Soviet relations in the triangle diplomacy with the US certainly provided a strengthening of the American position by which to influence China.

In what appears to be a classic chicken and the egg dilemma of which preceded the other, improving Sino-American relations at the macro level appeared to coincide with improving CIA narratives on China. Just as tensions began to wane between the two countries, the actual CIA narratives in the late 1960s definitively pointed to a decreased threat by China. Was it a mutual extension of the olive branch that in turn spurred China to act friendlier resulting in an improved Agency view of its longtime foe? Kissinger assessed Mao as the first mover in extending the olive branch to the US with America followed suit, albeit nearly five years later, with similar overtures. Kissinger noted that in 1965, Mao invited Snow to Beijing and made several conciliatory comments to the US with the intent for them to go public. Mao understood Snow’s ability to connect with the American people. Mao deliberately told Snow, “naturally I personally regret that forces of history have divided and separated the American and Chinese people” (Kissinger, 2011, 204). Mao also provided very calculated comments on Vietnam saying with the intent to reassure the US, “we are not going to start the war from our side; only when the United States attacks shall we fight back… As I’ve already said please rest assured that we won’t attack the United States” (Kissinger, 2011, 204). Mao’s restraint of not using combat troops in Vietnam as he had done in Korea, as well as the fact that he was telegraphing his intent via the mouthpiece of Snow, showed a shift in attitude for Mao.

At the very same time of Mao’s overtures of friendship in 1965, and in an apparent sprint in the opposite direction, McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson’s National
Security Advisor, continued the view of China as an existential threat. Bundy noted that “her nuclear explosion [referring to the October 1964 nuclear test] and her aggressive attitudes towards her neighbors make her a major problem for all peaceful people” (Kissinger, 2011, 205). Was Mao’s conciliatory remarks spurred by a multitude of factors: China’s growing troubles with the Soviets, its economic stagnation, political and military crisis, and adoption of a defensive military stance? While the US did not begin to immediately parrot back these more peaceful overtures, a softening of Chinese threat narratives by the CIA in the late 1960s began to reflect this move.

By the mid-1970s, the Agency believed that China viewed the Soviets as the greatest threat and sought to balance with the US against the USSR (NIE 13-76). Indeed, the US Government began to believe that China saw the US as a better option than the Soviets and even more benign. The Agency noted that “Peking considers the US to be less of a direct military threat than the Soviet Union. The Chinese also view the US as a weakened power, gradually withdrawing from Asia” (NIE 13-76, 1). The CIA also stated in a 1973 assessment that the Sino-Soviet relationship will be characterized over the next four years by a “prolongation of a competitive and adversary relationship” (NIE 11/13-6-73, 8). The Agency explained that both China and the Soviets would be competing with one another over who could improve relations with the US faster. Finally, Chinese efforts in Eastern Europe and Soviet efforts in Asia to promote Asian Collective Security were seen by the Agency as additional reasons for the Sino-Soviet relationship to remain at its low point for several more years (NIE 11/13-6-73, 8).

Several sub narratives presented themselves in Agency discourse around the larger narrative of a deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship. These sub stories revolved...
around: A) Soviets stopping aid to China and recalling its ambassadors, B) trade which once flourished between the countries became minimal, C) a massive propaganda war grew between the counties, D) without Soviet aid, the offensive threat of China decreased. Another sub narrative which was already discussed in the military narrative section was the fact that armies from both counties had lined up across the Mongolian border from each other in 1969. This growing military conflict was as much a contributing factor to the demise of the relationship as some of the other sub narratives.

**Aid Cut Off, Ambassadors Recalled**

In the late 1960s, the Agency believed that Sino-Soviet relations were continuing to deteriorate (NIE 11-12-66). Nothing illustrated the decay of the partnership more than Soviet aid stopping and diplomats being recalled. The Agency believed that Soviet technical assistance had been pulled following the collapse of the Great Leap Forward partly due to the Soviet view that China was attempting to re-engineer and lead the revolutionary Communist movement (NIE 13-3-67, 2). It held that the Soviets saw Mao’s Great Leap Forward as his attempt to take the Communist mantel of leadership. Also, both countries withdrew their ambassadors in 1966 (NIE 11/13-69, 1). The two nations were quickly drifting apart. These data points in the CIA’s assessments emphasized the souring relationship.

**Trade Nearly Ceases**

By the late 1960s, the Agency believed that there was “little to no prospect for improvement of [Sino-Soviet] relations…and it was reasonable to ask if a major Sino-Soviet war could break out” (NIE 11/13-69, 1). The relationship was so dire that the annual trade between the counties had plummeted to less than $100 Million in 1968 from
its high-water mark of $2 Billion in 1959 (NIE 11/13-69, 3). What was seen a decade earlier as a boon to the Chinese economy in having Soviet markets, was now viewed by the CIA as lost opportunity and one that would hamper China’s long term economic progress.

Highlighting this shift in trade from the Soviets to other parts of the world, the CIA noted that in 1965, Japan replaced the USSR as China’s largest trading partner. Per a 1967 NIE, the Sino-Japanese trade increased 52% in 1965 and another 32% in 1966 with similar increases with Western Europe (NIE 13-5-67, 7). The CIA believed that irreparable damage had been caused in the Sino-Soviet relations and China would start looking elsewhere for its trade.

**Propaganda War Increases**

By 1967, the Agency believed that nearly 50% of all of Chinese propaganda was anti-Soviet in nature (NIE 11/13-69, 3). The amount of time and effort aligned to the denigration of the Soviet Union showed a preoccupation with an enemy approaching probable military conflict. This departure was also significant because nearly two decades prior, Stalin and Mao had focused their propaganda efforts to support their partnership and shared vision. They had even celebrated their meetings with parades and propaganda saturation to support the relationship. Whereas a decade earlier the countries had tried to show the world that they were best of friends, the late 1960s ushered in a period of publicly shaming each other.

A telling moment in this propaganda war was in 1968 when the Chinese embarked upon a mass propaganda effort against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (NIE 11/13-69, 3). The thought of the USSR invading another socialist state was
troubling for China on many levels but primarily because China believed it could be next. At the same time, China also attempted to sway international opinion by loudly protesting Soviet incursions into its airspace. It was a battle between the socialist leaders on the world stage. What had been handled in the past behind closed doors between Chinese and Soviet leaders had devolved into an open dialogue of conflict for all to see.

This narrative continued in a 1973 estimate when the Agency noted China’s response to Soviet attempts to isolate it from Eastern Europe would be one of “predictable vehemence” (NIE 11/13-6-73, 5). The Agency continued, “in his definitive statement at the Party Congress in August [1973], Chou left no doubt that Peking considers the Soviets as its number-one enemy. He charged that the “new czars” have restored capitalism, imposed a “fascist dictatorship,” and used military force to back their foreign policies…and China should remain on guard against a “surprise attack” by the Soviets” (NIE 11/13-6-73, 5). Between the CIA’s emphasis on Chou’s speeches and its belief that China had had enough from the Soviets, it believed the Soviets were pushing Mao into America’s arms.

**Chinese Threat to US Decreased Without Soviet Ally**

The tone of the NIEs on Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s and early 1960s painted China as a larger threat primarily because of its strong partnership with the Soviets. Not only did the countries sign a defense pact, but they coordinated in their use of force outside of their countries and shared nuclear secrets as well as military equipment exchanges. With the severed Sino-Soviet relationship, the potency of the Chinese threat diminished significantly in the NIEs of the late 1960s. The CIA even noted that “Soviet leaders now see China as their most pressing international problem,
and are beginning to tailor their policies on other issues accordingly” (NIE 11/13-69, 4).

With the Soviet Union no longer the defender of China, it was as if China had lost it tag-team partner in the wrestling match against the US. From the perspective of the CIA, the danger associated with China dissipated.

4. Political Crisis

The CIA believed that Chinese political leadership was in a state of crisis in the late 1960s. In 1967, Chinese leadership purges occurred at all levels as part of the Cultural Revolution. The Communist Party structure was badly damaged and the old “revolutionary war heroes” were discredited. Furthermore, foreign allies were alienated and China became isolated (NIE 13-7-67, 3).

The Agency viewed China as having moved into a very lonely position in the world. International reverberations from the Cultural Revolution had grown especially with the scarcity of trained Chinese diplomats to interact with foreign counterparts. In addition to the Revolution’s primary casualty of the economy, diplomacy suffered. The Agency noted in 1968 that, “red guard diplomacy cost Peking last year in relations with Communist as well as non-Communist regimes” (NIE 13-9-68, 2). Public narratives within the US at the time supported this very view that Mao’s revolutionary fervor had become almost incompatible with the maintenance of diplomatic relations with other countries. A 1970 Foreign Affairs article by Laszlo La Dany noted the main interest in Beijing lay in “fomenting subversion and revolution” (La Dany, 1970, 702). La Dany spoke from a position of authenticity as a Hungarian-born Jesuit living in Hong Kong with many years’ experience on the mainland during the civil war. His “one-man research
“outfit” produced weekly reports titled *China News Analysis* and was regularly a key source for CIA analysts. La Dany himself was one of the “most authoritative” figures on China according to senior CIA officials (Lilley, 2004, 139). La Dany’s 1970 *Foreign Affairs* article noted how difficult it was for China to cultivate relations with other counties with revolution as its goal. There was also a common view that Mao was “rigidly abusive” to heads of state of Asian countries (La Dany, 1970, 702). It had seemed that many of the diplomatic inroads that China had made with other countries in the 1950s and early 1960s had deteriorated by the late 1960s.

This melding of the CIA’s NIE on China’s diplomatic failings with La Dany’s article shows how the secret and public intelligence were beginning to converge in the early 1970s. The reasons for this were partly due to CIA analysts who were beginning to understand China better but also because the CIA, according to Lilley, were using authentic public sources on China like the *China News Analysis* as the basis for their views and resulting narratives. It was no longer the secret intelligence only driving US Government views on China that had been the case for much of the 1950s but a more comprehensive public and secret intelligence view of the world. This multi-source, mosaic approach is in line with Jervis’ recommendation to use both public and secret intelligence to complement each other and fill in the holes to get a more accurate threat picture.

The Agency also appears to have applied a zero-sum view of Mao’s ability to focus on different issues as previously mentioned with domestic economics versus military expenditures. The CIA believed Mao had the same limited, zero sum view on domestic versus diplomatic affairs. The CIA thought it was seldom the case that he could
adequately divide his attention between both domestic and foreign concerns because of the revolutionary and inherently “total” nature in which he would apply to them. Furthermore, the Agency believed that Mao’s “preoccupation with internal affairs is likely to relegate foreign concerns to a secondary role” (NIE 13-9-68, 2). The political implications for Mao’s Cultural Revolution were deemed by the Agency to wreak havoc on China’s ability to concentrate on issues outside of its own borders.

Overall, the period of the late 1960s and 1970s saw the threat that China posed to the US drastically fall. The CIA believed that China was half the country it had been in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some of the reasons for this change in the nature of the CIA’s narratives can be attributed to China’s own actions, but many more are due to domestic issues within the US that either led to bias in the 1950s or helped to remove it in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The next chapter will examine how the sources of bias dissipated in the 1960s while sources of transparency began to flourish. At a high level though, the early 1960s saw the anti-communism movement begin to stall. The cozy intel-policy relationship of Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers was cast away as Kennedy stepped in and fired Director Dulles and kept his successor Director McCone on a tight leash. Moreover, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment in the early 1970s reeled in the CIA to a point where clandestine operations were not used as the primary source of intel collection on China.

While sources of bias diminished, sources of transparency grew to the level where notions of partnership won the day. The foundation for high-level dialogue was built in the late 1960s with momentum growing in the early 1970s. Multi-source intelligence on China grew in the geo-spatial, human, and signal areas as well as a step-change in how
the CIA began to meld public intelligence into its holistic intelligence picture. It tossed out its former practices of allowing publicly derived narratives to fall on deaf ears. Finally, the fortunes of the US and China were beginning to align against a common Soviet enemy. Supporting the adage of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Kissinger and Nixon along with their Chinese counterparts of Deng and Mao believed the time was right to make amends. A level of ripeness was present to encourage this increased transparency and partnership.

Chapter 6 dives into how the sources of bias diminished and sources of transparency grew and influenced US perception of Sino threat. The transitions between bias and transparency were mutually supporting evolutions that buttressed the proposition of Sino-American rapprochement.
6. Sources of Bias and Transparency at the Heart of Threat Narrative Evolution

The threats that the US Government, and more specifically the Central Intelligence Agency, perceived to be emanating from China following WWII were heavily influenced by domestic sources of bias. Major forces of subjectivity in the 1950s and 1960s created an environment that coddled the rise of inflated Sino threat narratives. These post-war sources of subjectivity gave way to sources of transparency in the late 1960s and 1970s. As the sources of bias were replaced by sources of transparency, the threat narratives and an overall inflated threat picture on China dissipated to reflect a more benign, objective threat truth. The transitioning of China from a position of enemy to quasi-friend had as much to do with evolving domestic conditions in the US and the resulting threat narratives as it had to do with China’s own actions.

In the 1950s and early 1960s (as detailed in Chapter 4), the CIA avowed five major narratives on China that painted Sino threat as considerable to the US. To be clear, the China threat was a reality based on US Government perception. However, this reality had approximated a skewed threat interpretation. The threat narratives that the CIA created were highly influenced by biases. In respect to the military dimension, the CIA believed China was ready to fight the US as it vigorously pursued nuclear weapons with Soviet aid. Economically, China was viewed as a gangbuster with its growing industrial base selling into the Soviet Bloc countries. Politically, China was quickly improving its relationship with the USSR as Mao consolidated his governance structure and domestic support. Not only was China rising and partnering with powerful allies, but it had the US in its crosshairs.
With the power of hindsight, we now know that several of these CIA narratives were highly flawed. Militarily, after the Korean War in the early 1950s, China was reluctant to engage the US in direct clashes between combat troops. Economically, China was not growing as fast as originally thought by the CIA and the Great Leaps Forward did not “leap” China as far forward as believed. Politically, Sino-Soviet relations were not as strong as thought by the Agency and Mao’s support from the peasantry was quickly fading. Moreover, the narratives on China in the public space of the US in the 1950s more often than not approximated the more benign, objective truth of what was actually going on in China.

An explanation for the discrepancies between flawed narratives in the secret space versus those more accurate narratives in public space is that certain forces of subjectivity contributed to inflated threat narratives around China in the CIA. These forces of bias were manifold. Fervent anti-communism caused the US to relegate many of its China experts. Intelligence dried up and covert missions attempting to plug this void generally ended in disaster. The only “out” for the CIA was to inflate the China threat to save face from these substantial losses. Finally, an unchecked intelligence apparatus with cozy, unhealthy relations to both the President and State Department led to convenient group think, lack of diversity of thought, and a subjugation of narratives originating from the public space. The checks and balances often associated with critical eyes in a naturally opposing policy-intelligence dynamic were absent. A set of threatening narratives around China emerged and were ultimately accepted and internalized by the US Government in the 1950s. These narratives led to an elevated threat status of China.
The hostile narratives on China within the US Government were not challenged until a new way of doing business (both with respect to process and tools) arrived in the late 1960s. This new system included sources of transparency such as an increased level of dialogue between the US and China at the most senior levels. Also, the US Intelligence Community’s China hands, which had been stripped and depleted by the forces of anti-communism, had replenished itself with a new cadre of experts along with more advanced human, signal, and geo-spatial intelligence. The Agency also began to consult public intelligence from think-tanks, academia, and the media in a departure from the over-reliance on secret intelligence and avoidance of publicly-born information. Finally, US and China were aligning geo-politically against a common cause in the Soviet Union, which in and of itself provided centripetal forces for cooperation.

These sources of transparency influenced a host of less hostile narratives as detailed in Chapter 5 such as China’s weakening military, economic stagnation, political crisis at home, and an incredibly fragile, almost hostile Sino-Soviet relationship. While only the Sino-Soviet demise spelled opportunity for friendlier Sino-American relations, the fact that China was appearing less dangerous was a necessary predecessor step to moving towards a potential partnership from the perspective of the US.

This chapter will focus on the sources of subjectivity and their impact on skewing the threat narratives on China in the 1950s. It will also review how some of these sources of bias dissipated in the late 1960s. It will end with how the sources of transparency that grew in the 1960s and consolidated in the 1970s allowed for a clearing of the fog on a more objective threat truth on China.
How the Systemic Biases Began

In the years following WWII, the US Government lost its grip on the actual political, military, and economic circumstances within China. The objective truth around the threat that China posed to the US rapidly vanished (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). For a multitude of reasons, both the State Department and newly formed CIA began to misinterpret the lay of the land in China. If the WWII years were the height of accuracy for American assessments on China regarding capabilities and intentions of the Communists and Nationalists (as discussed in Chapter 3), the two decades following WWII would prove to be the nadir of American understanding of China. An unfortunate cocktail of 1) rising anti-communism in the US, 2) an embarrassing string of covert operational failures based on misinformed intelligence, and 3) intelligence and policy coziness resulted in inflated threat narratives and thus a skewed threat picture of China. A confluence of these factors prompted the primacy of threat narratives divined from secret intelligence over narratives based on “public” intelligence. The natural antidote to this selection bias in the form of a blending of secret and public intelligence would have created a more accurate and holistic threat picture. Moreover, a lack of diverse views on the China threat can be attributed to the casting aside of the China experts as well as an insulated group-think mentality namely between Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers. These structural factors fostered an environment that lent itself to a faulty assessment of the threat truth. The sources of bias would compromise the American Government’s view of China threat for years and only when the system changed did America’s view of China.
As Mao noted, the further one departs from the *actual situation*, the more *subjective* the policies become (Cooper, 1972, 223). The inflated threat picture represented a subjective threat reality that skewed away from a more objective threat truth. This is not to say that China was failing to develop into a credible military force following WWII. However, the health of China’s relationship with the Soviets, the extent of China’s economic recovery and expansion, and Mao’s political consolidation and domestic support were overstated by the US Government in the 1950s. I will explain these key forces of threat subjectivity in the US in the post war period, their impact on CIA threat narratives at the time, as well as how the proverbial ship righted itself in the mid-1960s with respect to narratives on China due to evolving sources of transparency.

**Anti-Communism in the US**

The divergence of CIA narratives from the actual conditions in China in the late 1940s coincided with the rise of the anti-communism movement in the US. This movement sidelined many of the accurate political and economic views on China by allowing compromised narratives to bubble to the top in the US Government. The anti-communism and hold-over China Lobby movements were uncanny bedfellows in the opposition to Mao and support of Chiang. While they approached the issue from different perspectives, they aligned on loftier goals. Their views of China threat were based on ulterior motives that inflated the actual threat that Mao posed. The anti-communists wanted Mao out while the China Lobby wanted Chiang in. They would stop at little to get their way even if it meant elevating the threat narratives of Mao’s China. Moreover, many of the China experts within the US Government as well as the media who painted
an accurate picture of Mao successfully consolidating power in China were suspected of being Communist sympathizers. The US Government made a concerted effort to denigrate their views. To illustrate the deep-seated nature of anti-communism and impact on American Government views on China as well as the importance of human agency, there is value in exploring the personalities and actions of four men: Patrick Hurley, Franklin Roosevelt, Charles Douglas (C.D.) Jackson, and John Dulles.

Former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) Thomas Fingar noted how McCarthyism in the early 1950s contributed to a lack of a coherent view on China in the US Government. The US Government’s attack on its own China-hands and its resulting dampening effect on intelligence had a significant impact on US understanding of China (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). It is worth starting this story with the fervent anti-communist and Ambassador to China following WWII Patrick Hurley. Assuming his post in 1944, Ambassador Hurley was the beginning of the anti-communist push in the US intelligence and diplomatic space in China. This movement would wreak havoc on American understanding of China for years. Since Hurley was well respected in Washington, he was able to quickly denigrate the views and narratives of many esteemed China hands (Griffin, 2014, 201). Several of the China hand stalwarts in the US Government such as John Service were quickly vilified and sidelined along with many of his State Department colleagues because of their positive, and perhaps misinterpreted as sympathetic, views of Mao. Similar to Service, John Davies and John Carter Vincent rounded out a key cadre of the State Department’s top China hands who understood and predicted Mao’s rise and Chiang’s fall (Bradley, 2015, 342). These China hands lived in China, spoke Chinese, and many
were the children of missionaries in China (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). When the anti-communist purge began in the US Government, they were all subsequently sent back to the US or reassigned to other parts of the world in large part due to Hurley.

The extent of Hurley’s anti-communism bias is clearly demonstrated by a data point in the waning months of WWII. As the US was considering a plan to have the Communists and Nationalists put aside their differences and unite against the Japanese, President Roosevelt implored Chiang, “when the enemy is pressing us toward possible disaster, it appears unsound to reject the aid of anyone [Mao] who is willing to kill Japanese” (Hu Shih, 1950, 34). The plan was to equip Mao’s forces and place them with the Nationalists under the command of American General Joseph Stillwell to fight the Japanese in an integrated manner. With Hurley and Chiang’s opposition to this proposal for a joint Nationalist-Communist force to fight the Japanese, the plan withered on the vine and Mao’s troops were never supplied. Hurley’s staunch communist opposition torpedoed the alliance and may have prolonged the fight against the Japanese in China. Hurley’s anti-communist views highlight how his ideological bias against Communists often trumped strategic pragmatism. This ode to fight communism at all costs was a bias that initiated an intelligence opaqueness with respect to America’s ability to see into the actual conditions, or truth, in China.

Further amplifying this notion of bias, Hurley reported that “the weakness of the American foreign policy together with the Communist conspiracy within the Department are reasons for the evils that are abroad in the world today” (Griffin, 2014, 201). Any foreign service China-hand that was friendly with Mao at the end of the war or believed a
Communist victory imminent over the Nationalists was quickly fired or reassigned to different posts (Griffin, 2014, 201). Even the China experts outside of government such as the journalist Edgar Snow who had spent considerable time in China and written extensively about Mao’s rise, were disregarded because of the perception of biased views. In the mid-1900s, Snow noted the gravity of the misinformation campaign in the US around China. He said, “during my seven years in China, hundreds of questions had been asked about the Chinese Red Army, the Soviets, and the communist movement. Eager [American] partisans could supply you with a stock of ready answers, but these remained highly unsatisfactory. How did they know? They had never been there. The fact was that there had been perhaps no greater mystery among nations, no more confused an epic, than the story of Red China” (Snow, 1968, 35-36). With very few American experts on China left in country or even in an intelligence gathering capacity, the coveted insider’s perspective disappeared into a “wasteland” of intelligence on China that was influence by American Government “partisans” (Griffin, 2014, 201).

The ill-conceived narrative that Chiang and the Nationalists were the future of China was a holdover manifestation of Roosevelt’s romanticized notion that China could exist as a Westernized, Christian nation. Roosevelt was a key supporter of the China Lobby that believed and proselytized the notion that Mao was merely obstructing Chiang from bringing China to its full potential. It was a hopeful although naïve argument that the China Lobby professed. The China Lobby merged with the anti-communist faithful to reject Mao and attempt to forestall the eventuality of his victory (Bradley, 2015, 157). While much of Roosevelt’s sympathetic views of Chiang and a democratic China predated the “hostile” years of CIA narratives, his China Lobby’s influence helped to
promote the military threat narratives that Mao’s China was out to get the US through military conflict in an existential sense. This China Lobby story fit nicely with the anti-communist story.

A notable example of a China Lobby and anti-communist intermediary in the postwar years who directly influenced public narratives on China was C.D. Jackson. As the Managing Director of *Time-Life* in the late 1940s, he was close friends with Henry Luce, founder of *Time Magazine*. Both Jackson and Luce presented a romanticized view of Chiang to the American people at every print edition opportunity. However, Jackson’s ardent anti-communist views became even more powerful when he served as President Eisenhower’s speech writer and then special assistant of psychological warfare (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). A staunch anti-communist, anti-Maoist had become one of the most influential American Government advisors in the postwar years. The placement of Jackson in government directly spurred a bias against Mao at the most senior level.

The arrival of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1953 also furthered the anti-communist movement in the State Department. Following Hurley’s early moves, Dulles made several staff changes in his East Asia policy group that consolidated power with an anti-communist-China Lobby Bloc (Kinzer, 2013, 143). This group believed that several State Department “traitors” had helped the Communists defeat Chiang to include the previously mentioned senior officials such as Service, Vincent, and Davies. Dulles, siding with Hurley, officially fired them for “failure to meet standards” and “lack of judgement” (Kinzer, 2013, 143-144). As the State Department released Service, Davies, and Vincent, their talents were wasted as Service turned to selling steam equipment in
New York and Davies built furniture in Peru (Bradley, 2015, 342-355). Dulles had supported Senator Joe McCarthy on the idea that China had been lost and the China Lobby could help bring it back (Kinzer, 2013, 143-144).

Dulles’ actions at the State Department dovetailed with the anti-communism campaign that McCarthy had orchestrated and were indicative of a larger movement afoot in the US at the time. The anti-communist movement in the US had become widespread in the late 1940s and early 1950s and permeated not only government but also the media and Hollywood. For example, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) ramped up its investigation of those actors and movies that painted the communists in a positive light (Barson and Heller, 2001, 11). On October 21, 1947, the “Hollywood Ten” – Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo – testified before HUAC and refused to answer if they were currently or have in the past been part of the Communist Party. They were indicted for contempt of Congress, fired from their jobs, and eventually served prison time (Barson and Heller, 2001, 56). Major films such as The Iron Curtain, The Red Menace, and I Married a Communist began to show how Hollywood would tell the tale of the Cold War and Communism’s dangers to the US (Barson and Heller, 2001, 74-78). Further illustrating the reach of the anti-communist movement in the Government, the Civil Service Loyalty Review Board was created in December 1947 to inspect the loyalty of federal employees (Barson and Heller, 2001, 56).

This extensive anti-communism movement had permeated the American Government and culture and had begun to detract from the objectivity of government
threat assessments on China and its ability to distinguish between truth and fiction.

Richard Immerman, former Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), noted that the tremendous impact of sources of bias in skewing American views (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). He noted the anti-communist movement’s influence on the government and intelligence agencies was reflected in both the removal of many China experts deemed too sympathetic to Communists as well as the artificial elevation of China as an existential threat. The elevation of anti-communist narratives and subjugation of others even in the public space is indicative of a loss of objectivity in the early government threat assessments during the period dubbed by the CIA as the Era of Mao.

Covert Operation Disasters Led to Inflated Chinese Capabilities

When the US intelligence community lost its China experts, it exposed a gaping intelligence hole in knowledge on Asia. It was in this pursuit to plug that hole that the Agency lost its way and led to the creation of a biased narrative of a highly dangerous China in the 1950s. The US Government bestowed the power of covert operations upon the CIA to understand and alter events in foreign lands. When these covert operations began to go sideways, the China threat was necessarily inflated to account for poor results.

While the CIA was created in September 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 gave the agency sweeping, unchecked powers to prevent another Pearl Harbor (Macintyre, 2014, 176). However, in its first major test on China, it failed to produce the desired results. In 1950, President Harry Truman asked the critical question
of whether China would enter the nascent war with North Korea. The Korean War began in July and even as late as October, the CIA was unsure when the Chinese would “resort to full-scale intervention in Korea…barring a Soviet decision for global war” (Weiner, 2007, 52). On October 5, American combat soldiers crossed the 38th parallel towards Pyongyang. Ten days later, Mao ordered his combat troops across the Yalu River into North Korea (Aid, 2009, 30-31). Even up until two days prior to 300,000 Chinese troops pouring across the border and almost pushing the Americans almost off the peninsula, the CIA expressed uncertainty around China’s intervention (Weiner, 2007, 52). U.S. Army intelligence also believed that any buildup of Chinese troops was in support of a Communist invasion of Taiwan and not Korea (Aid, 2009, 30). The magnitude of this intelligence gap of not predicting China’s invasion cannot be overstated as well as its implications for inspiring future changes to the Agency.

Still smarting from its inability to predict the Soviet atomic bomb as well as the start of the Korean War in the previous year, CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith needed to take drastic action in the wake of the agency’s failure to foresee the Chinese invasion in Korea (Weiner, 2007, 52). At a time when the CIA was still young, its reputation was at great risk. Smith sent his deputy director of intelligence Loftus Becker on a fact-finding mission to tour the CIA’s Asian stations in the early 1950s. He concluded that the CIA’s ability to read the situation in Asia and gather intelligence in the Far East was “almost negligible” (Weiner, 2007, 57). Even more disconcerting, the narratives that the CIA did produce were often products of Korean informants manipulated by the North Korean and Chinese security apparatus (Weiner, 2007, 57).
With a dearth of information on China in the early 1950s, the answer was to grow the covert operations arm in order to gain a lens into that part of the world and effect change. Covert operations were not in the initial charter of the CIA. William Jackson, Deputy Director of the CIA, began to make the case to link covert operations to intel collection (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). In the now famous Dulles Report, the link was made that with poor open source collection of information around countries like China, covert operations were the only solution. This covert function was recommended to be housed in the CIA.

Smith appointed Allen Dulles, brother of John Dulles, as Deputy Director of Plans to build this capability. Their relationship would start rocky and remain so for the duration of their tenure together. Allen Dulles increased the covert budget 11 times that of the late 1940s and Smith quickly believed that the covert mission had begun to move into a dangerous place with such drastic intervention abroad. Illustrating the dysfunctional nature of their relationship and apprehension of the direction that Dulles was taking the Agency, Smith noted that Dulles’ “operational tail will wag the intelligence dog” (Weiner, 2007, 53). Smith’s prescient idiom on the emerging divide within the Agency would be buttressed some half century later by CIA Director George Tenet when he described the clandestine service as the “fighter pilots” while the analysts were the “college faculty” and scientists and engineers were the “geeks” (Tenet, 2007, 18). The nod to the clandestine “cool kid” cowboys had begun to overshadow the analysts. Dulles would replace his boss in 1953 and become the head of the CIA. The notion that within the agency daredevil execution could be elevated over analysis lies in
stark contrast to Sherman Kent’s emphasis on analysis and the scientific method’s pursuit of truth as discussed in Chapter 2.

Dulles’ covert operations in China in the early 1950s met with failure and cost thousands of lives. One example was when the CIA spent $100 million in 1951 on weapons and ammunition for a “Third Force” in China. This Third Force was described as distinct from the Nationalists and would align with the US and fight the Communists. When the CIA sent men in to link up with this force in Manchuria, its members were either killed or captured and the Third Force was never located. Captured CIA officer Dick Fecteau, who had only recently graduated from Yale, participated in the failed operation and would spend the next 19 years in a Chinese prison. The Chinese broadcast the results of this campaign noting that of the 212 foreign agents that the CIA dropped into Manchuria, 101 were killed and 111 were captured (Weiner, 2007, 60).

Other examples of covert operational failures were when the CIA trained and supplied Chinese Nationalist forces from Thailand and Burma to attack China. In the Thailand case, 1,500 troops under General Li Mi, a former Nationalist leader, attacked Communist China in 1951. General Li’s radioman however was a Communist spy and his force was destroyed by the Communists as they entered China (Weiner, 2007, 60-61). In Burma, Allen Dulles also employed this Chinese Nationalist partnership to foment destabilization in the early 1950s. Allen Dulles grew a force of Chinese Nationalists in northern Burma to attack southern China. Allen had coordinated with his brother John to ensure the State Department was telling the world as well as the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu that the Americans were not involved. Even with the State Department’s insistence that the US had no part in aiding the guerrillas, U Nu stopped receiving American aid and
subsequently improved its relationship with China (Kinzer, 2013,133). This tilt towards China by Burma was another example of how a flawed understanding of the actual conditions on the ground resulted in policy decisions that ultimately hurt the US strategically in Asia.

The CIA’s actions appeared to be backed by nearly endless funding, a lavish cloak of secrecy, and little actionable evidence. These covert endeavors tragically resulted in a series of costly failures the extent of which only a small group of individuals understood. With the Agency’s reputation at stake, the size, prowess, and intent of the Chinese Communists would, by necessity, be assessed as significant even if the Agency lacked eyes and ears on the ground to corroborate such a judgement. How else could so many CIA covert operations have ended in failure? The only story it could tell was that it ran into a Chinese force with significant fire-power. Inflated threat narratives of Communist China would serve as a way for the CIA to save face.

**Intelligence-Policy Coziness**

The relationship between the intelligence apparatus and policy makers in the 1950s is important when examining sources of subjectivity that impacted threat narrative creation. Kissinger noted the criticality of objectivity in this relationship when he told the Senate in 1973, “anyone concerned with national policy must have a profound interest in making sure that intelligence guides, and does not follow, national policy” (Richelson, 2008, 12). A more in depth look at how the Eisenhower-Dulles brothers relationship in the 1950s fit into the larger picture of threat interpretation and policy creation will shed light on how these threat narratives formed in a manner that skewed them away from the objective truth.
The role that the Agency played during the Era of Mao is significant because of how it began as well as how substantially it changed during this period. In the Eisenhower Administration, an extremely close relationship existed between the estimators and the White House. Eisenhower created the Planning Board where CIA’s estimators and policy wonks worked closely together in the creation of “position papers” for the White House (Cooper, 1972, 226). The 1950s saw more Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIEs) than any other period in history. This “special” nature of the NIE represented very specific policymaker’s requests for “advice” on policy options and was a departure from the traditional NIEs. The request for a SNIE also represented a sense of urgency and a more rapid deadline for the estimate (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). This working relationship ensured that intelligence and policy were interconnected at the highest extent possible. Furthermore, Director Dulles also included the relevant NIEs in his National Security Council (NSC) weekly meeting. This engagement model provided the CIA with a sense that it had “a direct, or least discernable, participation in the policy process” (Cooper, 1972, 226-227).

This close relationship in the 1950s between intelligence and policy also stemmed from the 1947 National Security Act (Barnds, 1969, 282). This act created the NSC to aid the President in the formulation of foreign policy. By design, the CIA was intended to gather and supply the best background information possible to the decision makers. In the wake of WWII with the US taking a larger role in world affairs, especially in Asia where colonial powers had begun to withdraw, America’s background knowledge of the world was not at the level it needed it to be. The US was “uncertain about the capabilities and intentions of both friendly and unfriendly nations—and sometimes not sure which was
which” (Barnds, 1969, 282). While the intelligence community was tasked to inform the policy makers, it only had access to scarce or imperfect information.

The knowledge creation dimension of intelligence highlights one of the primary purposes of the CIA: assemble all information from all US agencies, synthesize it, and present it in the most useful manner for policy makers (Barnds, 1969, 283). This function of assembling and shaping information is of particular importance because of the level of success the Agency had in influencing policy makers during the Eisenhower years. The Eisenhower and Dulles brothers’ partnership was the epitome of a highly-connected policy and intelligence relationship. At no other time in American history have two brothers controlled both the overt and covert parts of US foreign policy (Kinzer, 2013, 180c). Some experts have noted that probably never before or since had the State Department and the CIA had closer coordination (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). Moreover, the Dulles family was an entrenched and influential family in America’s foreign policy with their grandfather serving as Secretary of State in the 1890s and their uncle holding the same role during WWI (Kinzer, 2013,180a). It was an elite run partnership with elite mentality permeating both the engagement model and decision making.

Eisenhower leaned heavily on the Dulles brothers and the use of the NSC meetings. While Truman used NSC meetings only periodically, Eisenhower used them more often and as the official way to build foreign and security policy (Kinzer, 2013,132-133). Allen and John Dulles usually did most of the talking during these NSC meetings. Allen would generally start the meeting with his national security overview and John would then follow with similar views (Kinzer, 2013, 133). One could see how the CIA and State
Department relationship, along with Eisenhower’s penchant for using the NSC and trust of the Dulles brothers, resulted in a joining of intelligence and policy. What was unique about the 1950s was the high level of emphasis placed on the CIA’s threat narratives on China as well as the use of intelligence analysts to help write policy. It was as if narratives from the public space (academia, think tanks, media) were inconsequential to the leaders in government. A three-man team was painting the threat picture, consuming it, and creating the ensuing policy. The functional divide between intelligence and policy and diversity of thought were absent.

As if the CIA, State Department, and White House were not interwoven enough with respect to the creation of the Planning Board and policy-focused intelligence reporting, in 1953 Walter Smith moved from the role of CIA Director to the Under Secretary of State under John Dulles (Kinzer, 2013, 134). To place a finer point on the move, on February 9, 1953, Smith went from being Allen’s boss to John’s deputy. A perfect fusion had occurred in the minds of the President and the men who led the CIA and State Department. Furthermore, in the 1950s, government was much smaller than in future years and there was not a large spectrum of views on China in the government (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017).

Robert Jervis has weighed in on the potential risks associated with this intelligence and policy relationship and its inherently oppositional nature of the two parties. Jervis stated that “different needs and perspectives of decision makers and intelligence officials guarantee conflict between them” (Jervis, 2010, 158). Political leaders must sell their policies which could result in overselling intelligence. They often see intelligence officers as timid, unreliable, and out to get them (Jervis, 2010, 159). Intelligence officials tend to
see politicians as careless and perhaps even intellectually inferior (Jervis, 2010, 159).

With this inherent dichotomy in approaches and roles, the friction should serve as a welcomed and healthy check and balance to each other. When the two think and act as one, intelligence and policy prescriptions blur (Jervis, 2010, 159). When this happens, the objective nature of the system crumbles. This was the nature of the 1950s.

Jervis provides the example of DCI Porter Goss in the mid-2000s telling the Agency that its purpose should be to “support policymakers.” This statement could have been construed as either informing policymakers to make better policy decisions or as finding and writing intelligence that reinforces current or preferred policies of politicians. Jervis noted some believed that Goss was referring to the latter which would undercut the system (Jervis, 2010, 159). In this scenario, the pursuit of Kent’s *truth* would be weakened by a politically biased fiction.

In the book *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence*, Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt dig deeper into these two schools of thought with respect to intelligence analysts’ role in policy. The first is that since intelligence analysts know and understand the most objective facts, they should be the ones prescribing policy solutions. Shulsky and Schmitt observe that this could result in the problematic stance where analysts could also “grade” or judge the correctness of policy. The second approach is where intelligence analysts avoid policy prescriptions and focus merely on the description of facts and the world around them. This is the divorcing of intelligence analysis from the policy process and having the intelligence analysts remain apolitical in nature. This second approach would support the notion that “intelligence is an endeavor similar to social science” (Shulsky & Schmitt, 2002, 165). Similar to Jervis’ comments,
the more obvious path of divorcing policy from intelligence creation is advantageous when truth of another country’s strategic stature and intent is the ultimate pursuit. The 1950s appeared to have lacked the separation between policy and intelligence to perhaps the detriment of understanding the actual conditions. Moreover, a lack of incorporating or at least acknowledging alternative views in the public space also helped mask the actual conditions on the ground in China. It was a period when public narratives as well as other government voices were overlooked and group think from a few dominated the threat picture.

**A New Way of Doing Business**

A new way of doing business emerged in the late 1960s and centered on three *sources of transparency*. The first was an increased level of dialogue between the US and China at the most senior levels. The second was the fact that the US had developed better intelligence as far as a better understanding of China (rebuilding its China hand cadre), improved human, geospatial, and signal intelligence, and a genuine consultation and incorporation of “public” intelligence. Third, a common cause developed between China and the US around a mutual enemy in the Soviet Union. This was an amazingly powerful unifying factor in decreasing mutual threat perception. When objectives align, people and countries simply get along better.

But, before we can explore sources of transparency, we must acknowledge how the previous sources of bias began to dissipate in the 1960s.

As the McCarthism of the 1950s began to recede and the anti-communism movement slowed, the practices of blacklisting, private investigations, and dismissals of intel community or government officials based on perceived sympathy for communism
also stopped. The anti-communist tendencies which had sidelined many of the China experts of the late 1940s retreated. The belief in the intelligence space that a Communist China could stand on its own two feet was not denigrated as in the past. Moreover, China experts who could speak the language, understand the culture, and had even visited or previously lived in the country were no longer seen as the enemy by the US Government. This allowed for a more balanced and informed view on China from within the US Government.

Second, structural changes ameliorated the inflated threat from failed covert operations. By the end of the 1960s, the rogue nature of the CIA was reeled back in through a series of Government hearings and legislation. Covert operations which were used in the 1950s as a way to gain intelligence and influence political change proved in many cases to be ineffectual and contrary to American values. In 1974, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment attempted to oversee covert operations with a governance structure. It was a response to Senate Armed Services Committee hearings in the early 1970s which outlined covert operations in Asia. The Hughes-Ryan Amendment required a Presidential Finding to initiate a covert action. The President had to affirm that the “operation in a foreign country…is important to the national security of the US” and explain the scope (Richelson, 2008, 507-509). This amendment helped to end the Agency’s ability to run covert operations without oversight as well as placing accountability squarely on the President.

Also, as the Agency developed its ability to gather intelligence through human, geospatial, and signal channels, as well as increased attention on public intelligence in the form of what think tanks, academia, and media were saying, this holistic view of the
world lessoned the need for covert operations designed at gaining information. China
hands were improving their knowledge, and their access to sound information, not
available in the 1950s and 1960s, became more readily available.

Third, a healthier intel-policy relationship was born from the ashes of a cozy and
dangerous, triangular relationship between Eisenhower, Allen Dulles, and John Dulles. The unhealthy relationship between the CIA, State Department, and policy wing and unchecked use of covert operations in Asia in the 1950s began to mature and professionalize in the 1960s with its culmination in the Hughes-Ryan Amendment of the 1970s. The close-knit relationship between the estimators and policy experts in the 1950s began to erode in the early to mid-1960s. For starters, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson did not utilize the NSC in the same manner as Eisenhower. The NSC had become more of an after-the-fact forum to communicate decisions already decided in smaller forums. Kennedy even dismantled the Planning Board and cut the CIA Office of National Estimate’s “umbilical cord to the policy making process” (Cooper, 1972, 227). It was as if a cloak of secrecy had been removed and the intel structure and relationship with the President had become more transparent and professional.

While the relationship between Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers had been close, Kennedy did not enjoy the same relationship with his DCIs. For starters, Kennedy fired Director Dulles after he felt that he been misled in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Whereas Eisenhower had empowered Dulles to carry out clandestine operations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to include overthrowing governments, Kennedy had a different, almost sympathetic view of national liberation movements (Talbot, 2015, 1-4). While Dulles served as Director for less than a year under Kennedy, it was a
tumultuous relationship between the old and new order with respect to how intelligence should shape policy and would shake the core of how the CIA and President would work together (Talbot, 2015, 5). Illustrating the acerbic nature of the relationship, Dulles remarked after being fired by Kennedy, “That little Kennedy…he thought he was a god” (Talbot, 2015, 1).

Kennedy also had a rocky relationship with Dulles’ successor McCone. Much of the outrage from Kennedy was directed at the CIA’s clandestine work, especially assassinations and other plots to undermine enemies of the US. In one example, the CIA had poisoned Cuban sugar heading to Russia. Once Kennedy had found out, he scolded McCone and ordered the sugar destroyed. Kennedy’s advisor Ted Sorenson noted that it was not in Kennedy’s “character or conscience” to approve assassinations and other international manipulations of world order (Talbot, 2007, 113). Kennedy believed that McCone’s control of the Agency was lacking as well as the direction that its covert operations were heading (Talbot, 2007, 113-115). Thus, the relationship between the President and the DCI in early 1960s was not what it was in the 1950s and the relationship between the intelligence apparatus and the policy arm began to professionalize.

Similar to the Kennedy years, the Johnson years did not reflect a close relationship between the President and the DCI. In Johnson’s autobiography, he described at length the path he took to respond to the Tet offensive in Vietnam in 1968. He noted that in one of the most critical national security moments of his Presidency, he approached the situation by calling together the so called “Wise Men” (Johnson, 1971, 415-416). This advisory group comprised of former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, former
Undersecretary of State George Ball, General Omar Bradley, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, former Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, General Maxwell Ridgeway, General Maxwell Taylor, retired diplomat Robert Murphy, and former Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance. Johnson had asked a handful of outside advisors to provide “the factual, cold, honest picture as [they] see it” (Johnson, 1971, 416). What is so interesting about this group of Wise Men that Johnson assembled was that many of them were ex-officials and outsiders who were helping Johnson make perhaps the biggest foreign policy decision of his Administration. Johnson had not gone to the NSC for consultation about this decision or even requested an SNIE for the IC to weigh in. Conspicuously absent from the Wise Men cohort were current and former DCIs who could have provided the strategic stature of North Vietnam as well as China. The manner in which Johnson utilized the NSC, CIA, and the CIA’s assessments and threat narratives contrasted starkly from how Eisenhower had received and digested the threat picture. From 1950 to 1965, the pendulum of CIA-President intimacy went from close to almost non-existent.

Interestingly, the number of Special NIEs also decreased during this latter portion of the “enemy” years. This reflected a potential decline in Executive trust of the intelligence community. As the 1960s progressed, the affinity between the policy and intelligence withered and the policy hands were less inclined to use the SNIE venue to ask for intelligence analysts to provide policy advice as part of their outlooks. This change is representative of a systemic shift in the executive-intel relationship. Since the SNIEs were “special” based on the fact that estimators were informed of the policy implications and potential courses of action prior to the rendering of their judgements, the
decreased utilization of SNIEs from their peak in the 1950s and early 1960s to the limited number in the 1970s, points to a dramatic decrease in the partnership between intelligence and policy. The number of SNIEs during the Eisenhower Administration was higher than the number of SNIEs in the rest of the Era of Mao. Slicing the estimates a different way along the periods of enemy and quasi friend, SNIEs also changed their frequency. Of the 70 estimates in the CIA’s Tracking the Dragon collection, 19 of the SNIEs were from 1950-1966, and only six after 1967 (Tracking the Dragon). While there could be a number of reasons for this, it is apparent that the use of the Special NIE format with policy implications decreased in frequency as a preferred method to inform policy in the late 1960s and 1970s.

While Nixon intended to restore the NSC to its heyday of policy influence of the 1950s, the impact that estimators and their NIEs played in the 1970s remained nearly as low as in the Kennedy and Johnson years. As an unintended consequence of Nixon’s NSC growth strategy, the size of the NSC had ballooned so large that its augmented production of reports had a derailing effect of pouring too much information into the policy makers’ hands (Cooper, 1972, 227-228). With vast amounts of information flowing from the NSC to the National Security Advisor and President, the desired impact was never truly realized and intelligence influence on the policy experts remained low.

**A new system**

In addition to the sources of bias that had dissipated in the late 1960s, several sources of transparency helped to present a more accurate view of China threat or lack thereof. The sources of transparency actually began to influence the threat narratives that
the CIA was including in its assessments thereby reducing the overall threat level assigned to China by the US Government.

**High Level Dialogue**

In the early 1950s, the Sino-American dialogue was minimal. While not quite non-existent, it was at its lowest levels in history with no official diplomatic relationship. Alexis Johnson was the primary American interlocutor with China. He was a relatively junior foreign service officer and he held secret meetings with China. This Sino-American interaction model certainly involved public servants at low levels but not until the 1960s did it move into the more public, “higher levels” of diplomatic service (Immerman, personal communication, 28 February 2017). The idea that a low level foreign service officer was holding the only meetings between two of the largest countries in the world is staggering.

From the end of the 1960s to the early 1970s, the US and China began to enter a period of awkward appeasement with one another. Neither was entirely sure of the other’s intentions, but both believed that the other was signaling for a friendlier relationship. Even when the other attempted overtures of friendship, more often than not it was misunderstood or missed entirely. For example, in July 1970 at a time of increased desire by both nations to initiate high-level meetings, both used proxies to exchange their message. The US told diplomats from Pakistan, Romania, and France that it desired diplomatic exchanges with China while the Chinese told the Norwegians and Afghans about these mutual aspirations with the US (Kissinger, 2011, 225). The attempts failed to materialize as the messaging opportunity was missed in translation.
This awkwardness was broken in April 1971, through an event which would famously become known as Ping Pong Diplomacy. This groundbreaking in Sino-American relations involved Mao inviting the US Ping Pong Team to China and would start the ball rolling for considerable improvements in diplomatic ties. Kissinger traveled to China several months later in July 1971, on a secret mission to lay the groundwork for an eventual Nixon visit in February 1972. Ideological interests of both countries eased to a degree and were supplanted by national interests (Kissinger, 2011, 274). The relationship had begun to transition from one based on the heart to that of the mind or from strict ideology to pragmatic strategy. In 1973, Mao had said that the Sino-American relationship had moved from one of “two enemies” in the 1950s and 1960s, to one of “friendship” (Kissinger, 2011, 244). The change in how the US and China viewed one another was monumental. Whether the relationship had indeed moved all the way to friend status can be debated, however, the seismic shift from enemy to quasi friend was stark.

Politically, Nixon was able to fall back on his reputation as a strong anti-communist to convince fellow Republicans that he was the only one who could stand up to Mao. Showing his party that he could handle Mao, gained him conservative support heading into the 1972 re-election. He also emphasized to liberals how he was bringing China back into the fold. Nixon omitted talk of democracy and human rights and focused his message instead on the momentous nature of the meeting (Mann, 2007, 72-74).

Chinese and American meetings occurred at more senior levels and with an increase in frequently in the early to mid 1970s. The sharing of “opinions, goals, and intentions” by senior politicians on both sides produced an outlook on Sino-American
relations more indicative of cooperation than a view previously surmised by “a committee made up of cautious generalists in the CIA headquarters” (Tracking the
Dragon, 2004, xxvi). In a rare acknowledgement of the limits of intelligence at the
beginning of the volume, Robert Suettinger, author of the “Introduction” to Tracking the
Dragon and former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for East Asia on the National
Intelligence Council, noted that the senior-level dialogue between the two countries could
perhaps do more for the relationship than intelligence analysts calling the world as they
saw it. With the Agency’s inherent risk averse predilection, the improved country-to-
country relations would have gone a long way in ameliorating some of the past
threatening narratives. Also, in the 1974 NIE on Strategic Attack Programs, the Agency
noted that China has “a changed perception of the strategic environment resulting
from…improved relations with the US” (NIE 13-8-74). The actual improvement in
dialogue and relations had begun to change the CIA’s narrative around China’s military.

US Developed Better Intel and Consulted “public” Intel

Former senior CIA officer James Lilley noted that US intelligence on China had
been lacking in the years following Mao’s rise. He noted “the truth was that almost
twenty years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the US remained
estranged from the country and thus still handicapped in its ability to gather intelligence”
(Lilley, 2004, 135). If the late 1940, 1950s, and early 1960s were the doldrums with
respect to American understanding of China, American intelligence started to improve in
the mid 1960s for several reasons. The first was that a new cadre of China hands, which
started to be groomed after the first wave was sidelined, had now sharpened their skills
and become experts on China. There was an element of simple maturity with growing
into the role and building the expertise. Second, technology and human intelligence collection techniques had improved to a point where the American government could see what was going on in China. Third, the CIA was starting to consult public intelligence with greater inclusion and decreased weariness.

The threat narrative around China’s nuclear weapon program and its evolution is indicative of a microcosm of the larger US intelligence aptitude on China. The opaqueness in the 1950s and 1960s surrounding the Chinese nuclear capabilities and aspirations gave way to increased transparency and an easing of threat in the 1970s. OSI chief Karl Weber said in the 1950s that China was “a real mystery…big, really foreign, hard to get a handle on” (Richelson, 2006, 142). Even Kent’s assessments in the 1950s on China’s nuclear capabilities stated that China’s nuclear weapons program was in its early stages and had many complex dependencies. The Chinese nuclear program was thought to take “well over 10, and possibly 20 years” without Soviet help to build and China’s own unwillingness to divert resources from conventional economic and military spending (Richelson, 2006, 143). In a significant misread by the US Government, China did indeed divert economic resources and without Soviet aid began constructing its own atomic bomb. In October 1964, China detonated its first atomic bomb with a yield of 20 kilotons (Richelson, 2006, 167). China had developed its first uranium bomb and the CIA scrambled to understand where it had created the materials and attained the know-how (Richelson, 2006, 169). The CIA had misread not only China’s intent, but also its capabilities.

Throughout the 1960s, this all began to change with respect to American understanding of China’s nuclear capabilities. American intelligence improved due to
greater surveillance on Chinese nuclear progress as well as signal and human intelligence assets. U-2 missions as well as Corona and Gambit reconnaissance satellites provided higher resolution images each year (Richelson, 2006, 160-195). While Nixon halted the U-2 flyover missions in 1971 in order to improve relations with China, the US continued with its satellite program to provide views of the primary nuclear sites (Richelson, 2006, 194). From the late 1960s throughout the 1970s, each new generation of satellite imagery provided more enhanced views of key nuclear sites like Lop Nur.

In addition to enhanced satellite and plane surveillance in the 1970s, improved coordination with the NSA allowed for a more complete intelligence picture by complementing the imagery with communications. Moreover, the US was beginning to make progress with recruiting human assets within China and a budding human intelligence was growing. The US was finally able to do something that it had not done in the 1950s and early 1960s: recruit human sources in China. In 1968, the CIA’s base in Hong Kong was able to connect with and recruit mainland Chinese (Lilley, 2004, 139). The CIA targeted members of government organizations in Taiwan such as the Bank of China, China Resources, and the New China News Agency (Xinhua). Whereas attempts in the past had fallen on deaf ears, the disastrous impacts of the Cultural Revolution had created sympathy to opposing views such as those of the US.

Times had changed and conditions in China presented a ripeness and openness by some of the disenchanted for cooperation with the US. In 1968, the CIA had gotten the first Xinhua employee—many of whom were high ranking Party members and traveled back and forth from Hong Kong to the Beijing – to provide information. In fact, this initial human intelligence source provided the first glimpses into China’s desire to build
closer ties with the US after such a long period of hostility (Lilley, 2004, 144-145). One of the rare, declassified examples of this recruitment, albeit several years later, was the human intelligence gleaned in the 1980s that showed ties between Chinese and Pakistani nuclear programs (Richelson, 2006, 405). The threat picture of the 1970s was finally informed by Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT), Signal Intelligence (SIGINT), and Human Intelligence (HUMINT). A final, telling indicator that China’s nuclear threat to the US was decreasing in the 1970s was China’s invitation of American nuclear scientists to visit China. Harold Agnew, the Los Alamos Director, visited China in the 1970s and met with Chinese weapons scientists and toured Beijing (Richelson, 2006, 407). This exchange of nuclear scientists would have been unthinkable some ten years earlier. The opaqueness that characterized American understanding in the 1950s has dissipated and US could see into many aspects of China’s military apparatus.

Finally, the CIA began to take narratives originating from the public sector to heart. For example, Lilley noted the value that a pundit living in Hong Kong could provide the Agency. Laszlo La Dany, a “one-man research outfit” produced weekly reports titled *China News Analysis* and was regularly a key source for CIA analysts. La Dany himself was one of the “most authoritative” figures on China according to senior CIA officials (Lilley, 2004, 139). This inclusion in CIA NIEs of information from La Dany’s articles shows how the CIA was beginning to use public intelligence the early 1970s. It was no longer the secret intelligence only driving US Government views on China that had been the case for much of the 1950s but a more comprehensive public and secret intelligence view of the world. This multi-source approach is in line with Jervis’
recommendation to use both public and secret intelligence to complement each other and fill in the holes to get a more accurate threat picture.

**Development of a Common Cause**

The development of a common enemy in the USSR had an immense influence on improving the Sino-American relationship. Both the US and China saw the Soviets as their arch enemy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the US verging on war with the Soviets in the early 1960s with the Bay of Pigs and China doing the same in the late 1960s, both had beat the war drum against China. Both the US and China had mobilized troops against the Soviets and both had embarked upon extravagant propaganda campaigns against the Soviets. It was as if they had a common issue with which to commiserate on.

Militarily both countries found value in having the Soviets worry about multiple fronts with the US on its Western front in Europe and China on its Eastern front. Soviet troop buildups did not seem as massive when they had to split against multiple front challenges. Moreover, the mere fact from the US perspective that the two largest communist powers were not military pledged to each other or sharing materiel aid was a huge relief.

Politically, where it had been the Soviets and Chinese in lock-step alignment in world affairs, the Chinese were starting to act like their own country. In a bi-polar world, the more major powers that drifted away from the Soviet bloc, the better the US would do in the UN as well as in unilateral agreements.

Economically, China also began to make some concessions to a market economy. While the Chinese economic reform began in earnest under Deng, the US began to take
steps to reorient its containment strategy to that of engagement in the 1970s. There was a clear focus economically on trying to make China work. While the 1950s and 1960s focused on an economic containment strategy to restrict trade, investment, and technology transfer, the 1970s witnessed a pulling back on this front by the US with respect to China (Christensen, 2015, xv). Some China experts such as Professor Thomas Christensen have even noted that no other global actor has done more to assist China’s rise than the US because of economic cooperation (Christensen, 2015, xv).

Conclusion

As Alan Wolfe noted in *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat*, US domestic factors had an immense role in the changes to perceived threat from the USSR. Wolfe noted that from the American perspective, US domestic factors directly led to the rise and fall of the Soviet threat more so than Soviet factors during the Cold War. One could logically conclude that a similar phenomenon could transpire in the American view of Sino threat. As discussed in this chapter, US domestic factors did indeed contribute to the rise and fall of Sino threat prior to and throughout the period of rapprochement in the 1970s. While Wolfe attributed the inflation of Soviet threat to the American political party system, bureaucratic politics in the Pentagon, and rivalries between different branches of government among others, I have outlined how similar American domestic factors — the anti-communism movement in the US, the denigration of experienced China hands in the intelligence apparatus, the failed covert operations endeavor in Asia to glean intelligence on China, and the ill-designed, cozy policy-intelligence relationship – inflated the China threat in the 1950s (Wolfe, 1984, 6-10).
Similar to the Soviet threat, the China threat also began to decline precisely when these sources of bias dissipated and sources of transparency surfaced. The high-level dialogue, improved intelligence and a more balanced use of all intelligence types, and a common cause for the countries to build trust all fostered conditions for more benign threat narratives to grow. A confluence of waning sources of subjectivity and waxing sources of transparency provided an environment that produced more friendly narratives on China. These narratives on China’s military weakening, its economy stalling, Sino-Soviet relations souring, and Mao’s political crisis painted China as less of a threat to the US as well as potential partner. These narratives afforded the US a clearer view of an objective threat picture of China and thus helped the threat status of China move from enemy to potential friend. With the sources of bias diminished and sources of transparency elevated in the early 1970s, the American view of China threat had evolved to a more benign, objective threat truth.

The notion of deception is important to this discussion for it manifests itself in multiple ways. There is deception by the enemy which is the more common understanding and accounts for an adversary intentionally masking its capabilities or intent. This form of deception is the traditional use of trickery by one country against another. However, there is also a notion of self-deception. Self-deception is in fact internal bias that a government introduces to its own detriment. For example, Hitler had convinced himself in the 1940s that the Allied landing would occur at Calais, where the English Channel is the narrowest. This view was so strong that all intel reports that contradicted it were jettisoned to the Germans’ peril (Shulsky and Schmitt, 202, 121). The US also has unknowingly engaged in self-deception. For example, American anti-
communist bias was so strong in the 1950s that the idea that China could be a potential ally of the US against the Soviets was prematurely jettisoned. The US Government was practicing its own form of self-deception on itself.
7. Conclusion

This research endeavor set out to better understand the nature of American threat narratives, how narratives evolve, what drives the change, and finally, what it all means for perceptions of threat to the US. The raison d'être of this study was to understand the implications of bias on evolving threat narratives and threat calculus and ultimately determine its impact on perceptions of friend and foe. The case study of China during the years of rapprochement was enlightening as it helped inform many of these questions around American threat perception. Contrary to popular opinion, changing American perception of external threat may not be caused primarily by actions of the threat actors. Instead, American perceptions change as threat narratives evolve based on phenomenon located on the American domestic front. To a large extent, threat narrative creation is shaped by domestic sources of bias and transparency with the former introducing elements of subjectivity and the latter elements of objectivity.

This research also highlights the tension between a perceived accuracy and often-times, false specificity of threat and the accurate threat depiction itself. The gulf between the perceived view of threat and threat truth can be considerable. Since its inception, the CIA very strongly believed that a truth regarding foreign threat exists. This truth equates in the intelligence community to an accurate portrayal of threat. Intelligence professionals, led by Kent as the father of modern American intelligence, have drawn parallels between the truth in intelligence and truth in science. In the hard sciences, truth is the goal of the scientific method. For example, the presence of truth exists in physics where laws of nature govern the everyday and can be proven through experiments. The CIA has always believed that similar to the notion of truth in the hard sciences, truth
exists in a knowable state in the form of an enemy threat. Carved in stone in the CIA’s original headquarters building lobby, its motto “and ye shall know the truth” attests to this concept.

Contrary to science though, threat can have multiple layers of deception. While self-deception or bias can prevent the attainment of truth in the pursuit of both physics and national security, deception from external actors only exists in the latter. Thus, the attainment of truth with respect to threat must survive both self-inflicted sources of bias and also external sources of deception. While the barriers to understanding and accurately assessing threat are significant, a threat truth exists nonetheless in the form of the actual conditions. The number of missiles pointed at the US by Great Frusina is knowable. Whether Great Frusina ever intends to launch them at the US is also knowable, albeit slightly more difficult to ascertain. The key is to remove as many sources of deception (externally inspired) and self-deception (self-inflicted bias) as possible to approach this truth. Threat narratives based on either form of deception propagate faulty threat. Threat narratives that are free from these points of deception expose the more accurate view of threat.

As discussed in the theory chapter (Chapter 2), threat is an amorphous concept. It is complicated because of its many positions of reference: an individual, a group, a nation, a culture, a race. It also has many perspectives such as security, gender, economics, cultural, religion, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, perception can vary from person to person and thereby reduce measures of consistency. Thus, two individuals who associate with the same race, economic status, religion, gender, and sexual
orientation can have different views of what is threatening to them even though logically they should react in a similar manner to notions of threat.

Threat narratives serve as a way to contextualize these various points of reference and perspectives and align them into a coherent story. Humans grasp for mechanisms to simplify how we see and understand the world around us. A narrative is a collective construct composed of many data points. A narrative is comprised of bits of information sourced from social interactions, newspaper articles, television and radio news segments, books, conferences, political rallies, government statements, and even YouTube videos. These sources meld together to form a coherent story that is easily digestible for people to understand. The potential problem with this story creation lies in the intentionality by which narratives further biased arguments. When sources of bias or subjectivity enter into the equation, they influence the narratives and threat calculus away from an objective truth.

Managing the scope of this study, I adopted a discourse analysis approach and limited the narrative examination to that of CIA text and national security threat. Focusing even more narrowly, I selected the case study of China from the 1950s through the 1970s as a way to focus on the period of rapprochement. Limiting the scope allowed for a detailed survey of all the threat assessments on one country during a finite period. It also isolated the source of texts to a discrete actor (the CIA) and within the general bounds of military, political, and economic threat. The result of this methodology was a manageable data set of nearly 3,000 pages of declassified threat discourse that could be analyzed in a manner as to track changes to the narratives over time. Using a limited temporal perspective, I was able to chart specific government narrative changes and
understand potential alignment with domestic events and public narratives in the US. This design allowed me to focus on answering the research question of “do American threat narratives evolve and what influences the change?”

Several theoretical perspectives such as constructivism and domestic politics allow for a more in-depth view of narrative progression. While Walt’s realism helps to explain at the macro level improving Sino-American relations in the 1970s as a balancing maneuver against a prevailing Soviet threat, the reasons for the initial souring of the Sino-American relationship in the 1950s could be more completely explained using domestic politics theory. Similar to how Wolfe characterized the rise and fall of the Soviet threat as a bi-product of American domestic factors such as the party system, electoral campaigns, and bureaucratic politics in the Pentagon, the rise of the China threat in the 1950s could be attributed to domestic factors such as the growth of anti-communism, a cozy policy-intel relationship, and a rogue CIA. In a threat environment that draws many similarities to Wolf’s Soviet case, American domestic conditions in the 1950s point to an exceedingly influential landscape that skewed perceptions towards a highly inflated China threat.

Constructivism provides a rich analytical framework by offering an iterative approach to knowledge creation, acceptance, and internalization of threat narratives as well as a way to calibrate for the influence of interests and identity. Applying Finnemore and Sikkink’s norm dynamics theory to the dynamics of threat creation allows for a framework to track narrative evolution. Also, Katzenstein’s *The Culture of National Security* provides a valuable perspective on why change occurs in the international system at certain times while it does not at others. The interactions between a country’s
identity and interests within the system directly influence its national security policy. As one looks at how China viewed itself with respect to the Soviet Union and greater Communist bloc as well as how the US viewed itself with respect to anti-communism, capitalism, and an anti-Soviet alliance, the intersection of American views on its identity and interests undoubtedly influenced threat perceptions and policy decisions. To that end, it was “who” the US was to oppose China based on the Capitalist-Communist divide of the times.

China during the period of rapprochement is a highly illuminating case study because of the dynamic nature of the Sino-American relationship. With the goal of exploring changing narratives, a case study that presents a dynamic relationship over time is paramount. The Sino-American case presents such an opportunity. In the late 18th Century, China was declining while the US was rising. A struggling China saw many of its people move to the US for work constructing railroads, manning gold mines, and building the economy as America moved West. The US in turn viewed China as a land of opportunity for trade and to impart Christianity and democracy. Through the Opium Wars, the US exerted influence over China. Positive and negative narratives on China filled the American public arena with Chinese seen as both hard working but also stealing American jobs. Similarly, Americans viewed those Chinese in China as drug addicts hooked on opium but also as potential Christians and future advocates of democracy in Asia. There was a sense that China was fertile ground for missionary work as well as capitalist teaching where the US could help China. These narratives continued with the China Lobby in early 20th Century imploring Americans to lend China a helping hand while at the same time preventing Chinese from immigrating to the US under the Chinese
Exclusion Act of 1882. This odd dichotomy of opposing views characterized much of the Sino-American relationship. The robustness of dynamic narratives on China cannot be overstated as well as its value when looking at narrative progression and evolution.

**What did American Discourse say about China?**

The extreme vacillation between threats and opportunities that China posed to the US began to settle on notions of threat following WWII. This is the precise moment in time where the substantive analysis of this study begins. The study of official discourse begins with the CIA-conceived threat narratives of the early 1950s. As a nascent agency within the US Government, the CIA was tasked with collecting knowledge about threats and presenting the information to American leadership. The CIA’s Office of National Estimates (ONE) was the master storyteller charged with identifying those countries which were out to harm the US. As the Agency told its story to American leaders, it would arrange the information into threads of military, economic, and political threat. Its assessments were written in a focused manner along these three substantive areas. This study reviewed over 70 of these Agency threat assessments. The analysis revealed an extraordinary evolution of thought and perception on the China threat from the early 1950s through the 1970s.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Agency narratives on China in the 1950s and early 1960s painted China in the most hostile, aggressive, and dangerous light possible. Specifically, the narratives said: 1) China wanted to fight the US even if it meant all-out war, 2) it was rapidly pushing for nuclear weapons, 3) its economy was heating up, 4) its ties with the Soviet Union were very strong, and 5) Mao had been able to successfully consolidate power. These storylines emerged in the late 1940s in the CIA’s assessments
and were accepted and internalized throughout the 1950s. These were the threat narratives passed directly to the US Presidents. As a point of clarification, great pains were taken to standardize the rigor for what constituted a narrative on China within the research design. The narratives not only had to appear in multiple assessments showing consistency and internalization but also had to appear in the executive, “conclusions” section.

In the mid to late-1960s, the Agency’s threat narratives began to make an about face and transition into more benign, less aggressive, and less dangerous narratives. Their substantive shift was seismic in nature and represented an opening of the door to a potential Sino-American partnership. The narratives, starting in the mid to late-1960s, spoke of a weakening Chinese military, complete economic stagnation, a Sino-Soviet relationship on life support, and a political crisis of epic proportions that even Mao could potentially not survive. These Agency narratives continued through the late 1970s when the period of this study concluded. Collectively, these “less-hostile” narratives painted China as weak and hardly a nation that the US should be concerned with from a security perspective.

At first glance one could say that the narratives changed precisely because China had changed. Continuing this thought experiment, this view would say that at one point in time China was economically and military powerful, well-connected to the Soviets, and bent on attacking the US, while in the mid to late-1960s, the wheels came off of China’s economic and military juggernaut and its relationship with the Soviets fell into disrepair. This would have been a plausible explanation for an external-driven catalyst of narrative evolution if the scenario did not run contrary to the actual conditions.
Many of the narratives on China within the American public space in the 1950s opposed the Agency’s narratives and painted China as a much more benign actor. Numerous *Foreign Affairs* articles in the 1950s spoke of China as still recovering from the devastation of WWII and its protracted civil war. Their storyline elaborated on China’s poor state and how it could not possibly present a true military or economic threat. Also, many pundits in the public space questioned the true closeness of Mao and Stalin and whether the two nations could ever partner. With the power of hindsight, many of these public revelations more closely approximated the actual conditions on the ground in China. While China’s economy was improving slightly in the 1950s, it was not at the high rates that the CIA had believed. Indeed, its military was also very weak and its partnership with the Soviets had severe cracks from the start. Agency narratives had inflated the China threat. With this dichotomy between what the Agency said and what the pundits in the American public space were saying, there must have been a reason for the divergence. Something must have caused the faulty evolution of hostile threat narratives on China within the Agency.

In looking at American domestic events in the 1950s and early 1960s, and also within the Agency itself, I observed the presence of several sources of bias that skewed threat narratives on China. One significant source of bias was the anti-communism movement in the US which spurred the US Government to fire many of its China-hands. The movement purged the very segment of the American intelligence community that knew what was actually going on in China. The rationale was that these individuals were too sympathetic to China and could be aligned with the enemy. This created a gaping hole in the US Government’s understanding of the lay of the land in China. Second, and
partially in response to the firing of the China-hands, the CIA had a massive blind spot on China and greater East Asia and was forced to introduce covert operations to fill this gap. These covert operations generally ended in failure. Since the CIA was a new organization and could not lose face, it had to, by necessity, inflate the threat of China. Using this logic, only a strong enemy could cause the CIA’s covert operations to have ended in disaster. Third, the intelligence-policy relationship was incredibly cozy in the 1950s and created an environment that lacked diversity of thought, oversight, and distance between the intelligence providers and policy creators. President Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers worked so closely together than the lines were often blurred between the Departments of State, CIA, and Presidency. Eisenhower used the NSC to help devise foreign policy and Secretary Dulles and Director Dulles monopolized the forum. Also, the “special” National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) device was used more in this period than any other in history highlighting the troubled intel-policy engagement model that distorted the normal separation of responsibilities. Representing policy’s ask from the intelligence community for policy prescriptions, SNIEs were an overreach by both the policy and intelligence functions. The Dulles brothers’ close relations with McCarthy also helped to further the anti-communist and anti-China narrative in the decision-making forum.

These sources of bias in the 1950s and early 1960s helped to elevate the hostile threat narratives on China. The likes of *Foreign Affair’s* authors C.M. Chang, Wolf Ladejinsky, Edgar Snow, and Hansen Baldwin, who wrote in the 1950s that China’s economic weakness, military ineptitude, and Sino-Soviet frailty were real, were either
discounted or ignored by the Agency. The tides started to change in the mid-1960s when the sources of bias began to dissipate and sources of transparency grew.

The sources of bias declined due to a number of factors. First, anti-communism began to fade as the practices of blacklisting, private investigations, and dismissals of government officials based on communist allegations stopped. Second, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment reeled in the CIA’s covert operations by providing a more rigorous governance structure. Third, the incestuous intel-policy relationship of the 1950s professionalized in the 1960s and 1970s with the President requesting significantly fewer SNIEs, employing a much more diverse set of advisors, and dismantling the Planning Board which cut the CIA’s “umbilical cord to policy” (Cooper, 1972, 227).

Coupled with decreasing sources of bias, sources of transparency began to crop up in the 1960s. First, a much higher level of Sino-American dialogue developed in the late 1960s. After a nearly two-decade hiatus characterized by very little diplomatic interaction, the late 1960s saw an awkward courting of each other by both China and the US. If Ping Pong Diplomacy truly got the ball rolling (pun intended) for closer ties, the ensuing dialogue between Kissinger and Deng and Nixon and Mao cemented the improved engagement. Second, American intel on China grew to impactful levels by the late 1960s. Increasingly powerful intelligence was due to: 1) improved HUMINT, GEOINT, and SIGINT, 2) increased attention to public intelligence and incorporation into CIA assessments, and 3) a maturing of the China-hands cadre of intelligence officers who spent the previous decade and half learning their trade. This improved intelligence helped to illustrate at several levels how China was not as aggressive or capable as previously thought. It showed China’s non-existent military alliance with the Soviets, its
purged and debilitated PLA, as well as its political and economic infirmity. Improved intelligence had illustrated the debilitating effects of the Cultural Revolution as well as the meager results of the Leaps Forward, especially the Second Leap Forward. Finally, and partly due to China’s position of weakness, an idea of a commonality of cause began to surface in the late 1960s between the US and China. China was at odds with Soviets and having nearly gone to war in the late 1960s with both armies lined up across from each other on the Mongolian border, China saw the US as a potential ally. The US similarly began to view China as a potential partner not only to shift the tide against the Soviets, but also to avoid stirring up trouble as the US examined its exit strategy from Vietnam.

These sources of transparency in the late 1960s and early 1970s helped to create Agency narratives around China as less hostile, economically weaker, and in the midst of a political crisis at home and a diplomatic crisis abroad with the USSR. Improved American intel revealed cracks in the previously thought ironclad Chinese threat of the 1950s. Additional Sino-American dialogue at high levels also helped to impart the message to the US that China did not view America as its enemy. China was focused solely on the Soviets, a pursuit fully aligned with that of the US. The position of strength that China and US saw as being a group of two within the larger power dynamic of three countries vying for dominance was enticing for both since they were navigating a wilderness period together. China was estranged from the Soviets and the US was faltering in its quest to squash communist uprisings worldwide. The prospects of a Sino-American partnership, or at the least a warming of relations, was attractive to both countries.
In the period of rapprochement and just prior, America’s perception of China threat was more heavily influenced by its domestic factors than by those actions of China. American domestic factors inflated the China threat in a biased way in the 1950s and only when the subjectivity of those sources declined and sources of transparency arrived did a more accurate, objective view of China threat reveal itself. The Agency’s hostile threat narratives evolved into less-hostile, quasi-friend narratives precisely when these sources of bias transitioned. Domestic sources truly influenced American perception of China threat in the post war period. Threat narrative creation, narrative evolution, and elevated threat perceptions were all influenced by these sources of bias.

**What Does it All Mean for Today?**

Fast forwarding four decades since the rapprochement, American domestic conditions of bias and transparency exist today and influence narrative evolution around China. Sources of bias are influencing threatening narrative creation on China while sources of transparency generally spur narratives of Sino-American hope and partnership. A primary source of bias today is the need to substantiate an exorbitant Department of Defense budget. The $700 billion DoD budget dwarfs any other national budget including China’s. China is, however, the next largest military spender. With the importance of a global competitor to justify the large American budget, the China threat is often inflated to satisfy this need. Second, a powerful anti-China Lobby has formed in recent years exhibiting a motto of “if its Chinese, its bad.” This lobby has opposed mergers of American and Chinese companies, as well as China’s purchase of American real-estate and ports. It also uses a bull-horn to caution that China is cheating in trade as well as annexing the South China Sea.
Both of these systemic biases – justifying the DoD budget and the anti-China Lobby – have led to increased narratives about a powerful, growing China, bent on usurping America’s global influence. Similar to how McCarthy employed patriotism for those supporting his anti-communism cause in the 1950s, those who are speaking out against China such as Congressman Pittenger today are likewise employing the patriotism card against anyone who opposes the anti-China Lobby. These sources of bias are undoubtedly influencing American perceptions on China by keeping their objectives front and center in the American media.

The sources of transparency today with respect to China are also similar to those sources in the 1970s: cultural exchange and a common cause. While the 1970s had Ping Pong Diplomacy, Nixon and Mao meetings, and even nuclear scientist exchanges, today there are cultural exchanges in higher education, fast-food, and entertainment. More Chinese are studying in the US than ever before, many are co-founding companies with their new American friends, and the fast food, music, and movie industries have decided to treat the Chinese and American markets as potential dual-opportunities when devising and marketing products. Regarding a common cause, the US and China have started to align on economic partnership between American business and Chinese public companies. While American business is increasingly coveting Chinese markets, China is seeking advanced technologies from American firms. In a quid pro quo relationship, American firms are transferring technology for rights to produce and sell in China. Militarily, a common goal exists in the international terrorism space with the US and China sharing terrorism information in databases and tactics. Also, the US continues to ask China for assistance in reeling North Korea back in with respect to its nuclear
weapons. Overall, the more China and the US interact, the better the relationship becomes and more “friendly” narratives pop up in the US. Thus, under this premise of increased cooperation in the economic and military space, the threat level of China generally decreases with the presence of supporting narratives.

I must also note that because of the classified nature of the CIA documents, there is no way to track current Agency narratives on China. We can merely review the narratives in the public space or what the current Intelligence Community leaders share in open forums about the China threat. Not for another 25 years will we be able to see what the Agency is currently saying about China from a threat perspective. In the Epilogue section, I will go into depth on how the sources of bias and transparency today could impact American perceptions of China threat. I will also end with my views on the implications of past sources of bias and whether they may repeat themselves in the future of the Sino-American relationship.

Recap

To review, threat narratives do indeed evolve in the US Government’s storytelling of threat. They can evolve even if external factors associated with the actual threat may not drastically change or represent a substantial modification in capability or intent of a threat actor. Domestic factors hold immense sway in the creation of threat narratives, their internalization, and their acceptance. Domestic factors influencing threat narrative creation could be ideological movements, personalities of leaders, inter-group interactions, business considerations, and interests and identities of all the actors. When systemic bias exists in the domestic environment, a faulty picture of threat is cast through
the resulting layers of discourse. These threat narratives paint a subjective view of the threat and skew the perception of threat away from a semblance of objective threat truth.

Sources of transparency help to peel back layers of subjectivity and allow for narratives to present a closer approximation of the threat truth. While the cases of China in the period of rapprochement and today show how sources of transparency paint a less threatening position of China, this is not to say that transparency equates to threat deflation. If a true threat exists, sources of bias can similarly obscure the threat and erroneously paint the threat as benign. It just so happened that the sources of bias with China in the 1950s and today influenced an inflated threat picture through faulty threat narratives. A possible counter-example could be around a country like Saudi Arabia. While the US considers Saudi as an ally in the Middle East region with its support for American military exercises, counter terrorism operations, and even oil trade, perhaps the Saudi-phile tendencies and hope for Saudi-American partnership could obscure true changes in the relationship that could represent more harmful Saudi intent and capabilities. While this is purely an example, it should be noted that transparency could also lead to the uncovering of a threat that may be more dangerous than previously thought.

As noted earlier, threat is a difficult topic to fully comprehend. Not only are there multiple positions and perspectives, there is a full spectrum of perception that is based on the referent object’s interpretation. Threat narratives help to shape that perception but at a cost. The pre-digestion, amalgamation, and packaging of information associated with narratives introduce bias. This is the price of getting information passed to us by others.
As long as individuals do not have full access to all information, this risk of bias will always be present.

The evaluation of threat, however, is not a doomed proposition. What this research has exposed is that sources of bias and transparency influence the creation of threat narratives. Knowing that subjectivity is inserted into the threat calculus equation is powerful in understanding when and how to look for it. It is not something that can be solved overnight or perhaps ever at all. But, being cognizant that it exists is a step in the right direction.
8. Epilogue: Old Wine in New Bottles?

America faces complex threats from a variety of sources today. While threat to the US is nothing new, the number of threat vectors and complexity of those threats has increased. Even more concerning, threats are not binary as many would wish them to be. Since threats are not 1s and 0s, they are not absolute in nature and have varying levels of impact. Threat actors today can move in and out of threatening positions based on context and perception. Unfortunately, objective measures do not necessarily dictate how threats are perceived.

Subjectivity plays a significant role in threat narrative creation and interpretation especially when viewed from various perspectives within the US Government and the American public. With a myriad of threat narratives noisily floating around the court of public opinion, the key to successfully defending against the true threats is in distinguishing between those threats that will actually bite and those that will not. A responsible and effective government mobilizes resources against the truly dangerous threats while sidestepping the noise of subjectively conceived, relatively harmless threats. When fallacy corrupts the parsing of threats, resources are mistakenly mobilized against those threats that are not truly dangerous.

The threats discussed in this section are based on a national interest perspective. A certain degree of consensus around what constitutes the national interest is necessary to measure the relative harm from various threats. Even at the national interest level, variations in understanding could exist with respect to what is the most valuable and necessary to defend (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017). With that
said, threats to personal, religious, or sexual security are not within the scope of this discussion on national security threat.

Second, behind the veil of subjectivity, a threat truth exists in an objective sense. As discussed in earlier chapters, a central premise is that an actual, objective threat truth exists and this truth represents dimensions of another state’s capabilities and intent to inflict harm. Capability is generally more black and white in nature where a country either possesses it or does not. Intent, on the other hand, may be fleeting. For example, a country possessing a missile capable of harming another country presents a potential threat, but its intent provides the motive and rounds out the complete view of threat. Thus, an existing capability coupled with a degree of intent presents an objective threat truth.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the more bias that skews threat narrative creation and the threat picture away from the objective threat truth, the more problematic the threats are that bubble to the top. Since a compromised threat picture results in a misalignment of notions of danger and subsequent resource allocation, paying special attention to factors that corrupt an objective view of threat is paramount. The closer a country can get to objective threat narration and resulting threat calculus, the better it is at truly characterizing impending danger and designing an efficient and productive response plan. With an increase in complex and multi-directional threats coupled with scarce resources, getting it right with respect to threat is more important today than even before.

There are many threat narratives swirling in the American marketplace of ideas today by way of the government, media, academia, and think tanks. When looking at these narratives, Linc Bloomfield, Jr and Tom Harvey provide as good a survey as any of
the top threats to the US. This recently devised, concise list of threats in *The National Interest* includes, “North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic-missile programs, Russia’s threat to its western neighbors, China’s assertion of unfounded territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, and Islamist violence, including Iran’s regional destabilization activities” (Bloomfield/Harvey, 2017, 71). This list is replete with state and non-state actors as well as military, economic, and political dimensions.

Focusing on the China threat at large, this chapter will explore whether the current American environment will render an objective view of the threat or if subjectivity will force a biased view. The goal is to understand if some of the sources of bias that skewed American views of China threat in the past are doomed to repeat themselves or if sources of transparency will win the day. It’s a question of whether yesterday’s wine is merely being served in new bottles.

It would be naïve to say that the American view of China threat could ever be completely objective in nature. My goal is to surface potential sources of bias that could impinge upon an objective view of this threat as a way to present a warning and opportunity for improvement. The goal would also be to highlight those sources of transparency as strengths within the system which should be reinforced. My hope is that by understanding potential sources of bias and transparency, we can gain an enlightened view on how Americans can view China threat in a more objective manner.

**Current Conditions**

The Sino-American relationship is incredibly complicated today. Not only do China and the US have the two largest economies in the world, but they also possess the strongest militaries powered by the biggest defense budgets. Moreover, both countries are
intertwined economically with China holding considerable American debt and the US importing vast amounts of Chinese goods. China’s bulk purchase of US securities has created an environment where it owns more than $1.5 trillion in American debt (Taplin, 2017, B1-B12). It would not be in either country’s best interest to see the other decline or even fight a war against the other. With this as the underlying economic backdrop, many points of friction still exist militarily, politically, and even economically. Much of the friction can be distilled to the relative levels of power of each country and the increasingly transitional nature of this dynamic.

China’s economic and military prowess has been growing in the past two decades with increased desire to expand its influence outside of its borders. While American economic and military prowess is still strong, American desire to project influence upon the world as it once has is receding. In a classic transitioning power dynamic, China is seeking a greater role in the world while the US is willingly and in some cases unwillingly ceding it. As Robert Gilpin described in Hegemonic Decline Theory, when one country becomes unable to provide a leading role in the world and another power rises and begins to take the reins, a hegemonic war will take place to correct the disequilibrium (Danilovic, 2002, 79). According to Gilpin, it is the fundamental change in the system that determines the evolution and an “unstable system is one in which economic, technological, and other changes are eroding the international hierarchy and undermining the position of the hegemonic state” (Gilpin, 1988, 592). This theoretical framework would suggest a conflict between the US and China unless the disequilibrium is addressed to correct the underlying notions of inequality.
While still growing today, the American economy is not consistently expanding at the 3% rate that it had for many years. In the post-WWII era, the US economy averaged 3.4% annual growth from 1948-2008 (Gramm and Solon, 2017, A17). During the Obama presidency, the US economy grew at only 1.47% and the CBO cut its 10-year growth forecast to 1.8% per year (Gramm and Solon, 2017, A17). Putting this in perspective, the US economy grew at 4.2% annually from 1820-1889 and 3.7% from 1890-1948 (Gramm and Solon, 2017, A17). The US may never see sustained 3% or higher growth again whereas China seems to be holding steady with its high-level growth. In fact, China’s share of world GDP growth has hovered above 30% for the past eight years (Taplin, 2017, B12). The economic growth and modernization of China is inexorable and will undoubtedly have a strategic effect.

The United States is caught in a challenging spot between the historical China containment policies of the past six decades and more recent overtures of engagement. Even as the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations began to look at new ways to engage with China around shared causes such as anti-terrorism measures, economics, and North Korea, the vestiges of containment of yesteryear still abound. Both administrations pivoted back and forth several times depending on the state of events. Obama’s pivot back to Asia was one such highly deliberate and visible change to comfort American allies in Asia and let them know that the US would not grant China free reign.

Complicating the relationship further, policies of engagement abounded in economic areas while containment generally appeared in military or political matters.

Today’s simultaneously disparate overtures of containment and engagement by the US can be seen in America’s recent setting of a schedule of naval patrols in the South
China Sea while asking China for assistance in dealing with a nuclear North Korea. The freedom of navigation operations (or fon-ops) programmed by the US Navy to check Chinese claims and build-up in the South China Sea represents containment vibes while engagement appears in the encouragement of China to be a good partner and halt North Korea’s rogue nuclear testing (Lubold and Page, 2017, A1).

For its part, China is also sending mixed messages to the US. Breaking with traditions of opposing nearly all US actions in the UN Security Council, China voted for an American resolution against Bashar and Syrian chemical weapons. This act provided a semblance of partnership and alignment on higher ideals. However, China continues with its state-affiliated cyber-attacks against American industry, blue-sea Navy build-up, and island creation in the South China Sea. These developments present China in a less than friendly demeanor to the US.

Muddying the relationship waters with the US further, China recently entered into an *entente* with Russia. In October 2017, China conducted major war games with Russia in a highly visible affront to the US. This exercise resulted in eight days of Sino-Soviet joint land and sea drills focused on defending ships from attack by air or other ships. While no formal military treaty exists, this largescale planning on equipment usage and techniques represents a “de facto alliance” between Russia and China according to Vasily Kashin, a military expert and China specialist (Grove, 2017, A8). Moreover, since 2014, Russia has significantly increased its advanced defense equipment and technology sales to China to include Russian jets and surface to air missiles (Gabuev, 2017, A17). In the spirit of reciprocity, China has ramped up its investment in Russia’s economy. The newfound Sino-Russian partnership has also put the US in the tough spot with respect to
North Korea. While the US continues to pressure China to influence North Korea’s nuclear behavior, Russia is free to defend North Korea and operate in places where China’s hands are tied by its economic partnership with the US (Gabuev, 2017, A17).

This containment versus engagement dynamic is nothing new to how the US has approached the Sino-American relationship. In his recent book *From Truman to Trump: The Great Divide over China*, Kevin Peraino noted a continual, historic tension between the two camps in the US Government. The first group supporting containment, “assumes that US-Chinese friction is inevitable and seeks to resist China’s rise [by] buttressing the countries along China’s periphery, economically and militarily” (Peraino, 2017, C2). The engagement group prefers the encouragement of business and cultural ties and “attempts to win its cooperation on global issues like North Korea and climate change” (Peraino, 2017, C2). In a classic example of carrots and sticks in the geo-political chess game, the US appears to have used both rewards and punishment at different times with respect to China and continues that approach today.

Peraino noted that even as far back as the Truman administration, these two groups in the US Government opposed each other with neither ever truly succeeding. In a historical example, General Claire Chennault, the former commander of the Flying Tigers during WWII lobbied for a hostile encirclement of China with respect to covert operations and the creating of a “belt of resistance” around China. On the other side, Truman’s Ambassador in Nanjing, John Leighton Stuart, a former missionary in China, lobbied the US Government to see China as a land of opportunity to expand the American economy and spread Christianity (Peraino, 2017, C2). In the end, the 1940s witnessed both perspectives failing to achieve lasting ascendency. Yet, the two camps
remain entrenched and the theoretical debate continues to this day within the US Government.

**Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces**

A closer examination of the Sino-American relationship would show that there are both centripetal forces that are pulling the countries together but also centrifugal forces that are pulling them apart. These opposing forces make the designation of China as a friend or enemy of the US extremely difficult with the clichéd *frenemy* term often used by politicians and pundits. The relative economic decline of the US and rise of China with the US receding in its desire for world influence is prompting China to desire a larger share of the proverbial international pie. This is contributing to the forces pulling the nations apart. However, the nations have become so intertwined with respect to their economies that it would difficult to conceive a war between the two (Morgan, personal communication, 22 October 2017).

Even if these centrifugal and centripetal forces were to offset each other at the systemic level (and this is big *if*), domestic factors in the US could serve as the tie breaker. Alan Wolfe noted that the rise and fall of the Soviet threat during the Cold War was more attributed to domestic factors in the US than by the actions of the Soviet military. Domestic factors in the US today could similarly break the systematic “tie” and determine the outcome in the current Sino-American relationship. The key is to identify which forces of domestic subjectivity could arise in the US to bias threat narrative creation and ripple through notions of China threat. Digging into these set-up conditions
will shed light on how faulty threat narratives spur inflated notions of threat against China.

**Sources of Bias**

Two primary sources of bias exist in the American domestic environment today: 1) the substantiation of the US Defense Budget, and 2) a growing anti-China Lobby. These sources are systemic in nature and create a level of subjectivity that influences narrative creation and ultimately narrative and threat acceptance.

**DoD Budget Justification**

The US Defense Budget is the largest in the world and outpaces the second largest budget by nearly three times. At $611 billion, the 2017 DoD budget is roughly equivalent to the next nine largest national defense budgets combined including second place China’s $215 billion budget (Schoen, 2017). Some experts have posited that a state actor threat is a requirement to sustain such a large US budget. Some have also noted the difficulty in rationalizing such a large American defense budget on a relatively small number of Islamist extremist fighters alone (Fingar, personal communication, 10 March 2017). The sustenance of such an extravagant budget requires an adversary with capabilities that are generally in the same ballpark as American capabilities. In other words, an adversary without a blue-sea Navy or reinforced combat divisions would diminish the need for American aircraft carriers or squadrons of M1 Abram battle tanks.

A force structure designed to battle a primary adversary of ISIS or the Taliban would be relatively inexpensive and include up-armored, light infantry vehicles and helicopters instead of hugely expensive $150 million F22 Raptors. The military industrial complex, however, applies immense pressure on keeping the viability of its programs
intact. These large military programs would not exist without a global peer—or at least the appearance of one. A primary state actor threat is necessary to present at least a visage of danger.

While a large defense budget certainly aids US job creation and preservation as well as instills patriotism through a top-notch military, it also spurs and supports US investment. David Nelson, a chief economic strategist at Belpointe, has noted the value of defense stocks and how they can act as a “good insurance policy for investors” (Nelson, 2017). Whereas markets can get rattled and portfolios disturbed by global calamities, terrorist attacks, or wars, defense stocks actually increase 15% at times of military conflict and can shield against the bad times. Nelson noted some of the major players here who insulate against downturns such as Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman, Raytheon, Boeing, and General Dynamics. With Lockheed driving the F-35 program and Raytheon’s Tomahawk cruise missiles recently used to neutralize the Syrian chemical plants, global events have contributed to defense companies’ growth to the benefit of investors (Nelson, 2017). A smaller defense budget would detract from this economic upside.

As another data point to justify the large defense budget, the US Government appears to be revealing more about China’s military intentions with respect to the US than it has in the past. Alex Gallo from the Center for Strategic and International Studies has noted that the Pacific Command and US Cyber Command have recently started sharing more in-depth information in posture statements around threats posed by China (Gallo, personal communication, 7 October 2017). In the past, these statements were more banal in nature and seldom revealed details of threats. The additional sharing of
Chinese threat vectors represents an increase in the level of transparency that paints a significant threat picture from China. In addition, the US Government attempts to expose a greater China threat when it allows the media such as CNN reporters on US ships and planes to document China’s reactions and even provocative behavior in international waters and airspace (Gallo, personal communication, 7 October 2017). The US Government’s posture statements as well as increased emphasis to publicly highlight impending threat helps to further military threat narratives around China.

Illustrating this point, CIA Director Mike Pompeo said in July 2017, “I think China has the capacity to present the greatest rivalry to America of any of those over the medium and long term” (Pickrell, 2017). He went on to say, “If you look at [the Chinese], they are probably trying either to steal our stuff, or make sure they can defeat it” (Pickrell, 2017). Finally, he noted their cyber espionage and spying efforts by saying its part of China’s mission “to reduce the relative power of the United States vis-à-vis their own country, and one of the ways they do that is through these active measures, these spying efforts” (Pickrell, 2017). This transparency from the head of the CIA about China’s intent and capabilities is indicative of a new primacy of threat that has been bestowed upon China by the US Government. While the General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has cited Russia as the greatest current threat to the US, he assessed that China will be the greatest threat by 2025 (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017; Browne, 2017). While there is a sense that Russia and even North Korea are proximate threats, China is looming.

A narrative is developing and growing around China’s quest for intelligence on the US. The US has accused China of stealing stealth radar and engine info on American
defense programs such as the F-35 Lightning Fighter and the F-22 Raptor (Pickrell, 2017). Moreover, Chinese businessman Su Bin recently pleaded guilty to stealing military secrets on US fighter jets (Pickrell, 2017). Former CIA Director and NSA Director Michael Hayden in an interview by Bloomfield offered very strong statements on Chinese espionage. Hayden said, “I step back in awe at the breadth, depth, and sophistication of the Chinese espionage efforts against the US” (Hayden, Stimson Center, 2010). He also said that the Chinese know how the US fights and if there are any gaps, the Chinese will buy, build, or steal” to remedy the situation (Hayden, Stimson Center, 2010). Between the public cases and public statements by US officials, the narrative is certainly growing that China is out to collect intelligence on the US to achieve parity with or surpass American capabilities.

As discussed earlier that the IC’s definition of threat is the combination of intent and capabilities of a country to inflict harm, China’s capabilities are certainly growing. While the intent is more difficult to ascertain in an objective sense, the mere fact that China is building its capabilities to either match or surpass those of the US and actively collecting intelligence to support its endeavor, could be viewed as an indicator of intent. Said another way, China’s actions to acquire and build military capability to exceed American capability is not only a measure of capability but also intent (Gallo, personal communication, 7 October 2017). This measure of intent is seen not only with tangible military capabilities but also military infrastructure growth in the entire Asian region.

A key narrative in China’s growth strategy is its mounting influence in Asia. It does this through a series of maneuvers to include island building in the South China Sea, constructing a blue-sea navy, and building bases in foreign countries. China has furthered
a “9-dash line” maritime claim where nearly 90% the South China Sea is considered part of China (Perlez, 2016). To the rancor of many Asian countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippians, and Vietnam, this policy represents no less than aggression. It is China’s own Monroe Doctrine. Not only has China’s island building impacted the marine environment, affected fishing and oil exploration, and endangered shipping, but it has increased the scope of China’s sovereignty in Asia. A 2016 Hague Special Tribunal determined that China’s claim of sovereignty over the waters had no legal basis. China, however, has not stopped its island building and faces international condemnation by rebuking international law as well as increased US Naval scrutiny.

A sub narrative to China’s growing influence in Asia is its attempt to align with American allies in Asia to subvert American influence. A potential Chinese alignment with countries like Philippines could begin to strip away American allies in the region. For example, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte recently applauded China for opening up talks around a code of conduct in the South China Sea (Otto, 2017, A8). In return for the Philippines not pushing for enforcement of the tribunal’s island building decision, China has pledged billions in economic and business deals. China is encouraging bilateral discussions instead of a multi-lateral international agreement on the space (Otto, 2017, A8). China believes it can negotiate with individual countries better than the collective. In the recent Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) Summit, both China and the US promised greater trade and investment to the members of Asean. Political courting is in full swing by both countries in a space where the US has formally enjoyed success. This would certainly support the narrative of America’s decreased role in the region if these relationships change and China can court former American allies.
China’s $1 trillion “Belt and Road” infrastructure program also speaks to its growing influence in the world (Browne, 15 November 2017, A8). Under President Xi’s original initiative called “One Belt and One Road,” he has orchestrated a push for China to assume a larger role in global affairs. The immediate influence zone, or belt, is in areas formerly part of the silk road. However, this would only be the launching point. Infrastructure, transportation, and energy are the keys to this expansion with the goal to increase China’s influence and economic growth throughout the 21st Century.

The US also has concerns about China’s growing influence in the future of telecommunications and its efforts to build a 5G network. The 5G network is the fifth-generation wireless network which is nearly ten times faster than the current 4G network (Talev, Epstein, Shields, 28 January 2018). China is attempting to roll out a global 5G mobile standard in 2020 and be one of the world leaders in this area (Perez, 2 October 2017). Not to be outdone, the US Government is also considering a secure 5G network of its own to protect against Chinese spying and cybersecurity concerns. The proposed US Government-run 5G network is attracting widespread condemnation from American private industry, such as AT&T and Verizon, which is trying to build its own 5G network by 2020. This telecom environment resembles an arms race of sorts with private and government actors in both China and US colliding with each other and raising American suspicions of China in both a global competition and national security sense.

The semblance of a Chinese military threat allows for the continuation of a defense budget that is rapidly approaching $700 billion. The justification of such a large budget is difficult when looking at the relative military power of other countries. Even the state actor threats noted by Bloomfield and Harvey from Russia, Iran, or North Korea
are all relatively low compared to China when viewed purely through military spending – $69 billion, $13 billion, $10 billion respectively versus $215 billion (Schoen, 2017; Craw, 2017). Based on military necessity, China presents the most capable and comparable competitor to the US. Using a boxing analogy, while the weight classes may be different, at least China affords the US a potential sparring partner by which Americans could build a rivalry.

The need to maintain a large defense budget helps position an inflated threat of China. To be clear, the need to maintain could also center on American jobs, military manufacturing, and technology development in addition to the altruistic defense of the nation. With the idea of a smaller budget being tied to a lack of patriotism, maintaining current defense budget levels necessitates a robust threat from China.

It is interesting to compare the need today for an inflated China threat as a justification of a large defense budget to the need in the 1950s for an inflated China threat. The practice of threat inflation today is reminiscent of a similar phenomenon in the 1950s and 1960s when the CIA furthered an inflated China threat to justify the need for covert operations as well as their subsequent failures. With covert operations at their apogee in the 1950s and their overwhelmingly unsuccessful results, the Agency inflated the China threat to save face with its relatively new organization. As outlined in Chapter 6, the Agency produced threat narratives around an inflated China threat even while China struggled to rebuild following WWII and its protracted civil war. The CIA’s need for a larger China threat in the 1950s represented a systemic bias similar to how the defense budget necessitates a significant China threat today.
The systemic-level bias in the 1950s created an environment where certain, more hostile threat narratives on China found their way into government assessments and onto the desks of the decision makers. Similar system-wide bias could be influencing the entire gamut from intel hands to policy wonks to Americans operating outside of the government space. From Raytheon advertisements today on the radio, to the media which finds selling a threat easier than selling a “all is fine in the neighborhood” story, America’s domestic surroundings are painting a picture. Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of think tank conferences on China cyber threat or China’s quest for world dominance, is yet another venue reinforcing this systemic bias and acceptance of the threat narratives by ensuring that they are top of mind. In a marketing sense, these touch points create higher scores in the un-aided “threat” awareness (instead of brand awareness), for the China threat.

**The Anti-China Lobby**

A strong undercurrent exists today in the US around the mindset of “if its Chinese, its bad.” This movement is using the guise of economic protectionism as well as national security. From the painting of the “made in China” slogan as anti-American and unpatriotic to the narratives that China is buying up key US resources such as American ports, the storyline dice are being cast. Supporting this notion of a growing Chinese business take-over in the US, in 2009 Chinese companies spent about $30 billion on overseas mergers and acquisitions and by 2016 this number had grown to over $200 billion (Back, 2017, B12). As China’s export industry took off in the early 2000s, China needed a place to invest to prevent the yuan from rising. China chose US Treasury bonds and luxury real-estate. In addition to the massive levels of US securities that China began
to buy, the most notable luxury real estate purchase was by China’s Anbang Insurance
Group of the famous Waldorf Astoria in New York for $2 billion (Back, 2017, B12). The
transfer of the classic American property to a Chinese company helped to push this group
of Sino-phobes to interpret all China’s actions with a tinge of negative intent. This
undercurrent is the manifestation of a modern-day “anti-China Lobby” that is the
antithesis of the China Lobby of the 1930s which was composed of Sinophiles.

One of the most vocal anti-China Lobby activists today is Representative Robert
Pittenger (R., NC). Similar to his American missionary predecessors in China in the 19th
Century, Pittenger spent time in the 1970s in China as part of Campus Crusade for Christ.
However, while Pearl Buckman, Henry Luce, and Franklin Roosevelt as part of the
original China Lobby in the early 20th Century viewed China as a potential bastion for
Christian and democratic values in Asia, Pittenger has adopted the antithetical view. He
has said that China’s economic and military growth transpired while rejecting human
rights and religious freedom and can no longer be overlooked by the US as in the past. He
has also said that America has “rebuilt [China’s] economy through our consumption. And
we took a garden snake and made it into a boa-constrictor” (O’Keefe, 2017, B1-B2). This
anti-China Lobby truly believes that China is out to get the US and the US must fend off
the onslaught.

Recently, Pittenger and the anti-China Lobby have fought against several key
China initiatives in the US. In the financial sector, this group has opposed a $1.2 billion
deal where Ant Financial Services would buy American payments firm Money-Gram as
well Chongqing Casin Enterprise buying the Chicago Stock Exchange. In the economic
and national security realm, Pittenger has also opposed the $1.3 billion sale of American
Lattice Semiconductor to Chinese government-backed Canyon Bridge Capital Partners (O’Keefe, 2017, B1-B2). The prospects of an American semiconductor company being owned by China has spooked many in the anti-China Lobby and provided them with a rallying point. The anti-China Lobby consolidates all that is negative in Chinese deals in the US and publicizes it for the American public to see and fear. It characterizes the actions of China as threats whether in an economic, military, or political sense. The base of this bias is so strong that it has characterized opposing views as unpatriotic—a not too dissimilar notion from the bias that McCarthy introduced with the fears of communism in the 1950s. In both cases, the fear-mongering tapped into patriotic zeal to support their cause and denigrate any opposing sentiments.

One of the key biases in the US Government in the post WWII years was against anyone who viewed China and Mao as capable and anything more than a flash in the pan. This persecuted group believed that Mao and Communists were consolidating power and would ultimately remain in power for a considerable time. Their insightful—and accurate—views were conflated with sympathy for Communism and most of these individuals were fired. As noted in Chapter 6, key China-hands in the US IC were sidelined because of their views in this highly-charged period. This bias created only one-sided perspectives on China, many of which were wildly wrong based on hindsight. In a not too dissimilar bias today, those opposing the anti-China Lobby are deemed unpatriotic. Extrapolating this view, those who oppose the blocking of the Chinese acquisition of American firms like Lattice are being painted as un-American. Whereas McCarthy was able to tell a story and “represent” patriotic Americans, Pittenger and the anti-China Lobby have secured a similar license.
The key economic threat narrative professed by the anti-China Lobby is that China is cheating economically, stealing American trade secrets through cyber espionage and during manufacturing in China, and manipulating currency. A storyline exists that China is not playing fairly with how it treats American businesses and the overall operating structure of the economic relationship.

The Trump Administration is currently investigating some of these Chinese trade practices where it has accused China of improperly pressuring US high tech firms to provide intellectual property (Schlesinger/Dou, 2017, A10). Section 301 of US trade law allows the President to penalize a country for unfair trade practices; however, many American companies are not sharing information with the US Government in support of its litigation for fear of retribution by the Chinese Government (Schlesinger/Dou, 2017, A10). The trade probe has stalled because of a lack of evidence of any wrongdoings of China.

This narrative is interesting because it supposes China’s proactive planning to lure American companies into China to steal their IP and recreate the products with their own state-owned companies. In some cases, however, there are actual agreements to share technology that American companies enter into by going to China and gaining access to Chinese markets. Many large American companies see this practice as the price for doing business in China. Andrew Brown, author of the “China’s World” section in The Wall Street Journal, highlighted the car industry when he described China’s master plan was always to “invite a few global auto makers to form joint ventures with state firms, absorb their technology and then go it alone” (Brown, October 2017, A10). GM and Ford have experienced this plan first hand. The notion that this practice of China “absorbing”
American firm’s IP is not limited to the auto industry, and the narrative of China stealing secrets is now commonplace in American media outlets.

Finally, there is a narrative around China manipulating its currency to make its products more attractive in American markets. Advocates of this narrative state that China purposely drops the value of the yuan so that its exports to the US are sold at a lower cost. While President Trump has said that he could label China as a currency manipulator thereby allowing the US to apply a tariff on Chinese goods, he has not done so and many believe he will not pursue this course (Morgan, personal communication, 22 October 2017). Nonetheless, the narrative exists that China is artificially suppressing its currency in order to cheat in the American markets. These narratives round out the meta narrative that China is an enemy.

**Sources of Transparency**

We will now turn our attention to those sources at the systemic level that are providing transparency today to the Sino-American relationship. These sources directly influence increased transparency around intent and help to provide a clearer picture of objective notions of potential threat or lack thereof.

**Cultural Exchange**

Countering the systemic biases of the DoD budget justification and the anti-China Lobby are several sources of transparency at work on the American view of China. One source of transparency is the cross-cutting *cultural exchange* today between the younger generations in China and the US. This exchange is truly at the cultural level and spans not only pop culture such as music, food, and movies, but also higher education and the
linkages to entrepreneurial start-ups based on connections made in the universities. Narratives abound in this space about how American and Chinese cultural exchanges are growing.

One such narrative in this space centers on the increasing levels of Chinese elite youth attending higher education institutions in the US. The secondary effects of this development are the growing personal friendships between American and Chinese youth as well the budding business partnerships that grow after they leave school. One expert has noted that many more Chinese are studying in the US today than in the past and are developing friendships and subsequent business partnerships with Americans (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017). Chinese elites are sending their children to study in the US in droves. According to the Institute of International Education, the Ivy League is currently enrolling eight times more Chinese students than a decade ago (Chu, 2017, C1). This shared education between US and Chinese students has become a primer to shared business ventures in the future, many of which are in Silicon Valley. These same Chinese students are instrumental today in leading Silicon Valley startups in “disproportionate numbers” according to Lenora Chu, author of a recent book on China’s education system (Chu, 2017, C1).

Illustrating a growing trend of Americans learning Chinese in the US, even President Trump’s grand-children are studying Mandarin. Arabella and Joseph Kushner performed a song and recited poetry in Mandarin for Chinese President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan at Trump and Xe’s first meeting at President Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort in April 2017. The children have been studying Mandarin since they were toddlers (Oppenheim, 2017). The impact of elite youths in both countries studying each other’s
languages, education systems, and cultures is hugely impactful to growing the partnership (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017).

A second narrative exists in the American fast food exchange space. While American fast food chains expanding to China is nothing new, the cultural exchange continues to strengthen as the wave grows. McDonalds and Starbucks have flocked to China in the past but today smaller American food retailers are testing their luck in China. The vast number of hungry customers is drawing smaller American chains like White Castle to China. White Castle recently opened two new restaurants in Shanghai and is trying to capitalize on a growing Western food appeal, rising desire for beef, and smaller serving sizes being in vogue for the younger Chinese (Ma, 2017, B2). Several trends of American food retailers that White Castle has also adopted is the addition of local tastes like the Spicy Tofu burger and Cherry Duck slider to a set menu.

American food retailers are benefiting from a cultural nexus where Chinese youth have seen the American food brands in American movies as well as growing individual purchasing power in China. For example, Xu Man in Shanghai had never heard of White Castle before he saw the 2004 American film “Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle” and was eager to check out the American food chain because of the movie (Ma, 2017, B2). American food retailers are also benefiting from a rise in the Chinese population earning more than 3,000 yuan (US $460) a month which is considered a threshold for when Chinese consumer habits change (Ma, 25 September 2017, B2). With the example of White Castle in China, we can see how cross-cultural exchange such food localization and interest, and a ripeness in the population both in earnings and taste acclimation can drive friendlier terms and commonality.
A third narrative around movies and music is yet another example of a Sino-American cultural exchange that is exploding. Some major motion pictures that are flops in the US go on to become wild successes in China (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017). For example, Universal and Comcast’s 2016 movie *Warcraft*, the largest ever video game adaptation, was a flop in North America making only $47 million, but earned $220 million in China (Mendelson, 2017). Another example is the 2017 Vin Diesel film *xx: Return of Xander Cage* which earned only $44 million in North America but was saved by its $134 million in China (Mendelson, 2017). Hollywood is also looking at ways to ensure movie success in both markets such as deliberately including a Chinese star in the film or considering product placement aimed at the Chinese market (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017).

Music is similar in the expansive potential that Chinese markets provide to American music labels. It is the idea that several marketing opportunities exist in the US and China where if one does not perform, the product can achieve redemption in the other. The more movies and music can parlay between the countries, the better the cross-cultural exchange. The 2017 film *Kung Fu Yoga* was made by Chinese producers, starred Jackie Chan, and had a mix of Chinese and English language and music throughout. It was truly a Sino-American collage of both cultures. Not only was the film an attempt at cross-cultural exchange, but it was also a Chinese propaganda film to push the Belt and Road theme to global markets (Schwartzel, 2017, A9).

This cross-cultural exchange today is very similar to what took place in the early 1970s between the US and China. From Ping Pong Diplomacy through the high level diplomatic meetings between Kissinger and Deng and Nixon and Mao, spending time
together had the de-escalating benefits of high-level meetings between leaders like the recent ones between the Obamas and Trumps and President Xi and Peng Liyuan. As Robert Suettinger, former National Intelligence Officer for East Asia noted, the entire dynamic of Sino-American relations changed in the 1970s because American leaders stopped viewing Chinese leaders as “distant, dimly perceived antagonists” and developed a personal relationship. Also, instead of relying on committee-derived intelligence reports written by “cautious generalists in the CIA headquarters,” Americans started to understand Chinese leaders’ opinions, goals and intentions (Suettinger, Tracking, xxvi). Just as 1972 was a watershed moment in improved discourse and cultural exchange, the 2000s and 2010s is a triumph in more open communications between leaders, constant contact between businessmen, and near ubiquitous product exchange.

**Common Cause**

A second, modern-day source of transparency is the development of a common cause. Today they are several causes that the US and China can coalesce around – mutually growing the economic pie, North Korea, and Islamic extremist terrorism.

There is this notion that partnership in some key areas can serve both the US and China well. While the commonality of objectives certainly does not align in all cases for both countries, there are areas in which objectives do overlap. This shared space on the Venn diagram of Sino-American interests is often described in the narratives of economic growth, combatting Islamic extremism, and keeping North Korea in line. By virtue of having similar interests or shared goals, these narratives have formed a basis for a semblance of Sino-American partnership. Similar to common Sino-American goals
against the Soviets in the late 1960s and early 1970s, goals today have served as a congealing agent for the two countries.

Economically, the US and China do better by partnering with each other. Economics 101 shows how the opportunity costs for the China to produce goods for the US allows American consumers to enjoy better prices while allowing Chinese economic growth. Further amplifying the benefits to the US, prices for US imports from China has consistently declined since the end of 2012 averaging a decrease of 2%. These lower cost Chinese imports also challenge American manufacturing to become more efficient as well as driving down inflation in the US (Taplin, 2017, B12). The US on the other hand has been able to market technologically advanced items in the vast Chinese markets. A technology transfer- some legal and some illegal – has also occurred because of this increased economic partnership.

The vastness of the Chinese consumer base of the future is enticing for American producers. Not only has the individual purchasing power of Chinese increased as seen by China’s GDP per capita as a percentage of the US GDP per capita growing from 8% in 2000 to nearly 30% in 2016, but the number of potential customers is skyrocketing (Taplin, 2017, B12). For example, a good indicator of a Chinese customer with means is that customer’s ability to buy a car. The number of private passenger vehicles in China has risen from 5 million in 2000 to over 125 million in 2015 (Taplin, 2017, B12). Thus, American auto manufacturers are seeing the world largest car market as the land of opportunity. American tech companies are also seeing the immense opportunity. For example, San Francisco based Airbnb has recently selected a new Chinese name, doubled its investment in China, and tripled its Chinese workforce in 2017 (Lin, 2017, B4).
Also, the influence of chambers of commerce and other organizations who lobby for the benefits of Chinese business interests in the US is growing considerably. For example, at Bloomberg Headquarters in New York City several years ago, the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce hosted a large event. The Executive Director of the Chamber championed bilateral economic relations between the US and China (Bloomfield, personal communication, 3 September 2017). The Chinese General Chamber represents hundreds of Chinese companies with subsidiary operations in the US. It was a good example of how the influence of China’s business groups in the US is extensive and expanding.

The trade imbalance, used to paint China in a negative light, is also a bit of a misnomer. According to international trade attorney Frank Morgan, the metric could be deceiving and is not as accurate as it is often portrayed. For example, the iPhone is imported from China and is therefore considered to be a product of China. But, nearly 30-40% of its research and development is from the US. Moreover, many other components are not Chinese in origin and come from Korea and other countries around the world. This piecemeal construction process makes the value of the phone not entirely Chinese although for the purposes of looking at trade imbalance, it is considered a Chinese product (Morgan, personal communication, 22 October 2017). This has led to an anti-Chinese bias even while the manufacturing of multi-component products in China should be viewed as a Sino-American trade success story.

Another indicator of shared goals, China appears to be moving more to the rule of international law with respect to intellectual property (IP) enforcement and economic dispute resolution. China has begun to make advances in IP protections since it sees the
benefits in bringing more international companies into its county (Morgan, personal communication, 22 October 2017). In a rather ironic example, China has also recently enlisted the support of the WTO in a grievance against the US. In the past before China was a WTO member, it would have generally employed extra-legal measures to combat the US in the economic space. Today, it is enlisting the support of the WTO to settle the matter. In one current grievance, China is disputing through the WTO the US application of fees against it with respect to its status as a non-market economy. To avoid dumping allegations, China was provided a period of non-market status to avoid the additional fees from the US when it joined the WTO. China contends that the US is wrongfully applying these fees (Morgan, personal communication, 22 October 2017). Instead of applying a reciprocal tariff on US goods or limiting American trade, it has taken the complaint to the governing body to seek a legal solution. This action in and of itself shows China’s greater adherence to international norms. The fact that active WTO disputes has risen steadily from about a dozen a year in the late 1990s to about 20 annually in 2010 to nearly 40 annually today should not be seen as a negative. On the contrary, it represents a movement from extra-legal, unilateral actions of China to the use of international governing bodies and norms (Schlesinger, 2017, A10).

Militarily, the US has leaned on China to assist with North Korea in containing its nuclear weapon ambitions. With dialogue between the US and North Korea historically unproductive, the US routinely asks China to pressure its ally to cease its nuclear program. For its part, China has exercised tacit cooperation on the matter for it too would prefer that North Korea does not grow its nuclear program. China is also in a better position to influence North Korea with its high level of economic cooperation as well as
military supply lines to Pyongyang. Moreover, China appears to be the only country that
Kim Jong Un seems to act in a rational manner around.

Also in the vein of national security, the US and China have struck an accord to
cooperate in the anti-terrorism world. Both the US and China have similar interests in
precluding Islamic extremists from exacting terror attacks on their soil. While ISIS and al
Qaeda have the US in their crosshairs, and Uyghur Muslim ethnic separatists in Xinjiang
target Beijing’s control. Due to this mutual Islamic extremist threat, there is a common
ground to share terrorist data base information to halt the terrorists who have been known
to drift between extremist groups. Both counties realize that closer cooperation between
China’s government and the FBI’s Terrorist Screening Center could provide the
necessary links to build out a sharable and highly productive No Fly list.

While Islamic extremist terrorism in the US has been well documented, China has
also struggled with terrorism. In western China, Muslim separatists are vying for an
Uyghur state, called either Uyghuristan or Eastern Turkistan. Extremely troubling for
China, the Uyghurs have formed associations with terrorist groups (Van Wie Davis,
2008). China issued an official statement in 2002 on “East Turkestan terrorists” and listed
groups allegedly responsible for terrorism in Western China including the East Turkistan
Islamic Movement, the Islamic Reformist Party Shock Brigade, and the East Turkestan
Islamic Party (Van Wie Davis, 2008). In 2007, a Chinese attack on an Uyghur training
camp in Xinjiang killed 18 suspected terrorists and provided evidence of ties to
“international terrorist forces” (Van Wie Davis, 2008). The desire by both the US and
China to build out a more comprehensive data base on international terrorism is a major,
common objective of the countries and a source of transparency and partnership.
**What Does It All Mean?**

When looking at domestic sources of bias and transparency today, you could draw parallels to an analogy using a water spigot. If you have a spigot signifying bias and one for transparency, the narratives that flow through these spigots influence threat perception either away from the objective threat truth or towards it. If the throughput of one of the spigots was increased, there would be a commensurate level of increased influence on perception. In other words, if both spigots poured into a tub, if the throughput of one was greater, the weighted level of influence would be higher in the tub for the more powerful spigot.

For example, if the anti-China Lobby increased its rhetoric and the DoD budget justification conversation monopolized the media, one could see how a preponderance of hostile narratives around China would propagate. The tub would be filled with enemy narratives on China. Humans are not immune to their surroundings and these threat narratives would influence them even as they attempt to avoid certain news outlets with purported angles of bias. This applies to those individuals in the US Government as well as the civilian world. Water-cooler conversations at work, at cocktail parties, or children’s sporting events on the weekend, are all venues for how narratives pass between people. As the spigot of systemic bias opens and individuals are influenced by the resulting narratives, subjectivity will increase as well as the China threat level.

Conversely, if the spigot of transparency opens wider based on a greater cultural exchange with China and a rallying around the common objectives of both countries, narratives of Sino-American partnership will result. Growing the economic pie,
increasing Sino-American cooperation with respect to rogue states, and a military semblance of alliance regarding halting terrorism would be the storylines of the day.

There is cause for optimism. Similar to how the anti-communist movement faded into the history books, the anti-China Lobby movement today could face a similar future. Americans realized in the 1960s that an ideological witch hunt was not productive to American progress or its values. Similarly, the anti-China Lobby is experiencing some of the same pressures today with its members starting to feel the repercussions of painting China solely as a threat. Cracks are starting to appear in the anti-China Lobby movement. In particular, Congressman Pittenger has already had a key donor stop funding when the Chinese-owned Smithfield pork-processing plant in North Carolina, which employs 5,000 people, began to flex its muscle against his anti-China policies (O’Keefe, 2017, B2). Moreover, Americans across the country are speaking out against how the anti-China Lobby is hurting American investors’ bottom line. A California-based portfolio manager at Seligman Investments wrote Congressman Pittenger saying that stopping the Canyon Bridge deal is hurting “thousands of US investors” (O’Keefe, 2017, B2). There is a feeling that the anti-China Lobby has gone too far in its characterization of the China threat. Its reminiscent of when McCarthy’s movement began to implode.

The weaponizing of an anti-China mentality and characterization of China as an existential threat is nonproductive and dangerous to national security in its own right. It paints with broad brush strokes a bias around China and obscures actual areas where hard facts can show that China could be threatening. For example, a dependence of the US military on Chinese microchip manufacturing is a substantiated threat with supporting facts. In 2011, Chinese microchips destined for US Navy helicopters were defective and
would have prevented them from firing missiles (Nidess, 2017, A15). After an investigation, the Navy believed the flawed microchips were unintentional but nonetheless highlighted a dependence on Chinese microchip manufacturing in many American defense and industrial systems. Also, China’s cyber-attacks from state-hacktivists against American firms is well founded at this point and poses a large, substantiated threat. The point is that if you say all Chinese actions, all Chinese mergers or acquisitions of American firms, or the all-encompassing role of Chinese manufacturing are threats to the US, you lose the ability to objectively focus on those areas that are actually dangerous. Why double down on the Chinese purchase of luxury American real-estate as a threat while actual threatening conditions exist in the defense and economic arenas?

As the bias of the anti-China Lobby could be fading, a major source of transparency is growing in the economic space of Sino-American relations. As both the US and China see a huge upside to economic growth of both countries through common objectives, this partnership in and of itself could drive friendly terms. A prime example of how this economic partnership is moving forward can be seen in the auto industry with two major American companies betting on China. In return, China is betting on the companies to assist with its technological growth and move towards a more environmentally conscious country.

American firm Tesla recently reached a deal with China to build a major factory in Shanghai’s free-trade zone. This deal will allow Tesla to produce electric cars in China and lower its costs while China would still apply the 25% import tax. Tesla which made more than $1 billion in revenue in China in 2016, is looking at the future growth of
100,000 vehicles in China by 2018 where it had delivered only 11,000 in 2016. China is also looking to allow only electric vehicles in the near future by mandating all producers in China to make electric vehicles by 2019. China sees its electric car market growing from 350,000 vehicles in 2016 to 7 million in 2025 (Jie, 2017, B1). It is a partnership where the American firm gets access to Chinese markets at lower costs and China gets access to new technology.

From China’s perspective, the partnership with Tesla also has important ramifications for its future governing strategy. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in late 2017, President Xi outlined how China will move towards becoming “moderately prosperous” by increasing welfare spending but also environmental enforcement and reeling in private industry which was polluting at alarming rates (Taplin, 26 October 2017, B1). As one of Xi’s pillars, the focus on electric vehicles is a joint American industry-Chinese government endeavor that will help China’s environment. Also, China is adopting a green growth index which is effectively saying that a certain level of economic growth can be sacrificed in order to “lower energy use, protect land, improve waterways and reduce air pollution” (Deng, 27 December 2017, A6). President Xi has acknowledged that rapid economic growth at the cost of the environment is no longer the path forward for China.

American auto giant Cadillac is now also betting on China. With its new President Johan de Nysschen, Cadillac’s sales in China are rising quickly even while they sag in the US. De Nysschen has noted that Cadillac’s growth strategy is to expand in China. He noted, “for us, the top priority is China. In China, it’s about rapid growth…so we invested very heavily into a state-of-the-art manufacturing plant” (Colias, 2017, B6).
Cadillac is putting its faith in the growing Chinese markets and China is looking to increase its technological transfer.

As Xi embarks upon his next term through 2022, the question will be whether the anti-China Lobby begins to grow louder in the face of this shared economic success. Party members recently approved the amending of the constitution to include “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a new Era” (Page/Wong, 25 Oct 2017, A1). Putting this in perspective, only Mao’s Thought and Deng’s Theory have every had a politician’s name associated with a Chinese philosophy. Xi did not hold any punches in the National Congress session by stating that China will become more involved in the world and grow its military. Also, with Xi being elevated to the ranks of Mao and Deng, his popularity is allowing him more latitude beyond the rule of committee as in the past.

The question is one of timing for China. Deng’s famous maxim around China’s quest for modernity stated, “Hide your strength, bide your time” (Taplin, 26 Oct 2017, B1). The question is will Xi choose now to stop hiding and will this overt move impact the current forces of economic partnership. As Xi talked about military growth as part of a larger pomp and circumstance for the convention, the anti-China Lobby may use the opportunity to highlight his nationalistic actions as another reason to beware of China.

With competing narratives, the real question is which spigot—bias or transparency—will increase its throughput in the upcoming years. Various levels of interpretation and perception of these narratives against the larger backdrop of a hugely complex relationship muddies the waters. Will the next several years resemble the 1950s when biased narratives of China threat monopolized the scene or will it resemble the
1970s when transparency and talk of China partnership won the day? We are truly at a cross roads. We must understand that when we start to tilt one way or another due to artificial conditions, it is critical to get back on track in the quest for more objective threat assessment around China.
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