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Through a Dual Lens: Examining U.S. Foreign Policy's Impact on China Using Realism and Status Competition

Zapata Lucio, Carlos

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Bachelor Project – Thesis: Foreign Policy in Times of U.S. Decline

**Through a Dual Lens: Examining U.S. Foreign Policy's Impact on China
Using Realism and Status Competition**

Carlos Zapata Lucio

Student Number: s3154920

Professor. Carina van de Wetering

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Introduction

The complex and evolving relationship between the United States of America and China presents a critical case in international politics. As the pre-eminent powers, their relationship holds significant consequences for global stability, security, and economic order. An in-depth understanding of power dynamics is necessary for academics and policymakers seeking to understand contemporary political issues in the global sphere. The relationship between China and the United States is complex and topical, with agreements or conflicts between the two countries affecting practically every field from diplomacy to trade, security, and treaties. The nature of the Sino-American relationship, however, significantly shapes how other countries perceive and react to China's global role and influence. Most theories about the two superpowers focus on competing interests in an anarchical world. A key concept within this realist perspective is the Thucydides Trap, which predicts conflict between rising and established powers. Furthermore, this study improves upon this by exploring the role of status competition in Sino-American relations. Whilst these frameworks provide valuable insights, they still overemphasize security, China's rise, and American primacy. In this thesis, I argue for a more nuanced perspective through the incorporation of status, specifically through status competition wherein states strive to close the gap between their actual and desired global position. Understanding how American foreign policy influences China's international status, while considering the challenges both countries face, provides invaluable insights to the field of international relations. Therefore, the research question guiding this thesis is *"How do U.S. foreign policy actions and decisions influence China's international standing."*

This question examines how foreign policy influences the international balance of power and the effects of status dilemmas, going beyond traditional power transition narratives by

incorporating status competition. Therefore, the theoretical framework continues to stem from realism and the Thucydides Trap, following with the vast majority of existing literature, but through the incorporation of status seeks to fill the knowledge gap left by realism's failed predictions on the Sino-American power transition. The analysis will utilize a comparative case study approach, drawing qualitative data from policy documents, academic journals, news reports, and statements. This allows for an in-depth understanding of how specific foreign policies connect to the central question through a framework analysis methodology. Ultimately, the thesis aims to aid international relations research by providing a deeper understanding of how U.S. decisions affect China's status.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into themes that will be explored after carefully selecting the most appropriate and relevant sources. Two main themes are identified in order to achieve this. First, the literature review examines the theoretical frameworks being used. Secondly, it examines China's internal and external challenges, to see how they may impact China's international standing. Data sources such as academic journals, official statements, policy proposals, and news reports will be used. This multi-pronged approach will contribute to a thorough understanding of the field. Critically analyzing past literature will help to address the knowledge gap of the failure of realist predictions on the power balance between the United States and China, through the incorporation of status competition.

Articles on Theory

The main theoretical framework underpinning this study is realism, specifically the power transition theory known as the Thucydides Trap. However, as stated in the introduction, realism has limitations, such as overstating security. So, considering the role of status in the

Thucydides Trap can help alleviate these. The primary sources used include Graham Allison's (2017) seminal work "Destined for War?", a comprehensive introduction to the Thucydides Trap and its consequences using a war simulation between the United States and China. Secondly, William Wohlforth's (2014) chapter "Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict" explaining the significance of status on the security dilemma also was a key source. Allison (2017) defines the Thucydides Trap as a "severe stress on the system" created by a rising power and the fear it instills in the dominant power (p. 11). This is due to the rising power's want for 'respect' on the international stage, which the dominant power perceives as 'hubris,' implying that the smallest spark can lead to armed conflict. To underscore this point, the author introduces Clausewitz's theory of the fog of war, which states that without all the facts and knowledge available, less than optimal solutions and actions will be adopted (pp. 11-13). Allison proceeds to conduct a detailed and extensive war simulation between the two powers to demonstrate the validity of his Thucydides Trap analogy. The simulation demonstrates the allure of realist theory within this relationship and field of study, as well as providing a solid foundation for future research. However, for its benefits and proponents, Allison overstates the significance of security and how easily conflict can spiral out of control. Duran (2023) builds on Allison's war simulation by evaluating specific conflict scenarios that can lead to escalating warfare as a result of the Thucydides Trap. Crucially, Duran introduces the concept of American decline and how it feeds into the trap, leading to increased tensions as the United States seeks to maintain its dominance (Duran, 2023, paras. 2-5). Alternatively, Duran agrees that conflict is not the only option, but that collaboration and engagement can be an alternative not considered within the constraints of the Thucydides Trap (Duran, 2023, para. 6). That perspective suggests a need to examine the relationship between the two powers beyond security. Though a simplistic article, in that it does

not deeply examine the Trap, it adds to Allison's more thorough work and, crucially, advances the idea that the Thucydides Trap may not be the best explanation for Sino-American relations presently.

Conversely, some disagree with Allison's assessment of Sino-American relations and the Thucydides Trap conclusion. Among these critics is Wolf (2017), who in his article "What the Thucydides Trap Gets Wrong" not only challenges Allison's position but also ignores the overall security dilemma. Wolf argues that the Trap is not a zero-sum game, implying that both rising and established powers can achieve security. He proposes that states can breakaway from the cycle of uncertainty by cooperating and rejecting the offense-defense dichotomy (Wolf, 2017, para. 2). He challenges realist theory by suggesting that states have ambitions beyond survival and security. He uses the example of Kaiser Wilhelm's desire for German international status and respect, which goes beyond basic security concerns. This challenges the core assumption of realism that states prioritize offense and defense. Furthermore, he argues that the Thucydides Trap, which is based on the offense-defense dynamic, is not the ideal framework for analyzing Sino-American relations (Wolf, 2017, para 3). Wolf proceeds to criticize Allison's conclusion that the United States and China will follow a standard power transition formula, providing two counterpoints. First, due to a reverse power transition, the United States continues to grow while China declines, and second, the timeframe for Chinese hegemonic ascension is too far into the future to consider at this moment (Wolf, 2017, para. 5). This article demonstrates the internal strife between academics, which is valuable for assessing U.S.-China relations in general. Through Wolf's perspective, the thesis gains a credible and valuable insight into how perhaps the Thucydides Trap is not the best way to go about researching this topic, despite being the dominant framework. In a similar vein, Holmes (2013) takes the same view as Wolf in his article,

“Beware the Thucydides Trap”, taking a more direct approach as opposed to Wolf’s more theoretical one. Holmes looks at how the British-American power balance was managed, as well as Britain’s successful conflict avoidance with Japan before the Second World War. Criticizing Allison’s focus on Anglo-German relations (Holmes, 2013, para. 6) he opines that the deals and diplomacy between Washington and Tokyo allowed for a reduction in tensions with London, freezing the Thucydides Trap spiral. He suggests that strategic engagement and diplomacy can mitigate tensions and armed power transitions. Through his research, we can learn how the United States and China can avoid a conflict as well as gain insights into how each view and are affected by each other’s foreign policy actions (Holmes, 2013, paras. 6-8). These articles highlight the limitations of realism and oversimplification of security and motivations. Through introducing status as a concept, an exploration into how status may influence foreign policy beyond security and survival can begin.

The secondary main article used is a chapter from Wohlforth’s (2014) book “Status and World Politics”. The author suggests that status should be included in existing security dilemma research. Wohlforth’s central claim is that conflict can occur when countries fail to gain recognition for their desired international standing (Wohlforth, 2014, p. 114). Furthermore, the author claims that his standard model of status competition can complement the established security dilemma. Arguing that competition for greater status, coupled with imperfect information, can lead to conflict, even among two security maximizing states, a situation not explicable under the security dilemma (Wohlforth, 2014, p. 118). Wohlforth then proceeds to highlight specific challenges to his status model. The anarchic nature of international politics incentivizes states to obscure their status. For example, China may portray itself as a developed nation to some and a developing nation to others, depending on the strategic advantage

(Wohlforth, 2014, p. 121). This manipulation creates uncertainty and complicates the security dilemma, as a state that takes actions to improve its position can be seen as a threat. Wohlforth further identifies systemic challenges. Unequal distribution of material capabilities and a limited amount of great power positions create conditions where status competition can escalate. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of units in the international system adds complexity, which is exacerbated when new states join or leave the system. Finally, Wohlforth argues that international norms cannot resolve status competition as states are unlikely to agree to rules that diminish their standing (Wohlforth, 2014, pp. 122-124).

Overall, both frameworks provide deep insights for this research and show the limitations of using a single theoretical framework. Not only will the frameworks aid in narrowing down the list of useful cases in order to research and answer the central question but will also allow for the incorporation of status competition as a critical factor. This approach addresses the identified knowledge gap and offers a more nuanced and complex understanding of Sino-American relations.

Chinese Standing and Tensions

The article by Shambaugh and Scissors includes analyses and recommendations on the directions in which the relationship between the United States and China could go. They begin by outlining how China has evolved domestically within the last few decades in order to compete with the United States, and follow that with a discussion on, how the United States can learn to live with a competitive China (Shambaugh & Scissors, n.d., p. 1). The authors recommend multiple yearly summits and multilateral meetings. Furthermore, they also advise that the global order take note of China's rise and begin incorporating and adapting the international system to reflect this. The focus on competition aligns well with the concept of status competition, where

states seek international recognition and influence. While the article lacks in-depth analysis, it provides several avenues of research into the relationship between the two powers as well as what policy the United States may employ in the future (Shambaugh & Scissors, n.d., p. 2).

The following articles discuss challenges that the Chinese will face affecting its international standing and how China responds to American foreign policy. Minzner's (2024) article on demographic decline and Luqiu's (2016) article on Personality Cults highlight key challenges that China is facing that impact its international standing and aspirations. Carl Minzner's (2024) article "China's Population Decline Continues", highlights China's demographic decline seen in recent decades. This is a very real challenge that China is currently facing that affects its international status. Low birth rates in the country can hinder economic growth and social stability, which will impact China's ability to project power and influence, thus limiting the scope of its international standing (Minzner, 2024, paras. 1-3). Luqiu's (2016) article "Reappearance of the Cult of Personality", provides an overview of cult of personalities, China's history with this phenomena, and associated risks. Luqiu states that China's current leader, Xi Jinping, is attempting to recreate Mao's cult of personality, putting the leader at the center of and synonymous with the nation. This has several effects, such as stagnating bureaucracy and stifling innovation hindering technological advancement (Luqiu, 2016, para. 15). Within the context of international status, should China fall behind in these crucial areas, it would undermine its ability to directly compete with the United States thus decreasing its standing (Luqiu, 2016, sec. 8). When coupled with Rachman's (2021) article "The Xi Personality Cult is a Danger to China", discussing how the challenges China is facing can be attributed to a cult around Xi and the legitimacy problems this poses. The base argument is that Chinese

economic slowdown and challenges faced by demographic decline can weaken public trust in Xi's leadership, something which is also discussed in Luqiu's article (Rachman, 2021, para. 13).

From both these articles, several themes and ideas emerge that can be used for the thesis' research. Firstly, that these internal Chinese challenges pose risks and consequences for China's international standing and affect foreign policy. Secondly, that this Cult of Personality arising around Xi has the ability to freeze and slowdown the China's internal dynamics causing problems in the system. These challenges and concerns culminate and are present in Brooks and Wohlforth's (2016) article "The Once and Future Superpower", they argue that due to these factors American primacy will continue and hinder Chinese growth (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp, 91-92). This is elaborated on through the claim that military might is no longer the main determinant of power, and it is more due to technological innovation, an area where the United States is further ahead than China (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 93). The main point that Brooks and Wohlforth make is that the Power Transition Theory of the 20th century is no longer applicable to modern day power competition (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 97).

These articles highlight the interconnected nature of Chinese internal challenges and how they will affect its international standing and foreign policy decisions. Declining populations affect economic growth and fuel societal unrest, which could undermine Xi's rule. This, in turn, affects the cult of personality attempting to be established, which also hinders innovation and efficient bureaucracy. These may culminate in either China adopting a more assertive foreign policy in order to uphold its current status or tempting the United States to seek a more containment-based strategy, which can lead to a status competition. These articles help fill the knowledge gap left by realism. The two superpowers have not devolved into armed conflict, as

per the Thucydides Trap. So, incorporating status into the framework can help explain the relationship between the two.

Theoretical Framework

What is the applicability of realism, status dilemmas, and the Thucydides Trap in regards to the complex relationship between the United States and China? The articles discussed show the limitations of realist theory, which emphasizes power and security concerns. This focus makes it difficult to predict the contemporary relationship between the United States and China. However, by incorporating status competition alongside realist theory, this thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap. Specifically, status competition aims to resolve this by emphasizing a state's pursuit of greater international influence and status, despite being security-maximizing. Therefore, whilst maintaining a realist framework but also incorporating status competition, the thesis can maintain a critical tone and analyze status.

The theoretical framework will be done in two sections, one focusing on realism, the Thucydides Trap, and why other frameworks are less applicable and the second focusing on status competition. Furthermore, beyond the operationalization of these frameworks, there are other 'themes' that have been identified in order to research the phenomena at play. The first two serve as a baseline to understand the Sino-American relationship: the focus of the relationship and the nature of the interaction. Furthermore, the other identified themes across the literature that will be useful for the analysis include: the specific actions being taken by the two superpowers with regard to their relationship; the economic impact and consequences of cooperative or antagonistic foreign policy; the challenges that will be faced by the two, and long term implications, if any.

Realism and the Thucydides Trap

The articles discussed earlier all provide the definitions for concepts being used across this thesis. Wohlforth (2014) provides all the concepts in relation to status and standing. Firstly, that status is the relative position of a state in relation to others (p. 123). Wohlforth then develops his standard model of status: if one state is dissatisfied with their position (meaning there is a gap between their desired and current status) and no other state is willing to provide recognition, a status dilemma will emerge. Similarly, that dissonance between desired and actual status is called status dissonance (p. 117). According to Wohlforth, a status dilemma is where states could only be satisfied with their status if they had perfect information. Without this, leaders may conclude that their status is under threat. In an attempt to confirm their status, they may be seen as undermining other states' position. Realism is a prominent school of thought and philosophy within International Relations, predicating national interest, anarchic state of international relations, power dynamics, and survival of the state as the main pillars of research and understanding the world (Zalta et al., 2010., pp. 1-3). Allison (2017) provides the concepts relating to the Thucydides Trap, namely, that it is a system in which a dominant power fears rising powers and, thus, escalates to conflict (p. 11). In this context China, who has witnessed rapid growth, is seen as the rising power whilst the current world hegemon, the U.S. is the dominant power. The benefits of using realism for the thesis come primarily from two directions. Firstly, it presents a wholistic picture of the power and economic competition between the two superpowers as outlined in the U.S. Strategic Directive (Trump White House 2020, pp. 1-2). Secondly, the realist school and Thucydides Trap provide a basis for analyzing conflict that may occur between the two leading countries due to a power transition (Minzner, 2017, para. 8). It should be noted, as mentioned in the literature review, that realism, and the Thucydides Trap are

not without drawbacks or challenges. They tends to overemphasize security, the incentive for collaboration is non-existent, and relies heavily on past conflicts and history. It is due to these omitted factors that the realism failed to predict the current situation between the United States and China. However, despite this, the downsides do not detract from the benefits that realism and the Thucydides Trap bring to the research. By using realism in conjunction with status competition whilst keeping in mind its limitations and actively levying them to the research's advantage, a clear and meaningful analysis can be made.

Although other frameworks, such as liberalism and constructivism could provide distinct points of interest, realism would still provide the basis for a richer analysis. Firstly, liberalism is a framework that emphasizes global cooperation and interdependence, two factors present and promoted within Sino-American relations. This is evidenced in Shambaugh and Scissor's (n.d.) recommendations for future research. While a liberalist framework offers valuable insights, it may understate the rivalry between the United States and China and crucially does not consider the possibility of status competition and only cooperation, as that is one of the main tenets of liberalism. This is due to the fact that states are incentivized to hide their true status from the international community and any action taken to change this can be construed as a change in the status quo leading to conflict, thus the liberal framework could not exist under these conditions. Secondly, constructivism holds merit due to the fact that status is a socially constructed concept with objective consequences, though it would be difficult to apply it while accounting for the wide ideological gap between the United States (a democratic nation) and China (an authoritarian one). Concurrently, constructivism, a theory emphasizing shared norms and identities, provides valuable insight into international relations, though does not fully capture the complexities of Sino-American relations. Considering Wohlforth's status model, which states

that countries compete for hegemonic status, what are the implications for understanding Sino-American relations? Within this context, the United States and China, both vying for this hegemonic standing, create a significant challenge to a core pillar of constructivism, the need for shared norms and identities. Therefore, whilst realism has its shortcomings, it provides a better overall explanation and possibility for research than liberalism and constructivism. Furthermore, with the incorporation of Wohlforth's status model, it may add a deeper dimension to both realists thought and the Thucydides Trap to explain contemporary Sino-American Relations more accurately.

Incorporation of Status Competition as a Framework

Incorporating status into the framework will firstly aid in distinguishing this research apart from the pre-existing literature on the topic as well as filling the knowledge gap identified. Status competition can help answer the question of why security-maximizing states engage in conflict and create a security dilemma. This is done through the framework developed by Wohlforth on his research into the effects of status in international relations and is then further refined and tied to U.S.-China relations by Wang (2019) and Pu (2019). Wohlforth (2014) defines status as a recognized position in a social hierarchy and relative to other states (p. 121). Furthermore, he creates his standard model of status competition, outlining that when a state is dissatisfied with their current international standing, it can lead to status dissonance. When a dissatisfied state seeks to improve its position, other states may view this as an attempt to shift the status quo and balance of power, resulting in a status dilemma and conflict (Wohlforth, 2014, p. 118). When applied to the relationship being studied, China may be driven by a desire for recognition and influence over power, which means the relationship is one of status dilemmas and not security dilemmas. Wang (2019) dives deeper into Wohlforth's article by specifically

highlighting status dilemmas and the role of misperception. He argues that a lack of understanding about state's motivations will exacerbate the security dilemma and assertive actions taken by China to enhance their position, which can be seen as a challenge by the United States. even if China's intention was for security and not for overthrowing American dominance (Wang, 2019, p. 53). Similarly, actions taken by the United States aimed at maintaining regional peace in the area could be viewed by China as stunting its rise, thus status competition becomes a zero-sum game when it need not be (Wang, 2019, p. 55). Applying this to the theoretical framework established by Wohlforth will aid the thesis, particularly in understanding the dynamics of the current power transition and Chinese actions towards the United States regarding regional flashpoints. Pu (2019) takes the ideas and concepts from Wohlforth and applies them to Sino-American relations in the Indo-Pacific, stating that both nations are locked in a cycle of mutual suspicion of each other's goals and dominance in the region. Pu proceeds to argue that while these concerns are reminiscent and have been studied under security dilemma research, the concept of status competition provides deeper insights. Misperceptions and uncertainty of each other's standing and actions can lead to conflict, despite the intentions being defensive rather than offensive (Pu, 2019, p. 31).

These refinements of Wohlforth's framework allow for a more nuanced understanding of status' significance to Sino-American relations, specifically within the Indo-Pacific. It also encourages a shift away from realism, allowing the thesis to explore not only material and security concerns, but also status dilemmas, and domestic pressures. Overall, Wohlforth provides a useful approach that supplements the existing realism framework for analyzing Sino-American relations. Wang and Pu refine the concept of status competition. Wang outlines status competition/dilemmas, and the role of misperceptions/miscommunications in exacerbating

tensions whilst Pu analyzes the Indo-Pacific through the perspective of status competition. Due to Chinese ambition and American hegemony the competition for status intensifies. The inclusion of these two articles adds to Wohlforth's theory and display why the status framework is valuable in understanding Sino-American relations and foreign policy implications. As a result, the joint framework between realism and status provides useful insights into the current power transition era, Chinese actions towards the United States, and the implication of foreign policy on status. So therefore, the thesis expects that cooperative U.S. foreign policy will enhance Chinese status whilst a competitive U.S. foreign policy will undermine it.

Research Design

The research design section includes a discussion of how the analysis will take place and what methodologies will be employed to answer the central question, "how do U.S. foreign policy actions and decisions influence Chinese international standing?" The thesis analyzes the complex relationship between U.S. foreign policy and Chinese status in the global order. A comparative case study will be used to analyze cases of Sino-American cooperation and competition through the use of a qualitative most similar systems design seen through the framework of status dilemmas and realism/Thucydides Trap.

A qualitative approach will be taken rather than a quantitative approach allowing the thesis to dive deeper into complex relationships of international politics and identify recurring themes in the cases being compared. When coupled with the comparative case design, it allows the thesis to analyze contrasting aspects of Sino-American relations as well as their effects on status and contribution to status dilemmas. A comparative case study allows for a nuanced understanding of Sino-American relations by delving into selected cases in order to capture the complexities of the international system (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 237–238). By contrasting

two cases, one can gain deeper insights and have a wider data range to work with than if a single case was chosen. Furthermore, as American foreign policy is diverse rather than monolithic, by employing a comparative case study, more of this diversity can be captured. Whilst more information on the specific cases selected will be elaborated later in the paper, they will fall under one of two categories, which constitute the overarching cases used. Firstly, cases on U.S.-China cooperation on a global scale will be considered; such cases could include events like the Paris Climate Agreement or health cooperation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These cases will be contrasted against those involving U.S.-China competition, such as the 2020 trade war or geopolitical rivalries in the South China Sea. These cases work within the context of a comparative case study using most similar systems design as they share the overarching context of a U.S.-China relationship but differ in the nature of the interactions: competition versus cooperation. Through this methodology a focused analysis of how U.S. foreign policy choices within these contexts influences Chinese standing and contributes to or alleviates the status dilemma will develop.

A simplified framework analysis methodology will be employed to analyze the data gathered and then compare. Thus, the data analysis will employ a thematic approach derived from the theoretical framework. From the data sources chosen on each of the cases, such as official documents and academic articles, relevant segments will be identified and incorporated into a matrix where themes are rows, and the columns represent the cases. Brief descriptions of each section will be used to capture the key arguments of each case (Goldsmith, 2021, p. 2063). Additionally, data obtained from non-academic sources (such as reports from international news agencies and regional media) can be employed to gain a more focused and regional perspective into the consequences of the cooperation/competition between the two countries. Once the

matrix has been built, using the theoretical frameworks in the thesis—realism and status dilemma—it will be analyzed to determine how U.S. foreign policy actions have impacted China’s standing. Data sources will be chosen on the basis of providing as accurate information as possible and attempting to avoid biased sources. Naturally, when utilizing official government reports and statements, achieving objectivity is challenging. However, incorporating a diverse range of academic and news articles can help alleviate bias issues. Key words used to find articles on the themes currently being explored include the following: U.S-China Competition/Cooperation, climate change agreements, manufacturing, trade war, and technological innovation. In terms of ethical consideration, it will primarily be essential to ensure that proper citation is used to avoid plagiarism and if any interviews with field experts or data sources from specialized organizations are used, to ensure any requests of privacy or credit are followed closely.

As with any research there will be limitations and advantages to the research method employed. The main drawback of utilizing a qualitative comparative framework research is subjectivity—a problem inherent to most qualitative methodologies, especially in interpreting and analyzing data. However, despite this, the open-ended nature of the qualitative design will allow for in-depth analysis of the themes and sources identified to draw out conclusions. As for a timeframe, it will include cases that have arisen since China began competing for hegemonic status at the beginning of the century, and more specifically, from 2010-2024. Overall, the research design being employed by this thesis will aid in creating a solid analysis of U.S.-China relations and status dilemmas through comparing two cases and seeing their respective consequences related to the balance of power and relationship.

Case Selection

The thesis analyzes the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Chinese international status through a comparative case study approach, focusing on two contrasting cases: Sino-American cooperation and competition. As a result, by explicitly comparing and evaluating these cases using a framework analysis, the study will aim to find common themes and extrapolate the effects of U.S. foreign policy on Chinese status. The selection criteria were based on three pillars: specificity, comparability, and relevance. Cases had to be specific events involving global U.S.-Chinese cooperation and competition. They also needed to ensure that both cases were sufficiently similar to one another to allow for comparability and proper analysis. Finally, the cases had to be relevant to the research question and show how U.S. foreign policy impacts Chinese status. Finding cases that fulfill these requirements should not be difficult, considering the many similarities in core Sino-American relations, despite their rivalry. Primarily, because the two states' economies are interdependent, any global action affects both countries. As a result, both nations seek nuclear proliferation and share concerns about terrorism. Finally, both consider foreign issues when making domestic policy decisions.

Case 1: Cooperation (Paris Agreement)

The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement exemplifies Sino-American cooperation on a global scale in the field of climate change. Its international consequences make it an excellent baseline. Despite their rivalry, both countries pledged to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, demonstrating a desire to collaborate. As a result, U.S. cooperation with a strategic rival may improve China's global reputation as a responsible player. As the rising power, China must prove itself to the international community, not the United States. Data for this case study will be

gathered primarily from documents discussing the Paris Climate Agreement and its consequences.

Case 2: Competition (2020 Trade War)

The 2020 Trade War between the United States and China reflects economic competition and puts pressure on the broader Sino-American relationship. The Trump administration's tariffs on Chinese goods, as well as China's retaliation, show the ever-changing nature of the relationship, which came after a decade of Sino-American collaboration. The rationale for this case in terms of Sino-American competition is that it exemplifies the two countries' economic rivalry, and China's retaliatory actions may have harmed China's international standing by lowering its image as a reliable trading partner and increasing scrutiny of its economic actions.

Methodology

The thesis focuses are on how U.S. foreign policy influences China's international status. This claim was analyzed using a comparative case study method, which involves contrasting cases to obtain results on the research question and hypothesis. Once the data for each case has been selected, a framework analysis will be performed to examine the information, identify common themes, and provide answers to the question. Naturally, the frameworks of realism and status will be used to analyze any findings as well as to guide the themes that are investigated in order to demonstrate why realism alone has not been effective in analyzing the current Sino-American landscape, but when combined with status frameworks can help illuminate the contemporary relationship.

The collected data for these cases can be classified into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, such as official government statements and original documents, provide

firsthand accounts and serve as the main source of information. Secondary sources, including academic articles and think-tank publications, provide analysis and interpretations of the primary sources, as well as broader contextual information. For the cooperation case, The Paris Agreement itself and government statements constitute primary sources whereas articles such as those from the Diplomat are secondary ones. The agreement itself outlines the specific contributions of all signatories. Whilst not explicitly detailing Sino-American cooperation, the thesis can assume areas of cooperation from its contents; given both nations signed the agreement, this indicates a willingness for cooperation. First, the agreement establishes a long-term vision on technological development and greenhouse gas reduction. Dedicated transparency frameworks are used to ensure compliance (United Nations, 2015, pp. 3-4). This is an excellent example of cooperation because China would need to open its doors to external actors, including the United States, proving it can be a reliable international partner. Finally, China and the United States agreed to provide financial aid to developing countries in article 9 (United Nations 2015, pp. 13-14). Again, this highlights Chinese and American commitments to work together for the alleviation of climate change. The cooperation between the two superpowers continued after signing the Agreement. Specifically, the document from the U.S. State Department details the contents of the meetings between Biden and Xi as well as the continued cooperation on climate between the two governments. It presents their continued commitment to the 2015 Paris Agreement, as well as their collaborative efforts to develop and implement green energy technologies, and transition towards a circular economy (U.S. Department of State, 2023, paras. 1–5). Despite recent tensions, this continued cooperation presents content for analysis on international standing, specifically in regard to, how U.S. engagement and cooperation with China is improving China’s international image and status. Furthermore, the article from The

Diplomat provides a contemporary perspective on climate change cooperation since 2015. The recent appointments of John Podesta and Liu Zhenmin as the American and Chinese climate envoys, further underscore the positive outlook on Sino-American cooperation. This renewed focus on collaboration on a significant global issue can potentially enhance China's international standing, demonstrating its commitment and responsibility as a main contributor to the issue (Zou, 2024, paras. 1-2).

Sources on the competition case of the 2020 trade war include the article by the Council on Foreign Relations, which details the events that lead to increased Sino-American competition and culminated in the trade war. Firstly, the result of moving production to China led to the loss of millions of American jobs. Additionally, China's State-led development model, characterized by limited economic transparency, has caused concerns among the international community. These factors have led to a potential decrease in Chinese status (Siripurapu, 2023, para. 2). These issues led to several American concerns, chief among them, currency manipulation and national security risks through sensitive technology acquisition. This culminated in Trump's tariffs on Chinese goods which marked the shift from the long-time cooperation seen during the Obama Administration to one dominated by competition (Siripurapu, 2023, sec. 4). These concerns that were levied against China leading up to the trade war are still applicable now and are a key reason for a decline in Chinese international status. This is reflected in the White House Strategic Approach to China, which states how the United States will respond to Chinese competition and an attempt to decouple from China. This dramatic shift in American foreign policy will have a ripple effect. American allied states may follow suit and thus negatively affect Chinese standing (Trump White House, 2020, paras. 3-6). The article by the Brookings Institute (2020) showcases the origins of the trade war as well as the costs of the war, finding that it was particularly costly

for the United States. In general, this resulted in a decrease in economic growth and a diversion of trade flows away from both countries (Denmark & Hass, 2020, paras. 3-4). Overall, while the United States initiated the trade war, it did so in reaction to a combination of issues, including concerns over intellectual property theft, China's State-led economic model, and perceived unfair trade practices. These concerns, as detailed in the CFR article, have contributed to perception of China as a strategic competitor, leading to increased tensions and ultimately, the trade war.

How will these two contrasting cases fit into the framework analysis in order to adequately compare them? By finding common themes across the articles in the two cases and subsequently adding them into the framework analysis matrix, it will allow for easier analysis of the of the cases and thus provide better results. Specific examples and relevant quotations from the case study sources will be incorporated within each cell of the matrix to illustrate how these themes play out in the contrasting cases. This analysis will allow for a comparison across the cases and contribute to answering the research question. However, the cases and sources chosen have some limitations that should be addressed. First, the thesis makes use of primary sources from the U.S. government, this naturally lends itself to a pro-American bias. This is exacerbated by the usage of purely English-language articles and sources and none from Chinese or Asian perspectives due to the language barrier. Beyond this, the limited scope of using only two cases may result in some selection bias. Both issues can be resolved easily in a larger and more comprehensive study.

Data Analysis

With the cases selected and an emphasis on determining whether U.S. foreign policy has an impact on Chinese standing, data must be analyzed using the aforementioned framework analysis methodology. The results will emerge from comparing the contrasting cases of Sino-American cooperation and competition, as identified by the analysis of the matrix, which sorts similar themes across the cases. The framework analysis will arrange the cases in the columns with the themes in the rows, allowing the cells to be filled with key information from the cases, which can then be analyzed, and inferences drawn from the collected and sorted data. This section will begin with the matrix followed by a discussion of the identified themes, before proceeding to the results.

Framework Analysis Matrix

Table 1

Framework Analysis Matrix for Analyzing U.S. Foreign Policy Impact on Chinese International Standing

Theme	Cooperation Case	Competition Case
Focus on Sino-America Relations	Addressing global climate change (U.S. Department of State, 2023)	Economic competition and strategic rivalry
Nature of Interaction	Collaborative Partnership	Antagonistic and competitive
Specific Actions	Joint commitments to reduce emissions. Technology sharing for clean energy developments. (U.S. Department of State, 2023).	Imposition of tariffs and trade barriers. Restrictions on investments. (Denmark & Hass, 2020)
Economic Impact	Potential for joint economic gains through green infrastructure projects. (U.S. Department of State, 2023)	Disruption of global supply chains. Job losses in both countries. Negative impact on China's export-oriented economy. (Siripurapu, 2023) (Denmark & Hass, 2020)
Challenges	Maintaining cooperation amidst broader geopolitical tensions.	Uncertainty and risk for businesses in both countries. (Denmark & Hass, 2020) (Siripurapu, 2023)
Long-Term Implications	Joint leadership on climate change and potential for broader cooperation. Enhanced international image of China as responsible power. (U.S. Department of State, 2023)	Decoupling of U.S. and Chinese economies leading to a more fragmented global economic order.

The framework analysis matrix reveals that there is indeed an effect between U.S. foreign policy and Chinese status. Through examining the contrasting cases of competition and cooperation an in-depth look into this relationship can be explored. Beginning with the cooperation case exemplified by the Paris Climate Agreement, it signifies a union between the two nations when it comes to addressing the global challenge of climate change. Through joint commitments to reduce emissions and technology sharing for green development shows China in a positive light by presenting themselves as a responsible stakeholder. The Paris Agreement fosters collaboration on several climate change solutions leading to mutual economic benefits (U.S. Department of State, 2023, paras. 1-7). Through this cooperative approach, China becomes elevated internationally by being portrayed as a responsible leader and partner when addressing global issues such as climate change. In contrast, the 2020 Trade War exemplifies competition and its negative effects on China's image. Actions such as tariffs and investment restrictions show China as a disruptive power (Denmark & Hass, 2020, secs. 1-3). Furthermore, these restrictions on investment raise concerns over Chinese business practices, further diminishing their image and status. The disrupted global supply chain weaken not only the Chinese economy but also those of its trade partners, again further damaging their reputation (Siripurapu, 2023, sec. 7).

The trend observed also fits in the long-term. Maintaining the level of climate cooperation achieved through the Paris Agreement (U.S. Department of State, 2023, para. 5) will bolster China's image as a reliable leader. However, continued competition, as seen through the trade war's after-effects (Denmark & Hass, 2020, sec. 3) (Siripurapu, 2023, sec. 6) create uncertainty and will weaken China's investment landscape. The American government's 2020 strategic approach prioritizing competition (Trump White House, 2020, para. 3) suggests this

trend will continue, if nothing changes, hindering long-term cooperation on issues of mutual interest. The impact of U.S. foreign policy goes beyond immediate gains or losses. Continued cooperation strengthens relationships and leadership, enhancing Chinese status in the international community. Conversely, persistent competition fuels deglobalization (Denmark & Hass, 2020, sec. 3), decreasing Chinese attractiveness as a trade partner and leading to a more fragmented global order. This analysis reveals a concrete truth: U.S. foreign policy decisions are not just about national interests; they fundamentally shape how China is perceived in the global order, as well as affect it. When the U.S. engages in cooperative ventures, it contributes to a more positive image for China (U.S. Department of State, 2023, para. 5). However, there are negative impacts that stem from these foreign policy decisions, such as trade disputes, which will portray China in a negative light.

Results

The following section includes an analysis of the thesis' research findings using realism and status dilemma frameworks. Beginning with cooperation and its impacts—the findings on joint commitments and actions (such as those decided in the Paris Agreement in 2015) including shared emission reduction (sec. Article 4) and technology transfers (p. 3), demonstrate that cooperation between rival powers is possible. Though it is crucial to consider the significant challenges posed by the dynamics of realism and status competition. Within these frameworks, states prioritize their own national interests and security concerns, which can make long-term cooperation difficult. However, it is this possibility for cooperation that will allow a more amicable relationship to develop, thus potentially alleviating tensions. Furthermore, because of joint action taken between the rivals at a global scale, there has been an increase in Chinese

status through bolstering its image as a responsible stakeholder, aiding in defusing a status competition. Therefore, the Paris Agreement's findings suggest that American cooperation with the Chinese will improve China's status, despite realist power dynamic theory. Consequently, economic interdependence affects cooperation, particularly in the realms of green infrastructure investments. Economic ties create incentives for collaboration, despite growing conflicts and tensions, as it would be disadvantageous to break said economic ties. Furthermore, mutual economic benefits between the United States and China have the possibility of elevating China's image as a dependable trading partner. In essence, when the two superpowers are entangled economically, it presents opportunities for cooperation that increase Chinese standing, which fights the traditional realist assumption that the international system is in constant competition. In terms of competition, the focus on strategic rivalry (such as tariffs and limited investment) also provide useful insights. Firstly, competition is a reflection of power and influence among states—this is doubly so for the United States and China. Especially when considering that antagonistic actions that China takes (such as in retaliation in the trade war) run the risk of decreasing their international status by being seen as a disruptive force in the global economy. This is exemplified through the 2020 trade war, where realist perspectives show that the default competitive state of international relations is damaging to Chinese standing. The international system also has uncertainty and tensions caused by the competitive state of international politics, and it is this uncertainty that weakens China's desirability as not only an investment partner, but also international ally, negatively impacting its status. The trade war once again highlights how competition, as stated by realist frameworks, creates uncertainty, which will weaken the Chinese image.

How do these findings address and answer the thesis' central question? They do so via two key pillars, American impact on China and moving past the dominance of pure realist frameworks. Firstly, as seen throughout the analysis and cases presented, U.S. foreign policy has a deep and significant impact on Chinese standing. As witnessed in the cooperation and competition cases, cooperative foreign policy (such as joint treaties and economic actions) will increase Chinese status whilst antagonistic actions (such as tariff retaliation and unscrupulous business practices) will decrease status. Secondly, as the thesis has argued and proven, utilizing pure realism as the core framework for analyzing Sino-American relations is no longer enough to explain the contemporary or future power relations. The two superpowers, whilst currently in competition, are also inextricably linked in terms of economics, treaties, and security. Thus, using frameworks that continue to underestimate cooperation are of no use. Through the incorporation of status, realism can be re-purposed to fit the contemporary relationship and lead to further understanding of Sino-American relations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research clearly shows that U.S. foreign policy decisions have a significant impact on Chinese status and provides a clear answer to the research question: U.S. foreign policy has a significant impact on Chinese international status. Specifically, cooperative foreign policy leads to enhancement of status whilst competitive foreign policy leads to a decline in international standing. Through use of a comparative case study analysis and the framework analysis matrix, several themes were identified that are key among cooperation and competition. It was found, that indeed there is a connection between foreign policy decisions and international status, especially on the rising power. These findings will contribute greatly to international relations research, by showcasing a new way to evaluate Sino-American relations through

incorporating the field of status dilemmas to the pre-existing realist frameworks currently being used. Furthermore, by providing a more nuanced outlook on great power relations, the field can better predict, research, and prepare for international politics in the years to come as the world deals with a more polarized and uncertain environment. Thus, through researching Sino-American relations through the framework of status competition in conjunction with the dominant realist ideology, it is made clear that U.S. foreign policy actions have a significant impact on Chinese international status, with cooperative actions enhancing the status and competition diminishing it. Realism provides a limited view on present international relations. The incorporation of status challenges the pure realist assumption of constant rivalry. However, the thesis is not without limitations. Firstly, the focus on only two cases is a weak point and creates a potential for selection bias upon the cases chosen. Furthermore, a lack of Chinese centered articles due to the language barrier also poses limitations. Finally, through incorporating and improving upon these weaknesses, future research will be able to delve deeper into how status is a relevant addition to realism when studying Sino-American relations and the effect the U.S. has on Chinese international status. This can be done by conducting more in-depth cases and using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In essence, the research calls for a multifaceted approach that considers both realist thinking as well as the pursuit of status within the complex relationship between the United States and China.

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