

## **Cooperation rhetoric as risk-communication: An analysis of Biden Administration's China policy rhetoric through the lens of the Mixed-motive Model\***

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This research applies the Mixed-motive Model of Public Relations to analyze the Biden Administration's rhetoric on China policy, focusing on crisis and risk communication. It explores how the administration rhetorically shifted from Trump's pure advocacy approach, known as "decoupling," to a nuanced mixed-motive strategy combining competition and cooperation. This shift redefines the US-China relationship, articulates the US vision, expresses underlying worldviews, and manages inherent tensions in policy rhetoric to reduce the risk of direct conflict. Using Burke's cluster-agon rhetorical criticism method, the study identifies key God terms, such as "rule-based international order," "shared vision of future," "diplomacy," "network of allies and partners," "Chinese people," "US strengths," and "comprehensive strategy/compete", and Devil terms, including "challenges," "conflict," and "China." The analysis reveals that Secretary Blinken's speech serves as strategic communication reflecting a blend of liberalism, realism, and constructivism, which justifies the use of mixed-motive strategies and mitigates tensions by aligning each strategy with a specific worldview. This complex rhetorical approach is shaped by the multifaceted nature of US-China relations and global dynamics. Importantly, the cooperative rhetoric functions as risk communication designed to prevent the US-China competition from escalating into armed conflict.

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## Introduction

The power of discourse has become an important aspect of security analysis (Balzacq, 2005), and foreign policy is often legitimated through the mobilization of rhetoric (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). Rhetorical contestation shapes the boundaries of acceptable policy and the very possibilities of state action (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). U.S. foreign policy toward China is no exception. Recent research indicates that U.S. national discourse has increasingly constructed China as a potential enemy Other (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017), and the mobilization of rhetorical resources from adjacent policy debates has become key to U.S. elites’ representation of China as an ideological threat (Winkler & Jerdén, 2023). Since Donald Trump became U.S. president in 2018, the U.S.-China relationship has entered a steady downward spiral marked by trade disputes, technological rivalry, geopolitical maneuvering, and human rights concerns. Bilateral relations between the two major powers have deteriorated to such an extent that both sides have begun discussing how to avoid an armed conflict (CSIS, 2024). In terms of rhetoric, Trump employed pure advocacy, exemplified by his call to “decouple” from China (Reuters, 2020). However, the subsequent Biden administration has adopted a different policy approach, and accordingly, the U.S. government’s rhetoric on China has shifted as well, moving from pure advocacy to a more nuanced and mixed representation that emphasizes both competition and cooperation (The Economist, 2020).

In this research, using rhetorical criticism and approaching the topic from the perspective of strategic communication, I examine the Biden administration’s rhetoric on its China policy. Specifically, I explore how the administration has rhetorically shifted from Trump’s approach of pure advocacy to redefine U.S.-China relations as a balance of competition and cooperation. I also analyze how the administration addresses the inherent tension within a policy mix that includes cooperation, contest, competition, confrontation, and the avoidance of conflict. This analysis aims to uncover the underlying motives behind the Biden administration’s China policy rhetoric: Is it merely a façade for a policy of pure advocacy, or does it reflect a genuine shift in U.S. strategic intent? The theoretical framework guiding this research is the Mixed-Motive Model of public relations, and the rhetorical criticism method employed is Burke’s (1969) cluster analysis. This study contributes to the strategic communication literature by testing one of its most influential theoretical models, the Excellence Theory’s Mixed-Motive Model, through rhetorical criticism.

## Trump and Biden’s China rhetoric

Donald Trump adopted a policy and rhetoric of pure advocacy in U.S.-China relations. His China policy is widely regarded as a paradigmatic shift, centered on the embrace of “strategic competition” (Ashbee & Hurst, 2022), and marked a historic turnaround in U.S. policy toward China (Kubo, 2019). Trump imposed tariffs on Chinese imports, aiming to

curtail China's technological advancement. Geopolitically, he took a more confrontational stance, explicitly framing China as a strategic competitor. While some of Trump's measures sought to address legitimate concerns about China's economic and security practices, they often produced unintended consequences and strained bilateral relations (Black & Morrison, 2021). The trade war imposed economic costs on both countries, with limited long-term benefits for the United States. Tariffs disrupted global supply chains and increased costs for American consumers and businesses. Meanwhile, efforts at technological decoupling harmed U.S. companies reliant on Chinese technology and cooperation, while simultaneously accelerating China's push for technological self-sufficiency (Schuetz & Chan, 2019).

Biden's approach to China marks a departure from Trump's confrontational stance, emphasizing strategic competition within a multilateral framework (Shi, 2024). Whereas Trump employed fiery and combative rhetoric, Biden has adopted a more measured and diplomatic tone. His China policy was succinctly articulated by Secretary of State Antony Blinken as "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be" (Blinken, 2021). Unlike Trump's preference for unilateral actions, Biden has prioritized rallying traditional allies in Europe and Asia to form a coordinated and united front in response to China's assertive behavior (Johnson, 2022). Although the Biden administration continues to confront China on key issues, such as trade, human rights, and regional security, it does so within a framework of multilateralism and strategic alignment with allies. In terms of trade, while Biden has retained many of the tariffs imposed during the Trump era, his administration has emphasized more targeted and strategic measures aimed at addressing specific concerns, including intellectual property theft and unfair trade practices (Haas, 2024).

## **Biden's China policy as mixed strategy**

When U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in August 2024, he reiterated the strategic approach outlined at the beginning of the Biden administration: "President Biden is committed to responsibly managing this consequential relationship to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict or confrontation, and to work together where our interests align" (Hotham, 2024). The U.S. approach, which combines elements of both competition and cooperation, reflects what international relations scholars refer to as "mixed strategy games," where the interests of the actors are neither strictly opposed nor fully aligned (Aitken-Turff & Jackson, 2006; Blidaru, 2018). Similarly, the Mixed-Motive Model of public relations, the guiding theoretical framework of this research, posits that it is possible to be both cooperative and competitive within the same campaign (Grunig, 2001). In the following analysis, I examine the Biden administration's China policy during the first year of his presidency to assess whether the U.S. government has genuinely pursued a mixed strategy, or

whether the rhetoric of cooperation merely serves as a façade for a continuation of pure advocacy. The documentation of U.S. policy actions is sourced from *China Briefing*,<sup>1</sup> a publication that meticulously catalogs developments in U.S.-China relations during the Biden era.

On January 20, 2021, Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. While signaling that he was in no rush to depart significantly from the Trump administration's China policies, his cabinet made it clear that Biden intended to adopt a multilateral approach to maximize U.S. leverage over China. On February 10, 2021, on the eve of the Lunar New Year, President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping held their first phone call. During the conversation, Biden emphasized U.S. concerns over China's economic practices, human rights issues, and Taiwan, while Xi focused on the need for mutual respect, cooperation, and dialogue. In the following months, the Biden administration began to clearly adopt a mixed strategy in both its China policy and accompanying rhetoric, balancing elements of competition and cooperation. On the one hand, the Biden administration inherited key advocacy strategies from the Trump era and, in many cases, expanded them. (See Table 1) On the other hand, it actively sought cooperation with China on climate, economic, and geopolitical issues. (See Table 2)

<i>Month</i>	<i>US sanction policy/actions toward China</i>
February	- Sanctioned 24 officials from Mainland China and Hong Kong.
March	- Took action against Chinese telecommunications firms over national security concerns. - Imposed sanctions (with allies) in response to alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang.
April	- Blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing entities.
June	- Expanded Trump-era ban on American investment in certain Chinese firms. - Banned imports of solar panel materials sourced from Xinjiang. - G7 leaders issued joint statement criticizing China over Xinjiang and Hong Kong. - NATO labeled China a global security challenge.
July	- Added 23 Chinese companies to the U.S. economic blacklist.
October	- Revoked China Telecom Americas' authorization to operate.
November	- Blacklisted several Chinese quantum computing firms. - Finalized rules enabling delisting of Chinese companies from U.S. stock exchanges. - Announced diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. - Banned all imports from Xinjiang.
December	- Sanctioned four senior Chinese officials in Xinjiang. - Placed China's leading AI firm on investment blacklist. - U.S. Treasury blacklisted eight additional Chinese companies. - U.S. Commerce Department added 34 Chinese entities to its entity list. - Sanctioned five more Chinese officials based in Hong Kong.

*Table 1 - Biden administration's sanction policies/actions toward China*

<i>Month</i>	<i>US cooperative policy/actions toward China</i>
March	- Held first high-level U.S.-China meeting in Alaska. - Both sides issued statements identifying limited cooperation (e.g., climate change, geopolitical issues), while acknowledging disagreements (e.g., Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan).

<i>Month</i>	<i>US cooperative policy/actions toward China</i>
April	- Jointly announced plans to cooperate on tackling the climate crisis.
May	- Held first U.S.-China trade talks since Biden took office.
June	- Revoked Trump-era executive orders banning WeChat and TikTok downloads.
	- Directed Department of Commerce to review apps linked to foreign adversaries (including China).
July	- Secretary Blinken and Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi held phone call discussing expanded cooperation opportunities.
	- Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman visited China; discussed U.S. concerns and potential areas of mutual interest.
August	- U.S. granted licenses for American firms to sell chips to Huawei.
October	- Treasury Secretary Yellen and Vice Premier Liu He held virtual meeting emphasizing global economic coordination and macroeconomic policy dialogue.
November	- Issued U.S.-China joint declaration on climate action.
	- Biden and Xi held first virtual summit; Biden reaffirmed "One China" policy while raising human rights concerns.
	- Agreed to relax visa restrictions on journalists from both countries.

*Table 2.- Biden administration's cooperative policies/actions toward China*

As demonstrated, the Biden administration has indeed adopted a mixed strategy toward China that combines elements of competition and cooperation, although the approach has notably leaned toward competition. This mixed strategy is succinctly captured in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's China policy speech at The George Washington University: "And to the people of China: we'll compete with confidence; we'll cooperate wherever we can; we'll contest where we must. We do not seek conflict" (Blinken, 2021). A close review of the U.S. policies and Blinken's rhetoric raises several important questions with both theoretical and practical implications: How is the U.S. mixed strategy, encompassing "compete," "cooperate," "contest," and "no conflict", rhetorically articulated by the Biden administration? How are the internal contradictions and tensions within such a strategy rhetorically negotiated? What kind of vision and worldview does this rhetoric project? Most critically, does the rhetoric possess ethos, namely credibility and moral appeal, that makes it persuasive to both China and U.S. allies? Answering these questions are important because the rhetoric, magnified through media, more than express policy. Rather, they help reconstruct collective imaginaries about "us," "them," and a common global order in an increasingly chaotic world (Silverstone, 1999).

This research contributes to the literature on strategic communication by applying rhetorical criticism to one of its most influential models: the Mixed-Motive Model of public relations. James Grunig argues that organizations and publics can each retain a strong sense of self-interest while being motivated to cooperate in limited ways to resolve conflict (Dozier et al., 1995). Grunig adopted the Mixed-Motive Model originally developed by Murphy (1991), asserting that it best represents the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication. However, empirical tests of the Mixed-Motive Model remain limited, and rhetorical examinations of this model, particularly in the context of international strategic communication, are even rarer. This research contends that rhetorical criticism offers a more suitable method for exploring the complexity and nuance embedded within the Mixed-Motive

Model than traditional quantitative approaches. By analyzing the Biden administration's China policy rhetoric, this study aims to show how rhetorical strategies can both reflect and shape the dynamics of mixed-motive public diplomacy.

## The Mixed-Motive Model of Public Relations

Signitzer and Coombs (1992) linked public relations models to diplomacy in an international context. They note that the public relations models originally proposed for organizations can map onto different forms of diplomacy depending on communication goals. In this research, I examine the Biden administration's China policy and rhetoric through the lens of the Mixed-Motive Model of public relations. I argue that the Mixed-Motive Model effectively captures the nuance and complexity of the administration's rhetorical approach, particularly when analyzed through rhetorical criticism. According to Grunig, two-way symmetrical communication in situations of conflict represents the most effective and ethical form of communication (Grunig & White, 1992). However, what precisely constitutes two-way symmetrical communication has long been debated. To support his argument, Grunig drew upon the Mixed-Motive Model developed by Murphy (1991), which posits that both organizations and publics can maintain strong self-interest while also being motivated to cooperate, albeit in a limited way, to resolve conflict (Dozier et al., 1995). Grunig et al. (1992) contended that the Mixed-Motive Model best exemplifies the ideal of two-way symmetry, and that it offers a realistic foundation for symmetrical communication, without rendering the symmetrical worldview idealistic or unattainable. Grunig and White (1992) further argued that individuals within organizations often experience "divided loyalties," or mixed motives, that reflect both organizational and societal obligations. From a theoretical perspective, the Excellence Theory maintains that by critically evaluating the underlying worldviews of organizations, scholars and practitioners can determine "which worldview generates public relations programs that best resolve conflict in society, resolve national and international issues, [and] make organizations more effective" (Grunig & White, 1992, p. 37).

Murphy (1991) integrated game theory with the concept of symmetry to develop the Mixed-Motive Model of public relations. This model posits that an organization simultaneously pursues its own objectives while attempting to help others achieve theirs, demonstrating that cooperation and competition can coexist within the same campaign. Plowman et al. (1998) identified nine negotiation approaches within the public relations literature, which exist along a mixed-motive continuum ranging from asymmetric to symmetric. Approaches such as contention, avoidance, and principled negotiation lie closer to the one-way extreme, where the organization wins and the public loses. On the opposite end are accommodation, compromise, and mediated communication, where public interests are prioritized over organizational goals. Positioned in the middle, the win/win zone, are cooperation, unconditionally constructive tactics, and win-win or no-deal strategies. These approaches reflect the stances organizations may adopt in mixed-motive situations. Grunig

(2001) concurs that mixed motives aptly describe symmetry, suggesting that two-way communication can only be realized if its primary goal is to identify win/win solutions between an organization and its stakeholders (Plowman et al., 2001). To incorporate the Mixed-Motive Model into the two-way symmetrical framework, Grunig et al. (2002, p. 15) further define two-way symmetrical communication as a process that attempts to “balance the interests of the organization and its publics.” Symmetrical practitioners, therefore, hold mixed motives. They are loyal both to their employees and to the broader publics of their organizations. Grunig argues that asymmetrical tactics may sometimes be employed strategically to position the organization optimally within the win-win zone. However, because such tactics are constrained by a symmetrical worldview that values the integrity of long-term relationships, the two-way communication model remains fundamentally symmetrical. Grunig also introduced terms such as “collaborative advocacy” and “cooperative antagonism” to describe this balanced model, which “balances self-interests with the interests of others in a give-and-take process that can waver between advocacy and collaboration” (Grunig, 2001). Despite these theoretical developments, most empirical studies testing two-way symmetrical communication rely on quantitative methods, and few have examined the model from a rhetorical perspective. Tests of the Mixed-Motive Model are even rarer, with rhetorical criticism of the model being particularly scarce (Zhang, 2010).

## Rhetoric and mixed-motives situation

Grunig argued that developments in rhetorical theory help us better understand and come to terms with mixed motives (Grunig & White, 1992). He noted that Booth’s four types of rhetoric closely parallel the four models of the Excellence Theory. Specifically, sub-rhetoric, which is employed to deceive or obscure issues, corresponds to the press agency model; mere rhetoric, used for sincere persuasion, aligns with the public information model; Rhetoric-B, the art of winning others through sound arguments, parallels the two-way asymmetrical model; and Rhetoric-A, which involves discovering and refining ends and purposes through critical dialogue, corresponds to the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & White, 1992).

Simonson treats rhetoric as a socially embedded “space” shaped by institutions, media, and cultural rhetorics rather than merely as individual acts of persuasion (Simonson, 2014). The deployment of God-terms and Devil terms, therefore, should be analysed not only for their symbolic valence, but as instruments calibrated to operate within this structured rhetorical ecology. Burke (1966) argued that every work of language contains its own network of symbolic actions, and that its structure and function can be revealed through careful analysis. By examining which subjects cluster around others, we can identify what is significant within a text. Charting these clusters allows us to uncover the rhetor’s worldview (Burke, 1969). For Burke (1969), rhetoric is the use of language as a symbolic means of “inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 43). He posited that

inducing cooperation is essentially a process of negotiation for identification, whereby people come to identify with one another. At the same time, identification can produce alienation (Burke, 1951). To capture these dynamics, Burke introduced the concepts of “God terms”, words that promote identification and unity, and “Devil terms”, words that generate division and alienation. Both God and Devil terms serve as valuable tools for investigating an individual’s worldview (Burke, 1967).

This study employs Burke’s rhetorical analysis because Burke conceptualizes rhetoric as symbolic action through which political actors construct realities, frame motives, and manage tensions. Risk communication, particularly in high-stakes international contexts, is inherently rhetorical, relying on symbolic framing to reduce uncertainty and prevent escalation. Burke’s cluster-agon method reveals how “what goes with what” organizes key terms into God and Devil clusters, allowing us to see how the Biden Administration structures China as a challenge short of enemyhood, and diplomacy as a mechanism for managing competition. Burke proposed several critical approaches, including cluster analysis, to uncover a rhetor’s motivations and worldview. Cluster analysis involves four key steps: (1) identifying clusters to determine what elements are associated with each other; (2) agon analysis to examine what is opposed to what; (3) analyzing progressive form to trace the movement “from what, through what, to what”; and (4) analyzing transformations to understand what is changed into something or someone else (Koptak, 1990). Rueckert (1994) outlined guidelines for applying Burke’s cluster-agon analysis. The first step is to identify key terms or symbols within the text based on their frequency and intensity. At this stage, a “God term”, an expression around which all others are ranked as subordinate, and its opposite, the “Devil term,” typically emerge. The second step involves identifying and charting clusters surrounding these key terms, examining their combinations and equivalences. The third step, agon analysis, focuses on discerning patterns between God terms and Devil terms, determining the meanings of key terms, and uncovering underlying tensions and conflicts. It is during this phase that the rhetor’s worldview becomes apparent. Finally, the fourth step involves naming the rhetor’s orientation based on the patterns identified within the text. According to Foss (2008), the central question addressed here is: What motive likely underlies the production of this particular rhetoric in this specific way?

The primary text for this research is the speech entitled “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” delivered by Antony J. Blinken on May 26, 2022, at The George Washington University. This speech provides the most comprehensive and detailed explanation of the Biden administration’s China policy. The cluster criticism analysis reveals several prominent God terms and Devil terms within the speech. Key God terms include “rule-based international order,” “shared vision of the future,” “diplomacy,” “network of allies and partners,” “Chinese people,” “U.S. strengths,” and “comprehensive strategy/compete.” In contrast, the primary Devil terms identified are “challenges,” “conflict,” and “China.” The following sections provide an elaboration and interpretation of these findings.

## God Terms

### ***Rule-based international order***

The Biden administration's rhetoric centers on the existing "rule-based international order", which is a "system of laws, agreements, principles, and institutions" that "manage relations between states, to prevent conflict, to uphold the rights of all people." The system includes "the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", which are "reflections of the world's shared aspirations." The system has made world "avoid another world war and armed conflict between nuclear powers," helped build "a global economy that lifted billions of people out of poverty," and "advanced human rights as never before." China's economic growth was made possible "by the stability and opportunity that the international order provides," and "no country on Earth has benefited more from that than China." The system "enshrined concepts like self-determination, sovereignty, the peaceful settlement of disputes" and has protected "all countries from being conquered or coerced." Ukraine "is fighting valiantly to defend its people and its independence." "Instead of weakening the international order," Putin has "brought countries together to defend it." The United States "must defend and reform" the rule-based international order. It "will defend and strengthen the international law, agreements, principles, and institutions that maintain peace and security," and make it possible for "all countries, including the United States and China, "to coexist and cooperate." It wants to "strengthen a system in which as many countries as possible can come together to cooperate effectively, resolve differences peacefully, write their own futures as sovereign equals."

### ***Shared vision of future***

"Future" and "shared vision of future" frequently appear in Blinken's speech. The United States wants "not just to sustain the international order", but to "modernize it", to make sure that it "represents the interests, the values, the hopes of all nations." To build "an open, secure, and prosperous future", countries in the world should "work in common cause to uphold the principles that make our shared progress possible" and "stand up for the right of every nation to write its own future." Blinken even states that "everything I've said today boils down to: advancing human progress, leaving to our children a world that's more peaceful, more prosperous, and more free." In this future world, energy is "cleaner, more secure, and more affordable," "trade and commerce support workers, raise incomes, create opportunity;" "countries are secure from coercion and aggression, and people, ideas, goods, and capital move freely."

Regarding to Asia and China, the United States hopes to forge "closer ties with the countries and people of Asia to try to enhance peace, prosperity, freedom, equality, sustainability. "But the United States "cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory." Instead, it will "compete with China to defend our interests and build our vision for the future." It will "shape

the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system.” To people of China, “we’ll compete with confidence; we’ll cooperate wherever we can; we’ll contest where we must. We do not see conflict.” In addition, the United States will align with its allies to “defend” and “reform” the rules-based order, and “lead a race to the top on tech, on climate, infrastructure, global health, and inclusive economic growth.” For Indo-Pacific region, the US vision is that it should be “one of a free and open Indo-Pacific where rules are developed transparently and applied fairly.”

## ***Diplomacy***

Blinken highlights the importance of diplomacy by noting that it is the “indispensable tool for shaping our shared future.” The United States has “put diplomacy back at the center of American foreign policy.” Through diplomacy, the United States is “not looking for conflict or a new Cold War,” but is “determined to avoid both.” It does not seek to “block China from its role as a major power,” nor to stop China “from growing their economy or advancing the interests of their people.” At times like these, “diplomacy is vital.” It is about “how we make clear our profound concerns, better understand each other’s perspective, and have no doubt about each other’s intentions.” The challenge posed by China “will test American diplomacy like nothing we’ve seen before.” Blinken said he has “never been more convinced about the power and the purpose of American diplomacy or sure about our capacity to meet the challenges of this decisive decade. “He is “determined to give the State Department and our diplomats the tools that they need to meet this challenge head on.”

## ***Network of allies and partners***

Aligning with allies and partners is a key US strategy. From day one, The US has worked to “re-energize America’s unmatched network of alliances and partnerships and to re-engage in international institutions.” Blinken highlighted the US efforts to build and strengthen alliances in Indo-Pacific region. The US “reaffirmed our vital security alliances with South Korea and Japan, “launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, a first-of-its-kind initiative for the region,” took part in the leaders’ summit of the Quad countries, Australia, Japan, India, the United States.“ The US is “reinvigorating our partnership with ASEAN,” “building bridges among our Indo-Pacific and European partners, including by inviting Asian allies to the NATO summit,” “enhancing peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific” through a new security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS).

In addition, the US has “deepened our alignment across the Atlantic” through the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council. The US also worked with the G20 and G7 on “fair trade” and meeting the “infrastructure needs in developing countries.” Both are meant to address China’s trade policy that “distorts” market. The US convened global summits on defeating COVID-19

and renewing global democracy, and rejoined the UN Human Rights Council and the WHO, re-energized NATO.

### ***Chinese people***

The Biden administration consciously made a distinction between the CCP and Chinese people. China has “formidable economic resources, including a highly capable workforce.” The US has attracted “millions of students from China, who have enriched our communities and forged lifelong bonds with Americans. Despite the pandemic, US issued “more than 100,000 visas to Chinese students in just four months”. “We’re thrilled that they’ve chosen to study in the United States.” “More than 80 percent of Chinese students who pursue science and technology PhDs in the United States have chosen to stay,” “They help drive innovation here at home, and that benefits all of us.” “Chinese Americans made invaluable contributions to our country; they’ve done so for generations. Mistreating someone of Chinese descent goes against everything we stand for as a country.” The US has “profound differences with the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government. But those differences are between governments and systems – not between our people.” “The American people have great respect for the Chinese people. We respect their achievements, their history, their culture. We deeply value the ties of family and friendship that connect us. And we sincerely wish for our governments to work together on issues that matter to their lives and to the lives of Americans, and for that matter the lives of people around the world.” “We can stay vigilant about our national security without closing our doors.”

### ***US strengths***

The US is “endowed with many strengths.” These include “peaceful neighbors, a diverse and growing population, abundant resources, the world’s reserve currency, the most powerful military on Earth, and a thriving culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.” The American “open society” attracts flows of talent and investment.” It continues to “investing in our core sources of national strength” – starting with a modern industrial strategy, “making strategic investments in education and worker training”, investing in research, development, advanced manufacturing. “ The US has “long been a destination for talented, driven people from every part of the planet.” And of course, the “core source of national strength” of the US is “our democracy,” one of the most powerful assets in this contest with China.

### ***Comprehensive strategy/compete***

The Biden administration outlined a “comprehensive strategy” can be summed up in three words, “invest, align, compete.” The US “will invest in the foundations of our strength here at home – our competitiveness, our innovation, our democracy,” “align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with common purpose and in common cause,” and “compete with China to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.” In this framework, the US will “compete with confidence; we’ll cooperate wherever we can; we’ll contest where we must. We do not see conflict.”

The US is “well-positioned to outcompete China in key areas.” It will unleash next wave of innovation and at the same time safeguard its technological competitiveness through a series of measures. The US will “push back on” China’s market-distorting policies and practices, and “boost supply chain security and resilience”. It will “stand together with others against economic coercion and intimidation.” It will “fight for American workers and industry with every tool we have.”

The US seeks to preserve peace through “integrated deterrence”: “bringing in allies and partners; working across the conventional, the nuclear, space, and informational domains; drawing on our reinforcing strengths in economics, in technology, and in diplomacy.” The US will “manage this relationship responsibly” to prevent unintended conflict from happening. US has “prioritized crisis communications and risk reduction measures with Beijing,” and remains “committed to intense diplomacy alongside intense competition. The US will “work to maintain economic and people-to-people ties connecting the United States and China.” “Competition need not lead to conflict. We do not seek it. We will work to avoid it. But we will defend our interests against any threat.” In fact, the US will seek to cooperate with China. “Even as we invest, align, and compete, we’ll work together with Beijing where our interests come together. We can’t let the disagreements that divide us stop us from moving forward on the priorities that demand that we work together, for the good of our people and for the good of the world.” The areas where the two countries can work together include climate, the COVID-19 pandemic, on which “our fates are linked,” nonproliferation and arms control, countering illegal and illicit narcotics, global food crisis, and global macroeconomic coordination between the United States and China.

## **Devil terms**

### ***Urgent challenges***

The US believes that “the foundations of the international order are under serious and sustained challenge.” Russian “poses a clear and present threat.” In attacking Ukraine three months ago, he also attacked the principles of sovereignty. But the US will “remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order – and that’s posed by the People’s Republic of China.” China is “integral to the global economy and to our ability to solve challenges from climate to COVID.” The United States and China “have to deal with each other for the

foreseeable future.” In addition, “none of us can meet many global challenges alone.” From fight the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future global health emergencies, rebuild from economic shocks, from supply-chain disruptions to debt crises; “The common denominator across these efforts is the simple fact that none of us can meet these challenges alone. We have to face them together.” The US “take on this challenge with confidence.” “We face [the challenges] as a country and a planet”. China is number one. The United States is number two. Unless we all do much more, much faster, the financial and human cost will be catastrophic. Plus, competing on clean energy and climate policy can produce results that benefit everyone.

The progress that the United States and China make together – including through the working group established by the Glasgow Declaration – is vital to our success in avoiding the worst consequences of this crisis. I urge China to join us in accelerating the pace of these shared efforts.

## **Conflict**

For the United States, the rule-based international order has helped the world avoid “another world war and armed conflict between nuclear powers.” With China, “we are not looking for conflict or a new Cold War. To the contrary, we’re determined to avoid both.” “Competition need not lead to conflict. We do not seek it. We will work to avoid it. But we will defend our interests against any threat.” The Biden administration “is shifting our military investments away from platforms that were designed for the conflicts of the 20th century toward asymmetric systems that are longer-range, harder to find, easier to move.” “We’re developing new concepts to guide how we conduct military operations.” “As President Biden likes to say, the only conflict worse than an intended one is an unintended one. We’ll manage this relationship responsibly to prevent that from happening. We’ve prioritized crisis communications and risk reduction measures with Beijing. And on this issue – and every other – we remain committed to intense diplomacy alongside intense competition.” “And to the people of China: we’ll compete with confidence; we’ll cooperate wherever we can; we’ll contest where we must. We do not see conflict.”

## **China**

China as a devil term refers to the Beijing regime, sometime referred as “Beijing” and “Chinese Communist Party”. It is the “only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” The US has “profound differences with the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government.” China once “was isolated and struggling with widespread poverty and hunger.” Now it is “a global power with extraordinary reach, influence, and ambition.” It “seeks to

dominate the technologies and industries of the future. “It’s rapidly modernized its military and intends to become a top tier fighting force with global reach.” Beijing “is undermining” international rules. The “ruling Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad.” “Beijing believes that its model is the better one; that a party-led centralized system is more efficient, less messy, ultimately superior to democracy.” “Beijing wants to put itself at the center of global innovation and manufacturing.” Blinken used many examples ranging from China’s legal system, state subsidies, and growing coercion to illustrate the “lack of reciprocity” in US-China relationship and pointed it is unacceptable and unsustainable.

## Discussions and conclusions

Among the God terms identified, the “rule-based international system” and “shared vision of future” together depict a worldview that aligns primarily with the win-win zone in the Mixed-motive Model. This zone encompasses three strategies: “cooperation,” “unconditionally constructive,” and “win-win or no-deal.” Of these, “cooperation” is the most emphasized in Blinken’s speech. He highlights that the stability and opportunity provided by the international system made “China’s economic growth possible,” and that this same system enables the United States and China “to coexist and cooperate.”

The term “constructive” appears as well, though it is explicitly not “unconditional.” Blinken states, “we’ll engage constructively with China wherever we can, not as a favor to us or anyone else, and never in exchange for walking away from our principles.” This framing positions “constructive” engagement as conditional upon adherence to U.S. principles, which places it toward the advocacy end of the Mixed-motive Model’s continuum.

The God term “Chinese people” seems to invoke an “unconditionally constructive” stance rhetorically. Blinken acknowledges the valuable contributions of Chinese Americans and condemns mistreatment against them as contrary to American values. Yet, this stance is again qualified, as he asserts, “We can stay vigilant about our national security without closing our doors,” reflecting a balancing act between openness and security concerns.

Overall, the rhetorical clusters Blinken uses to elaborate on the “rule-based international order” and “shared vision of future” convey strong ethos, or source credibility. It is indisputable that China has significantly benefited from the liberal world system dominated by the United States. For example, China’s economy grew by 61% within five years after its entry into the WTO in 2001 (Li, Liu, & Zhou, 2023). This economic growth partly explains why China now positions itself as an advocate of globalization (Shrader, 2020). Moreover, Blinken’s rhetoric about defending foundational documents of the international order, including the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrine principles such as self-determination, sovereignty, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, is rhetorically unassailable.

However, the credibility of this ethos faces challenges in the eyes of some international actors, particularly in the Arabic world, where U.S. policies regarding conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine

evoke perceptions of double standards and Western hypocrisy. Critics ask: if both Israel and Russia are occupiers, why is one shunned while the other is protected? (Abbas, 2024). Research supports these concerns, showing a high degree of voting alignment between the U.S. and Israel in the UN General Assembly and a liberal use of the U.S. veto power in the Security Council to support Israel, effectively creating a deadlock on the Question of Palestine at the United Nations (Sarsar, 2004). These tensions complicate the image of the U.S. as a fully impartial defender of the international order.

As such, the above rhetoric does not mean that the United States is a “do-gooder.” Rather, the US has its national interest in defending and reforming the international system. This is why Blinken articulated a series of advocacy strategies. The Devil terms “urgent challenges” and “China/CCP” demand asymmetric advocacy strategies. The whole range of US policies and “investments,” as is articulated by Blinken in elaborating the God terms “diplomacy,” “network of allies and partners,” and “comprehensive strategies,” center on advocacy. Among the three strategies on the advocacy extreme of the Mixed-motive Model, in which the organizations win and the publics lose, “contention” and “principled approaches” are stressed, whereas “avoidance” is absent. Blinken states, “we’ll compete with confidence; we’ll cooperate wherever we can; we’ll contest where we must. We do not see conflict.” The US will not “sacrifice” its “core values”; It “will defend” international principles, “work in common cause to uphold the principles,” and “never in exchange for walking away from our principles.”

The three strategies on the other extreme of the Mixed-motive Model, namely “accommodation,” “compromise,” and “mediated communication,” where the public wins and the organization loses, are all present in Blinken’s speech. “Accommodation” is reflected by the rhetoric of “reforming” the international system: “we must defend and reform the rules-based international order..... that should benefit all nations.” The statement that the US is not seeking “to transform China’s political system” to an extent represents a compromise to the US foreign policy that has promoted the value of democracy and liberty in the world. The extensive emphasis on “America’s unmatched network of alliances and partnerships, along with rejoining the UN Human Rights Council and the WHO, the World Health Organization” can be regarded as necessary instruments of “mediated communication.” “Compromise” is not clearly stated but in diplomacy it is very often practiced.

In terms of worldviews, Blinken’s speech shows a mixture of liberalism, realism, and constructivism, but ultimately rests in realism. His call of “advancing human progress, leaving to our children a world that’s more peaceful, more prosperous, and more free” paints a liberal world order. So is the rhetoric of defending and reforming the international institutions. At the same time, he notes the “growing convergence about the need to approach relations with Beijing with more realism.” He extensively elaborated on “investing” in US strengths and consolidating the network of alliances and partnerships, ensuring “that our military stays ahead.” The constructivist theory of international relations argues that the social world is constructed and not given; it emphasizes identities, ideas, values, and social norms, or a standard of appropriate behavior for actors (Wendt, 1999). Blinken’s elaboration on “rule-based international order,” “shared vision of future,” and the “urgent challenges” it faces due to China’s “misbehavior” all reflect a constructivist worldview. The statement that “We’ll continue to raise

these issues and call for change – not to stand against China, but to stand up for peace, security, and human dignity” highlights the power of persuasion and ideas. Such a mixture of worldviews helps justify the US use of multiple strategies identified by the Mixed-motive Model and reduces the potential tensions among them, because each of the strategies is valid within a particular worldview.

As can be seen, Blinken portrayed a mixed strategy approach to China and projects a worldview that mixes realism, liberalism, and constructivism. On the one hand, such a complicated vision and strategy mix are conditioned by the complexity of the bilateral relations and the world reality. As Blinken states, the US-China relationship is “one of the most complex and consequential relationships of any that we have in the world today,” and neither country can “meet many global challenges alone.” On the other hand, it appears that the cooperation rhetoric also serves as a safety valve and risk communication to prevent the US-China competition from turning into a real crisis such as a head-on armed conflict. This is clearly reflected in the rhetorical clusters elaborating on the Devil term “conflict.” Blinken states, “As President Biden likes to say, the only conflict worse than an intended one is an unintended one. We’ll manage this relationship responsibly to prevent that from happening. We’ve prioritized crisis communications and risk reduction measures with Beijing. And on this issue – and every other – we remain committed to intense diplomacy alongside intense competition.” This is also shown by US national security advisor Jake Sullivan’s emphasizing the importance of dialogue for preventing risks from turning into crisis. He said Washington was “willing to engage in dialogue” with China and others “to better understand risks and counter misperceptions” (South China Morning Post, 2024).

Lastly, in terms of theory building, a large body of literature testing the Two-way Symmetrical model through quantitative approaches has developed; however, research using rhetorical criticism to test the model is rare, and studies testing the Mixed-motive Model are even scarcer. This scarcity is likely because the latter model involves many variables and dimensions, making quantitative research difficult to design. The current research shows that rhetorical criticism can fully capture the sophistication and subtlety of the Mixed-motive Model and its various dimensions, potentially serving as a better method to test the model. Furthermore, research testing these models has largely focused on the organization. More research is needed to examine how other parties in the conflict perceive and rhetorically respond to the organization’s rhetoric. In the case of US-China relations, China does not appear convinced by the cooperation rhetoric of the United States. For example, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Antony Blinken in September 2024, he said to his US counterpart, “The U.S. cannot always approach China with ‘two faces,’ simultaneously trying to contain and suppress China while engaging in dialogue and cooperation as if nothing is wrong. Since the U.S. has repeatedly stated that it does not intend to conflict with China, it should fundamentally establish a rational understanding of China and build a proper way to coexist.” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The theoretical questions that arise from such rhetoric are: To what extent would the conflicting parties truly trust each other’s win-win rhetoric? What factors would make such rhetoric credible? How would the conflicting parties convince each other that their worldviews align around the win-win zone of the Mixed-motive Model, and that the cooperation rhetoric is not a façade

concealing advocacy motives or merely a form of risk communication to prevent conflict from spiraling out of control? If the latter is the case, should the Mixed-motive Model be regarded as a contingency model instead of a symmetrical model? More studies are needed to address these questions.

## Biographical note

Dr. Juyan Zhang is Professor of Communication at the UTSA and Contributing Scholar for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. He received his doctoral degree from the School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia. His research focuses on strategic communication, public diplomacy, interfaith dialogue, religious tourism, and media studies. Zhang contributed two monographs for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy's faith diplomacy project, respectively on Buddhist diplomacy and the Sino-Vatican faith diplomacy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> China Briefing. Available at< <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/us-china-relations-in-the-biden-era-a-timeline/>>