

Article

Lessons of the Cold War and Biden Administration's China Policy

Yijing Ren^{1,*}

¹ Institute of International Relations, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, China

* Corresponding Authors: Yijing Ren. Email: renyijing@mail.cfau.edu.cn

Received: 19 June 2025 Accepted: 8 July 2025 Published: 25 August 2025

Abstract: Since entering the period of great-power competition, the discussion around the Cold War analogy and U.S.-China relations has never been settled: in policy community, whether China and the United States are already in a “new Cold War” and whether the United States should launch a “new Cold War” against China are currently hot topics related to U.S.-China relations. However, in academic research, whether the Cold War analogy has had a substantial impact on the U.S.’s China policy needs further study. Under President Biden’s leadership, the U.S. escalated the strategic competition with China, with many aspects reflecting distinct Cold War-era dynamics. This article contributes to the existing literature by analyzing the Biden administration’s use of Cold War historical lessons on its China policy. The importance of this study is two-fold: theoretically, it suggests that historical analogy does play a critical role in shaping foreign policy decision-making; practically, it reveals that some aspects of contemporary foreign practice of the United States during President Biden’s term are deeply rooted in the past, which are likely to persist into and intensify in the coming years, therefore providing insights into understanding U.S.-China relations in Trump’s second term.

Keywords: Historical Analogy; Biden Administration; U.S.-China Relations; New Cold War; Great-Power Competition

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has long debated whether it should continue to pursue a strategy of engagement or containment against China. As of 2016 to 2017, the result of the debate was still mainly “engagement” with China, supplemented by containment measures in some areas. However, since President Donald Trump took office for the first time in 2017, the US government announced that world politics had entered a period of great power competition and made major adjustments to its China strategy. Democrats and Republicans have also basically reached a consensus on China strategy. The competitive and restrictive aspect in the US policy towards China has become increasingly prominent. Largely following Trump administration’s strategy, Biden administration proposed to “outcompete” China, adopting policies including “small courtyard, high fence” and

“friendly shore outsourcing”, and actively carrying out ideological mobilization at both domestic and international levels to win the strategic competition against China. While the U.S. continued to intensify the practice of great power competition towards China, it is also worth noting that Biden administration has repeatedly stated that the U.S. does not seek a “new Cold War” with China.

As geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China have escalated significantly since 2017, efforts to conceptualize current U.S.-China great-power competition in terms of a “new Cold War” spread widely. Are the United States and China already in a “new Cold War”? There are largely two bunch of views, one applies the cold war analogy to the current situation, comparing US-Soviet relations during the Cold War era to the contemporary Sino-US relations. Some U.S. pundits, analysts and politicians have repeatedly called on the government to return to containment strategy during the Cold War and intensify the implementation of the “new Cold War” against China in order to win the competition with China in the 21st century. Others calls for less confrontational policies to temper down the increasingly tense bilateral relations. In academic field, most discussion focuses on whether the Cold War analogy is the best historical analogy for understanding the current Sino-US relations and why. Michael McFaul (2020) criticizes that “The Cold War analogy distorts, more than illuminates, dynamics in US-China relations today”, and it also underestimates the real cost of the Cold War. Economically, the U.S. decoupling from China is unthinkable since it will incur enormous costs. Joseph S. Nye (2022) argues that the Cold War analogy misleads the U.S. policy-makers from the real challenge of China because the deep and complex interdependence between the two countries, and believes that the Anglo-German analogy in 1914 is a more appropriate metaphor. Randall Schweller (2022) provides a detailed analysis on how the emerging China-U.S. bipolar structure will differ from U.S.-Soviet bipolar system. While admitting the Cold War analogy offers a convenient heuristic for interpreting the dynamics of U.S.-China strategic competition, Jiwu Yin (2020) also stressed the cognitive bias underlying this historical analogy to capture the real essence of this ongoing rivalry. Current U.S.-China relations may be approaching a “quasi-cold war”, but whether they will head for a new Cold War depends on many factors such as the policy choices of decision-makers, and perceptions of social elites and the public (Li, 2020). As the first one advocating historical analogical reasoning framework, Yuen Foong Khong (2019) believes that the Cold War analogy is the best historical case for understanding the current Sino-US relations. Avery Goldstein (2020) examined five causes shaping the intensifying rivalry, and concluded that even if there will be a new “Cold War” between the U.S. and China, it will differ from the original Cold War rivalry. Peter Harris and Iren Marinova (2022) argue for the reversed case: the Cold War analogy can best be applied when the U.S. is viewed from the Soviet’s position. In short, in both policy and scholarly fields, the debate has not settled yet, and no final conclusion has been reached.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss whether the Cold War analogy is the best historical analogy for understanding Sino-US relations under the background of great power competition, or how the ongoing rivalry will fold in the future. It seeks to explore the connections between the U.S. strategic experiences during the Cold War and its contemporary policy toward China. Since President Biden

himself lived through the Cold War period, and given the fact that policy-makers often seek successful lessons from history, therefore it is worth to trace, and explore the potential connections between U.S. Cold War experience and Biden's China policy. On the one hand, the Biden administration has repeatedly issued statements claiming that the United States does not seek a new Cold War with China, on the other hand, it has taken measures to continuously intensify competition with China, giving the impression of competing with China in a new "Cold War" style. This article aims to join this ongoing discussion.

2. Historical Analogy in Foreign Policy Decision-Making

When facing decisive moments, national leaders often look into history for wisdoms and lessons to learn from past success or mistakes, so as to avoid falling into the same old tragedy and to overcome difficulties at hands. This section is organized as follows: first, it reviews the role of historical analogy in foreign policy making in international relations, then it outlines two opposing views in academia on whether historical analogy plays a critical role in foreign policy decision-making. In the third part, it peers into the current discussion on the cold war analogy and U.S.-China strategic rivalry.

2.1 Learning from History: Historical Analogies in International Relations

Historical analogy is to compare past historical events, behaviors or patterns with current or future situations to infer possible outcomes or strategies. In foreign policy-making, national leaders often turn to historical experiences or analogous events to find solutions to current or impending challenges. Policymakers frequently invoke historical analogies as heuristic tools for addressing contemporary or foreseeable foreign policy dilemmas. When using historical analogies, policymakers play the role of "practical-intuitive" historians rather than studying history in a scientific way (Vertzberger, 1986). Faced with complex and ever-changing real situations, decision makers at all times and in all countries, especially American policymakers and diplomats, often use historical knowledge and experience to gain a deep understanding of the current situation. Even when faced with new and unprecedented situations, they draw wisdom from history, summarize lessons learned, and use this to guide the formulation of real policies, with a hope to avoid repeating the mistakes in history.

Looking back into the history of international relations of the 20th century, the origin of World War I, the "Munich Lesson", the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War and other events are historical cases that decision makers often cite when making historical analogies. The outbreak of World War I was one of the most tragic disasters in human history. The lessons learned by politicians from various countries from World War I profoundly influenced the historical trend from the 1920s to the 1930s. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of 1914 and preventing Europe from being involved in large-scale conflicts and wars again, leaders of Britain, France and other countries adopted an overly permissive response strategy to Germany's expansion. Similarly, the memory of the Vietnam War remains fresh in the early 21st century, when Bush government decided to launch Iraq War to overturn Saddam Hussain's regime.

Scholars have studied the misuse of historical analogies in U.S. foreign policy. Neustadt and May's work (1986) shows that for policy-makers, history can serve as a two-edged sword since it can both inform and misinform the assessment of current issues and events. Flaws in public policy-making commonly arise when leaders either ignore the insights of history or draw misguided parallels from incomplete or ill-fitting historical comparisons. May also argues in his book, that policy-makers are often influenced by beliefs about what history teaches or portends, and they often use history badly (May, 1973). Khong (1992) proposed that the psychology of analogical reasoning makes it difficult for policymakers to use analogies properly.

2.2 Historical Analogies' Function in Foreign Policy-Making: Two Competing Views

Though historical analogies are often cited, whether they can make a difference in foreign policy decision-making is a question at debate. While we can incorporate historical knowledge into foreign policy analysis to enhance understanding of world politics, learning from history is one thing, and specifying when and from what events certain actors learned lessons and under what conditions lead to policy changes is quite another (Levy, 1994).

In literature, there are two competing views on whether historical analogies play a critical role in foreign policy decision-making. Opponents doubt the role of analogies in the process of foreign policy-making. They assert that historical analogies cited by political leaders are merely used for defending their policy propositions. Arthur Schlesinger (1974) criticized Ernest May's opinion by saying that "the historians can never be sure—the statesman himself cannot be sure—to what extent the invocation of history is no more than a means of dignifying a conclusion already reached on other grounds." Besides, the lessons of history are not always clear cut, sometimes contradictory, therefore leaving politicians into different interpretations and uses of history.

Advocates rebut by arguing that historical analogies do affect foreign policy decision-making process, not only guiding decision-makers to view the present through a historical perspective, but also prompting decision-makers to take similar actions. In his book *Analogies at War*, Yuen Foong Khong (1992) brought up analogical explanation framework, arguing that analogies can help political decision-makers to (1) define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker, (2) assess the stakes, (3) provide prescriptions, and help evaluate alternative options by (4) predicting their chances of success, (5) evaluating their moral rightness, and (6) warning about dangers associated with the options. Robert Jervis identifies the use of analogies as a core mechanism for decision-makers to "make sense" in new situations. Jervis (1976) argues that what one has learned from major events in international history is an important factor in determining how one interprets information. Previous international events provide the politician with a range of imaginable situations in which he can detect patterns and causal relationships that help him make sense of his world. Ernest May (1973) insisted that although he could only prove that history had helped shape some people's thoughts at certain recent moments, it had always done so and would continue to do so in the future. In another word, analogies can be used to provide context for political leaders to understand ongoing events, and can serve as guidance for policy

actions based on specific steps that succeeded or failed in the past, setting the boundaries of political choices and making certain policies seem inevitable.

2.3 Discussion on the Cold War Analogy and U.S.-China Relations

The power shift in the international system over the past twenty to thirty years has made U.S.-China relations one of the most important bilateral relations. Students of International Relations draw analogies between the rising power and the established power from ancient times to contemporary international histories to gain understanding of U.S.-China dynamism in the 21st century. Frequently cited historical cases include Athens-Sparta in ancient Greece, Britain and Germany before the outbreak of World War I/II, U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War, and U.S.-Japan relations in the 1980s. Since 2017, as the rivalry between China and the United States escalates, both nations are increasingly vying for dominance in areas such as the economy, science and technology, and military capabilities. Many experts and scholars have begun to use the Cold War analogy to characterize and comprehend the current competitive dynamics of U.S.-China relations. The “new Cold War” or “Cold War 2.0” becomes the new meme circling in public discourse.

In fact, there are clear divisions within the U.S. regarding the “new Cold War”. Some scholars and analysts support the Cold War analogy and advocate for more aggressive policy response to China, viewing current U.S.-China relations through a more confrontational and adversarial lens. In 2019, Robert D. Kaplan published an article “A New Cold War Has Begun” on Foreign Policy. According to Kaplan (2019), China’s persistent computer hacking of Pentagon files and U.S. warship maintenance records amounts to a new Cold War which will last for decades. Disagreements between the two countries can hardly be resolved through negotiations, and they can rarely be relieved. Michael Lind (2018) points out that in the past few years, the “cold peace” between Russia and the Western alliance led by the U.S., has become colder and less peaceful. As China and the U.S. become increasingly conflicting in the military, diplomatic and economic fields, and China and Russia are engaged in an arms race, the era of cold peace has ended, and the second Cold War has arrived. Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis (2021) also noted that there are some similarities between the Cold War era and the contemporary world. The growing polarization, intensifying political conflicts and antagonism, and the fundamental tension between democracy and authoritarianism are profoundly reshaping the global landscape.

Those who disagree point out that the Cold War analogy fundamentally distorts the nature of the current competition, and U.S.-China relations differ from U.S.-Soviet relations in many aspects. Most notably, the deep interdependence between China and the United States—across economic, environmental, and societal dimensions—stands in stark contrast to the largely isolated relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. This view is widely shared among both Chinese and American scholars. Joseph Nye (2021, 2022, 2023) insists that the Cold War analogy is misleading, and repeatedly emphasized that the United States and China are deeply intertwined economically, socially, and ecologically—factors that were absent during the actual Cold War. Melvyn P. Leffler (2019) believes

that China poses a different type of challenge in ideology, and the type of geopolitical competition between China and the United States is also very different from that during the Cold War. Ryan Hass (2018) believes that the Cold War is a very inappropriate analogy for the current U.S.-China relationship, since there still exists deep economic and social connections between the two countries, and the level of current ideological divergence is far below the situation during the Cold War era, and there is neither proxy wars nor nuclear war crisis. In short, the future direction of U.S.-China relations needs further observation, and discussions on the Cold War analogy are still open to debate.

3. Lessons of the Cold War for U.S.

The fall of the Soviet Union leaves the U.S. the winner of the Cold War. However, as the memory of the Cold War remains rich and divided, the lessons from it is also divergent. This section focuses on the lessons of the Cold War for the U.S. through more than forty years of strategic competition, and summarizes from four aspects of how the U.S. outcompeted the Soviet Union through top-level strategic design, alliance network building, use of economic statecraft and ideological mobilization. In the end, it also briefly discusses the failed or relatively unsuccessful experiences of the U.S. during the Cold War era.

3.1 Long-Term Strategic Competition

Long-term competition can be defined as “an ongoing, open-ended contest for influence between great powers” (Hal Brands, 2022). To survive in a long-term competition, a state needs to mastering the abilities to wiled resources and tools to create advantages and impose disproportionate costs over adversaries in a span of time. Since the early stage of the Cold War, the U.S. established an overall grand strategy of “containment” towards the Soviet Union (Gaddis, 1987). This long-term strategic deployment provided the U.S. with a flexible policy space, enabling it to constantly adjust its strategy towards the Soviet in response to changes in the international situation while maintaining strategic initiative and coherence.

The success of the U.S. at the strategic level could be attributed to its multifaced employment of military, economic and political instruments to systematically weaken the competitiveness of the Soviet Union and eventually lead to the collapse of its political system. The arms race emerged as a pivotal component of this strategy, depleting the Soviet Union’s resources until it collapsed. At the military level, the United States forced the Soviet Union into a long-term arms race and technological competition to continuously invest in nuclear weapons, aerospace technology and conventional weapons through high-tech arms programs. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) promoted during Reagon administration is just one example. The economy of the Soviet Union was difficult to adapt to technology-intensive competition, resulting in military expenditure accounting for more than 25% of the national economy for a long time, seriously squeezing the development of civilian industries and exacerbating the imbalance of the economic structure. Meanwhile, the United States strengthened

collective security through the NATO alliance system, trapping the Soviet Union in geopolitical depletion. For instance, Soviet's invasion in Afghanistan further magnified its resource overdraft.

3.2 Alliance Network Building

Alliance building was key for the United States to build a global anti-communist structure during the Cold War. To counter the influence of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism, the United States strategically forged alliance networks around the world. From Europe to Asia, from military defense to political and economic cooperation, the U.S. promoted and established key multilateral alliances including North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe and South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Southeast Asia. The United States led a grand coalition against the Soviet Union through the Marshall Plan, NATO, "police operations" in North Korea, the European missile program, the special relationship with Britain, and the many facets of the Reagan Doctrine. In contrast, the Soviet Union was never able to command the real loyalty of the people of the Warsaw Pact or within the Soviet Union itself.

At the same time, bilateral alliance networks were also in the building, signing the security treaties with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, curbing the Soviet Union and China's influence in East Asia. Through aid programs and multilateral mechanisms (such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund), the United States further integrated the economic and political resources of Western countries and established its leadership in the liberal camp. This strategic cooperation based on institutionalized alliances enables the United States to achieve resource sharing and strategic linkage on a global scale, thereby significantly improving the efficiency and stability of its confrontation with the Soviet Union.

3.3 Economic Statecraft

Economic statecraft was often neglected when studying U.S. statecraft during the Cold War. In fact, western allies manipulated economic relationships with the Soviet for political purposes (Zhang, 2025). The U.S. implemented economic tools such as tariff, industrial policy, economic sanctions, export control, etc., to curb Soviet's development and to build its own strength. By weaponizing economic tools and strengthening its own technological capabilities, the U.S. successfully made the Soviet face serious difficulties in economic construction and development, and eventually led to the disintegration of the Soviet Empire due to its internal economic collapse.

After the Truman administration's containment strategy gradually took shape, the introduction of trade export controls and strategic embargo against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries was also in the process of making. Since the early stage of the Cold War, the U.S., Western Allies, had imposed economic blockade and embargo on the socialist countries for more than forty years, also known as the "economic cold war". Since the "Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls" (CoCom) established on January 9, 1950, CoCom served as a strategic weapon for the U.S. to wage economic Cold War against the Soviet by expanding the scope and leveling the intensity of

trade control. By implementing export controls, trade restrictions, and technology embargoes, the U.S. effectively blocked the Soviet's access to key technologies and advanced equipment, leaving the Soviet to lag behind in technology in the high-tech fields such as computers, electronics, and aerospace.

The U.S. also has consistently maintained its global technological hegemony through substantial investments in science and technology. Technology emerged as a critical domain of great power competition. Both Soviet and American leadership recognized that comprehensive demonstrations of technological capability served as vital instruments for securing global influence and shaping international perceptions. The Cold War era witnessed intense technological rivalry between the two superpowers in this strategic battlefield. To preserve its preeminence in military and technological domains, the U.S. government implemented a multifaceted strategy encompassing the promotion of scientific innovation, enhancement of domestic research and development capacity, and expansion of defense industrial production.

Furthermore, the United States strategically maneuvered to exclude the Soviet Union from the international financial system, constraining its access to foreign exchange and external financing. This deliberate economic isolation compounded the Soviet Union's challenges in both foreign trade and industrial modernization. The combination of technological embargoes and sustained financial pressure progressively undermined the viability of the Soviet economic model, while simultaneously exacerbating systemic institutional crises within the Soviet.

3.4 Ideological Mobilization

At its root, the Cold War was a battle of ideas — liberalism vs. Communism (Engerman, 2010). As American historian Melvyn P. Leffler wrote, citing former U.S. president George H. W. Bush, that “the Cold War was a struggle for the very soul of mankind” (2007), the Cold War was not only a power struggle, but also an ideological struggle. The U.S. put sustained efforts in ideological mobilization, competing with and ultimately outlasting the Soviet Union in a global ideological rivalry.

Ideological differences were used by American decision-makers to mobilize domestic and foreign support to compete with the Soviet Union. Through ideological propaganda, the U.S. framed the Cold War as a global struggle between liberal democracy and communism. Domestically, American decision-makers used ideology as a tool to persuade the public, mobilize society, and win domestic support for both domestic and foreign policy initiatives. At the early stage of the Cold War, its designers such as George Kennan urged American citizens to strengthen civic power and follow previous generations of American revolutionaries to meet unprecedented global challenges, proposing a traditional American behavior: organized public support to resist foreign tyranny. Internationally, U.S. leaders rallied allies, isolated the Soviet Union and socialist countries, and promoted American values around the confrontation between liberal democracy and communist totalitarianism.

The above content provides a relatively detailed analysis of U.S. successful experience during the Cold War era. However, it is of equal importance to acknowledge that there are also some failures or relatively unsuccessful dimensions of U.S. global rivalry with the Soviet Union. One is that the U.S.

was over reliant on the use of force. Although there was no direct military confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, both engaged in proxy wars by supporting third-party combatants to defend and expand the sphere of influence, and to advance their strategic interests. To fight what it perceived as communist threats, the U.S. often used military force or secret interventions, sometimes without fully understanding the real local contexts in other places. Korean War, Vietnam War, and Bay of Pigs invasion are some examples of U.S. overreliance on military intervention. These interventions frequently backfired, resulting in lengthy wars, the deaths of civilians, and harm to American credibility. Therefore, one lesson could be learned is that engaging in proxy wars can lead to unexpected consequences that will persist for a long time even after the conflict ends.

4. The Cold War Analogy and Biden's China Policy

Biden administration's China policy reflects a deliberate synthesis of Cold War lessons deriving from America's more than 40 years of strategic competition against the Soviet bloc, at the same time adding substantial modifications to adapt to the geo-political realities of the 21st century. Although the Biden administration has repeatedly emphasized that the U.S. does not seek a "new Cold War" with China, and stressed the importance of competing with China in a "managed" way, its policy formulation and implementation nonetheless reveal a clear adaptation of strategic practices derived from Cold War experience. This section intends to show how and in what way Biden's China policy mirrors U.S. Cold War lessons.

4.1 Revising Strategic Competition Strategy

Despite the fierce criticism of Trump's policies, Biden's China strategy largely inherited the strategic framework of great-power competition. Biden's China policy started by redefining the nature of threat posed by China. Largely following Trump administration's official rhetoric, Biden administration underlined the competitive nature of U.S.-China relations by identifying China as the "most serious competitor" that challenge America's "prosperity, security, and democratic values" (Biden, 2021) and "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system" and "the biggest geopolitical test" of this century (Blinken, 2021). Within six months after taking office, Biden administration repeatedly emphasized that the United States will engage in "extreme competition" with China. It views Sino-US relations from the perspective of "strategic competition" and pays more attention to the systematic, long-term nature and urgency of competition among major powers.

By defining China as "the only country with the intention and ability to change the international order" under the framework of "strategic competition", Biden administration positioning of China essentially follows the basic idea of the Cold War's containment of the Soviet Union. Under this framework, the Biden administration has implemented a multi-dimensional containment strategy covering technology, security, geopolitics and institutional values, such as restricting China's access to advanced semiconductor technology, strengthening arms sales to Taiwan, and reaffirming its

commitment to the Asia-Pacific Security Alliance. This strategy encourages coordinated efforts across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans and mobilizes the entire government, including the legislative, executive, and even judicial institutions. The outcome is a strategic competition with China that is full-spectrum, cross-regional, and whole-of-government. Similar to the “total containment” during the Cold War, Biden administration emphasized that competition with China is not limited to the military dimension but is strategically laid out in multiple cutting-edge fields. Biden administration accelerated the process of derisking from China by organizing and consolidating geo-political and geo-economic groupings in the Asia-Pacific region, aimed at countering China, seeking to establish and reinforce a U.S.-centric bloc confrontation in its strategic competition with Beijing (Zhu, 2024).

4.2 Reviving U.S. Alliance System

In shaping its competitive strategy on China, the Biden administration draw lessons from the Cold War era especially on alliances and partnerships network building. During the Cold War, the United States successfully built a global alliance network, strategically containing the influence the Soviet Union through NATO in Europe and bilateral security treaties in the Asia-Pacific. The Biden administration attempted to replicate this practice by reviving current U.S. alliance network and forging new partnerships to confront with the so-called systemic challenges from China. Restoring alliance network is one of the three pillars that the Biden administration built to outcompete China (Gu, 2022). Starting from his first day in office, Biden has repeatedly emphasized that the U.S. should “repair our alliances and engage with the world once again”, unite allies and partners to jointly address challenges (The White House, 2021). The Biden administration rejected Trump’s unilateralism and committed to building, expanding and consolidating the “broadest alliance” against China, intending to increase the United States’ ability and effectiveness to contain China.

To take a closer look, the Cold War lessons of alliance building could be observed in Biden administration’s effort to repair the cracked transatlantic relations with its traditional western allies and strengthen its ties with Indo-Pacific partners. After taking into office, the Biden administration began to strengthen its alliances and partnerships with European countries and Indo-Pacific countries, and placed more emphasis on building small group networks or mini-lateral mechanisms to counter China’s increasingly rising influence. In his first overseas trip to Europe in June 2021, Biden aimed to bolster transatlantic alliance partnership and repair U.S. credibility among European nations. One of his foreign policy priorities was to working with allies to counter the threats to U.S. interests posed by authoritarian rivals such as China and Russia. Traditionally, NATO is a Eurocentric military alliance since its establishment. However, its recent strategic documents reflected a growing concern on China’s strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific area. This no doubt revealed the Biden’s administration’s intension and effort to counter China through alignment. At the same time, the Biden administration has also advanced mini-lateral mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region. Such efforts include the Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the trilateral security partnership AUKUS, US–Japan–Philippines trilateral summit, US–Japan–South Korea trilateral cooperation, etc. These cooperative arrangements echo U.S. Cold War-era

containment strategies that aimed at constructing global networks of deterrence by strengthening alliances and partnerships.

4.3 Economic Statecraft: Restrictive Economic Policies and industrial Policies

In economic dimension, one can observe clear continuities of U.S. Cold War economic strategies in Biden administration's China policy. Just as economic statecraft was employed strategically by the U.S. to promote its economic and political influence and to contain the Soviet, tactically using economic tools such as trade embargo, economic sanction, industrial policy, and export control to limit the Soviet's access to resources and critical technologies, the Biden administration implemented similar strategies aimed at constraining China's advancement in critical and emerging technological areas and its growing global economic influence.

The Biden administration's efforts to curb China's economic influence and development could be summarized into the following three points: first, the Biden administration, together with its allies and partners, tried to build an economic circle that is less influenced by China. By depicting China's image as a coercive power that is willing to engage in "economic bullying" for political concession, the U.S. and its western allies have called for the creation of a multilateral mechanism to counter China's "weaponization of economic interdependence" (Cha, 2023). Friendshoring, nearshoring and reshoring strategies have been promoted to adjust key parts in supply chains and industrial chains away from China to trusted U.S. allies and partners on the grounds of reducing risks and enhancing diversity. In the Indo-Pacific region, the Biden administration launched the regional multilateral economic initiative Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022 to counter Beijing's rising influence in the region. Second, the Biden administration use industrial subsidies and public-private partnerships to reinvigorate U.S. technological research and industrial production capacity. As it has noted that U.S. prosperity and security depend heavily on the country's ability to produce cutting-edge science and tech, the Biden administration signed bills including Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act to rebuild and upgrade the country's manufacturing capacity in key industries like semiconductors and renewable energy. Third, the Biden administration upgraded and implemented targeted export control measures to prevent China from acquiring U.S. advanced and emerging technological productions and critical equipment. "Small yard, high fence" strategy was employed to set strategic boundaries delineated around specific technologies and research areas deemed critical for U.S. national security. During Biden's term, the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) issued four unprecedented key updates on export controls (2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), setting new restriction to block China to access semiconductors and related technology for artificial intelligence. Analogous to its Cold War-era strategy against the Soviet, the Biden administration systematically pursued the implementation of a selective technological embargo designed to curtail China's access to key advanced technologies possessing significant dual-use potential.

4.4 Highlighting Values and Ideological Mobilization

The Biden administration has attached importance to building alliances based on democratic values. Faced with an ever increasingly divided domestic society and partisan divisions, the Biden administration sought to mobilize forces on both domestic and international levels to compete with China. By narrating U.S.-China relations as a confrontation between “democratic values and authoritarianism”, the Biden administration sought to weaken China’s discourse power internationally, tarnish China’s national image, and win support from its allies and partners. The way that the Biden administration narrates no doubt reminds us of the Cold War era East-West ideological confrontation.

According to its official rhetoric, the severity of challenges posed by China has been gradually deepening since Biden administration vigorously exaggerated the confrontation on ideology. By deliberately amplifying ideological differences, it frames the bilateral strategic competition as a fundamental clash between the “free democratic world” and a “hostile authoritarian power.” Internationally, The Biden administration proposed the “alliance of democracies”, convened the global summit for democracy, and built a “democratic alliance” in the transatlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. “Summit for Democracy” launched in 2021 is a representative of its soft power diplomacy. At various multilateral international summits such as the G7 summit, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, U.S.-led coalition has portrayed itself as a coalition of “like-minded” nations united with “shared democratic values”. By exaggerating China’s ideological threat, Biden’s Cold War-style narrative serves to legitimize a confrontational approach and mobilize allied support under the banner of defending liberal democratic values.

From the perspective of policy implementation, this section provides a detailed analysis of the Biden administration’s application of successful Cold War experience to its China policy. While Biden and his team have shrewdly drawn on experiences which are deemed vital for winning the Cold War, they have also carefully reflected on its failures in order to avoid repeating past mistakes and to guide their policies towards China. On the Taiwan and South China Sea issues, the Biden administration has shown a certain degree of restraint in its policies toward China, both in public statements and actual policies, and has been particularly cautious in the use of force. The U.S. government has maintained strategic ambiguity in its actual actions to avoid triggering a military conflict between China and the United States, though President Biden was tough in rhetoric, stating in public that the United States will defend Taiwan if China uses force against it. On the South China Sea issue, the Biden administration has continued to conduct “freedom of navigation” operations to uphold international law and the right of navigation in international waters, but avoids entering the 12 nautical miles of islands and reefs actually controlled by China to reduce the risk of military friction. Besides, the Biden administration has actively engaged countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, India and others to jointly put pressure on China on the South China Sea issue, but has focused more on strategic deterrence and diplomatic alliances rather than the use of force.

5. Conclusion

The Cold War has long since come to an end, but it has not left us. The above analysis shows that the Biden administration's China policy is deeply influenced by U.S. Cold War experience in various aspects. The Cold War analogy has not only led Biden's team to define the nature of U.S.-China rivalry in a more competitive way, but also provide guidance in policy implementation. In a broader sense, this article also shows that political leaders draw lessons from history of the past for understanding situation they were in, and often seek for diagnosis and policy prescription to handle critical issues at hand. Analogies have the power to influence political leaders' way of thinking in decision-making process, hence implying possible policy prescriptions. However, advocates who argue that a new Cold War is on-going or inevitable in the immediate future should bear in mind that Biden's policies are constrained by profound changes in the international system. China's deep economic integration in regional and global economy, the complex interdependence between U.S. and China, the existence of nuclear deterrence mechanism and the lack of proxy war, the need to cooperate on climate issue, etc., these factors will make the rivalry between U.S. and China more complex and divert from U.S.-Soviet Cold War competition. This also indicates that although historical analogies can serve as guidance to political leaders under certain conditions, policy making must be based on deep understanding and assessment of realities. One limitation of this study lies in the lack of detailed research based on historical archives from the Biden administration. Due to the lack of access to archives on some key decision-making discussions, the analysis of Cold War analogy in the Biden administration's China policy must primarily be based on observable outcomes. As more internal documents from the Biden administration are declassified, future research can explore the actual role of Cold War analogy in the policy-making process by examining declassified materials such as private conversation records of core decision-makers, minutes of key meetings, and other relevant sources.

Acknowledgement

None.

Funding Statement

None.

Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data used in this study are confidential at the request of the wind farm operators.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

References

- [1]. McFaul, M. (2020). Cold War Lessons and Fallacies for US-China Relations Today. *The Washington Quarterly*, (4): 7-39.
- [2]. Nye, Joseph S. (2022). How not to deal with a rising China: a US perspective. *International Affairs*, (5): 1635-1651.
- [3]. Schweller, R. (2022). An Emerging World that Defies Historical Analogy. In *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future*, eds. by Græger, N., Heurlin, B., Wæver, O., Wivel, A. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [4]. Yin, J. (2020). The Cold War analogy's misrepresentation of the essence of US-China strategic competition. *China Int Strategy Rev*, (2): 257-269.
- [5]. Khong, Y.F. (2019). The US, China, and the Cold War analogy. *China Int Strategy Rev*, (1): 223-237.
- [6]. Goldstein, A. (2020). US–China Rivalry in the twenty-first century: Déjà vu and Cold War II. *China Int Strategy Rev*, (2): 48–62.
- [7]. Harris, P. and Marinova, I. (2022). American Primacy and US-China Relations: The Cold War Analogy Reversed. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (4): 335-351.
- [8]. Vertzberger, Y. (1986). Foreign Policy Decisionmakers As Practical-Intuitive Historians: Applied History and Its Shortcomings. *International Studies Quarterly*, (2): 223-247.
- [9]. Neustadt, R. and May E. (1986). *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*. New York: Freedom Press.
- [10]. May, E. (1973). *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [11]. Levy, J. (1994). Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield. *International Organization*, (2): 279-312.
- [12]. Khong, Y. (1992). *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University.
- [13]. Jervis, R. (1976). *Perceptions and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [14]. Kaplan, R. (2019) A New Cold War Has Begun. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>.
- [15]. Lind, M. (2018). America vs. Russia and China: Welcome to Cold War II. *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-vs-russia-china-welcome-cold-war-ii-25382?nopaging=1>.
- [16]. Brands, H. and Gaddis, J. (2021). The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History. *Foreign Affairs*, (6):10-20.

- [17]. Nye, J. (2022). How not to deal with a rising China: a US perspective. *International Affairs*, (5): 1635-1651. Nye, J. (2023). Not Destined for War. *Project Syndicate*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-china-not-destined-for-war-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-10>. Nye, J. (2021) With China, a “Cold War” Analogy Is Lazy and Dangerous. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/opinion/biden-china-cold-war.html>.
- [18]. Leffler, M. (2007). *For the Soul of Mankind: the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- [19]. Zhang, X. (2025). *The Cold War and Its Legacy*, 2nd ed. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press.
- [20]. Brands, H. (2022). *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great-Power Rivalry Today*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- [21]. Gaddis, J. (1987). *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [22]. Biden, J. (2021). Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World. *The White House*. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.
- [23]. Blinken, A. (2021). A Foreign Policy for the American People. *U.S. Department of State*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.
- [24]. Zhu, F. (2024). Analysis of US Strategy and Outlook for Sino-US Relations. *International Economic Review*, (2): 27-33.
- [25]. Gu, G. (2022). Three Pillars in the Biden Administration’s China Strategy: Allies, Values, and High-Tech. *International Relations and Diplomacy*, (6): 277-285.
- [26]. The White House, (2021). <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.
- [27]. Cha, V. (2023). Collective Resilience: Deterring China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence. *International Security*, (1): 91–124.
- [28]. Bureau of Industry and Security. (2022) 87 FR 62186. Department of Commerce. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/10/13/2022-21658/implementation-of-additional-export-controls-certain-advanced-computing-and-semiconductor>. Bureau of Industry and Security. (2023). 88 FR 73458. Department of Commerce. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/10/25/2023-23055/implementation-of-additional-export-controls-certain-advanced-computing-items-supercomputer-and>. Bureau of Industry and Security. (2024). 89 FR 96830. Department of Commerce. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/12/05/2024-28267/additions-and-modifications-to-the-entity-list-removals-from-the-validated-end-user-veu-program>. Bureau of Industry and Security. (2025). 90 FR 4544. Department of Commerce. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/15/2025-00636/framework-for-artificial-intelligence-diffusion>.



Copyright: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MOSP and/or the editor(s). MOSP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.