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Narrating and Practising the US–China "Tech War"

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US and Chinese domestic and foreign policies increasingly point towards great-power competition. Technology plays a significant role therein, with the bilateral "tech war" portraying economic and technological interdependence as a national security threat. This represents a significant shift in US China policy, which had, since the Clinton administration, focused on economic engagement. Prominent realist accounts consider this change as the inevitable consequence of shifts in the balance of power associated with China's rise. We propose an alternative perspective, arguing that the US side of the "tech war" is shaped by shifts in dominant, meaning-making narratives. Based on discursive and practice theories in International Relations, we use the concept of narrative practices to understand this process. Narrative practices emphasize the procedural and relational aspect of narratives, rather than viewing them as something that actors pursue in a limited, strategic manner. Empirically, we trace the trajectory of actors performing changing narrative practices from the Obama to the Biden Administrations. The central focus of the policy shift lies in how these narrative practices are integrated in and sustain two different master narratives. US actors gradually moved away from performing narrative practices of engagement connected to the liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative towards "tech war" narrative practices entrenched in and supporting the realist master narrative centred on great-power competition. We therefore hold that the "tech war" arises from the incremental build-up of social meaning associated with actors performing "tech war" narrative practices rather than a strategically executed narrative plan.

Las políticas, tanto internas como internacionales, de Estados Unidos y China apuntan hacia una competencia, cada vez mayor, entre grandes potencias. La tecnología desempeña un papel importante en este sentido, y la "guerra tecnológica" bilateral representa la interdependencia económica y tecnológica como una amenaza para la seguridad nacional. Esto representa un cambio significativo en la política de EE. UU. con respecto a China que, desde la administración Clinton, se había centrado en el compromiso económico. Existen prominentes relatos realistas que consideran este cambio como una consecuencia inevitable de los movimientos en el equilibrio de poder asociados con el ascenso de China. Proponemos una perspectiva alternativa, argumentando que el lado estadounidense de la "guerra tecnológica" está moldeado por cambios en las narrativas dominantes que crean significado. Partimos de las teorías discursivas y prácticas en el campo de las Relaciones Internacionales y utilizamos el concepto de prácticas narrativas con el fin de comprender este proceso. Las prácticas narrativas enfatizan el aspecto procedimental y relacional de las narrativas, en lugar de verlas como algo que los agentes persiguen de manera limitada y estratégica. De manera empírica, analizamos la trayectoria de los agentes que realizan prácticas narrativas cambiantes desde las administraciones de Obama hasta la de Biden. El enfoque central del cambio de política radica en cómo se integran estas prácticas narrativas y cómo sostienen dos narrativas principales diferentes. Los agentes estadounidenses se alejaron gradualmente de la realización de prácticas narrativas en materia de compromiso que estaban conectadas con la narrativa principal liberal de la "paz capitalista" y se fueron acercando a prácticas narrativas de "guerra tecnológica", las cuales estaban arraigadas en la narrativa principal realista centrada en la competencia entre las grandes potencias y que apoyaban esta narrativa. Por lo tanto, argumentamos que la "guerra tecnológica" surge de la acumulación incremental de significado social asociada con los agentes que realizan prácticas narrativas de "guerra tecnológica" en lugar de surgir de un plan narrativo ejecutado estratégicamente.

Les politiques nationales et étrangères des États-Unis et de la Chine suggèrent de plus en plus une concurrence entre grandes puissances. En cela, la technologie joue un rôle important : la « guerre de la tech » bilatérale dépeint l'interdépendance économique et technologique comme une menace de sécurité nationale. Cette situation constitue un changement important dans la politique États-Unis–Chine ; depuis l'administration de Bill Clinton, elle se concentrait sur l'engagement économique. Les principaux récits réalistes estiment que ce changement est une conséquence inévitable de l'évolution de l'équilibre des pouvoirs qui accompagne l'essor de la Chine. Nous proposons une autre perspective et affirmons que le côté américain de la « guerre de la tech » dépend de l'évolution des principaux récits créateurs de sens. Nous fondant sur les théories discursives et pratiques des relations internationales, nous employons le concept de pratiques narratives pour comprendre ce processus. Les pratiques narratives mettent l'accent sur l'aspect procédural et relationnel des récits, plutôt que de les considérer comme quelque chose que les acteurs suivent de façon stratégique et limitée. Sur le plan empirique, nous retraçons la trajectoire d'acteurs dont les pratiques narratives évoluent au sein des administrations de Barack Obama et de Joe Biden. Le changement politique réside principalement dans la façon dont ces pratiques narratives s'intègrent dans deux récits dominants et les entretiennent. Les acteurs américains ont progressivement délaissé les pratiques narratives d'engagement liées au récit dominant de « paix capitaliste » libérale pour adopter des pratiques narratives de la « guerre de la tech », ancrées dans le récit réaliste dominant centré sur la concurrence entre grandes puissances et qui le soutiennent. Par conséquent, nous

maintenons que la ≪ guerre de la tech ≫ découle d'une accumulation progressive de sens social associée à des acteurs aux pratiques narratives de la ≪ guerre de la tech ≫, plutôt que d'un plan narratif appliqué stratégiquement.

According to most US policymakers and analysts, the United States has entered a new era of great-power competition with China (Brands and Gaddis 2021; Marandici 2023; Schindler et al. 2023). A dimension of this competition is technologically charged, leading to the description of a "tech war." The United States views global connectivity, (technology-based) economic interdependence, and global supply chains as something potentially threatening that should be limited to like-minded states. The "tech war" marks a distinct change in US China policy. After the end of the Cold War, successive US administrations from Clinton to Obama in his first term pursued a policy of economic engagement. It was assumed that US interests (and those of its allies) would be better served by a stable and prosperous China rather than the opposite. Therefore, the United States should welcome rather than block China's rise (Steinberg 2019). However, since 2013, when the second term of the Obama presidency began, Sino–US relations have been gradually transformed into a "geopolitical competition" (Steinberg 2019, 119). We therefore ask: *How can we make sense of the US–China "tech war" aimed at untangling global supply chains?*

The broader competitive framing of US China policy started brewing towards the end of the Obama administration's second term and was extended through the Trump and Biden administrations (Wang et al. 2018; Ratner and Carson 2019; Friedberg 2022). It has now become bipartisan agreement across US domestic and foreign policies. Key policy examples include the May 2019 addition of Huawei to the US Department of Commerce's Entity List, the August 2022 introduction of export controls on technologies supporting the production of advanced semiconductors and turbines, as well as the CHIPS and Science Act to boost US domestic production of semiconductors (King and Wu 2024). Because of mounting concerns over China benefiting asymmetrically from bilateral cooperation, the Biden administration only renewed the US–China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement (STA), which has been in place since 1979, for 6 months twice in 2023–2024. Finally, a bilateral agreement to extend the STA for five years reached on December 13, 2024 (Gilbert and Mallapaty 2024; Ching 2024; Sutter and Blevins 2024). In partnership with US allies, both the Trump and Biden administrations have been taking steps to establish China-free technology supply chains, especially but not limited to semiconductors (Woo and Yang 2021; Yang and Zhai 2022).

Neorealist scholars of international relations (IR) see this foreign policy direction as the unavoidable result of changes in the balance of power connected to China's rise. According to Allison's "Thucydides's trap" argument (2017), when a rising power threatens to displace an established hegemon, this rivalry will likely cause a war between them. Literature on the "tech war" appears dominated by such power-oriented arguments (Akdag 2019; Zhang 2022). We offer an alternative account by arguing that the US side of the "tech war" is constituted by changes in prevalent, sense-making narratives. US policymakers construct narratives that represent social events in a sequential way, featuring a cast of characters, and suggesting a specific intersubjective way of making sense of the world (Onega Jaén and García Landa 1999, 3; Wibben 2011, 59; Bode 2015, 47). Drawing on theoretical insights from discursive and practice theories in IR, we understand this process as resulting from how actors perform *narrative practices*. This analytical notion highlights the processual and relational dimension of narratives rather than conceptualizing them as something that actors pursue strategically (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017; Bueger and Gadinger 2018; Freistein and Gadinger 2020, 221). As "a nexus of saying and doing" (Schatzki 2012, 15), practices constitute patterns of human activity and "embody shared intersubjective knowledge" (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 15). Narrative practices can be understood as "the processes of narrative building, management, and performance" that, in our case, become constitutive of foreign policy (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017, 579). Our argument, therefore, connects to and expands on an emerging scholarship integrating practice theories into foreign policy analysis (Loh 2020).

We hold that the increasingly adverse reading of China's ascendancy in technology is constituted through changing narrative practices performed by US policymakers, analysts, and academics. These actors perform their changing perceptions and intersubjective knowledge of China from favorable/positive to unfavorable/negative in two parts.

First, the narrative practices of the "tech war" are embedded in and therefore sustain a changing master narrative in the international economic realm. A master narrative is understood as "a dominant storyline that permeates and structures knowledge" (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 388). Narrative practices of the "tech war" depart from the liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative (Russett and Oneal 2001; Gartzke 2007; Weede 2010; Keohane and Nye 2012 [1977]) that had long served as the main reference point for US China policy, especially in economic matters. This liberal master narrative holds that international commerce based on free-market principles leads to increasing levels of economic interdependence between states, which in turn enhances their mutual political cooperation potential and reduces the likelihood of conflicts. From the second Obama administration onward (2013–2017), US policymakers questioned this proposition and, instead, began to enact "tech war" narrative practices. Over time, the accumulated performance of "tech war" narrative practices has moved US China policy towards portraying a globally connected world as a source of competition, insecurity, and war. We argue that the performance of different types of narrative practices and how these are embedded in two different master narratives are at the heart of this change of direction. US actors moved away from the previously dominant narrative practices associated with the liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative towards "tech war" narrative practices embedded in and sustaining a realist great-power competition master narrative.

Second, narrative practices performed by US actors changed their characterization of China from a potential partner to an adversary with revisionist motivations about the international order. Such characterizations become increasingly ideologically charged in portraying China as the "Other"—the major "outlier" in an ongoing rivalry between authoritarian and democratic systems of government (Turner 2013, 2014). In performing narrative prac-

tices about what China "is" and does, US policymakers have sought to redefine and narrow the range of available policy options and legitimize these as "normal," "common-sense," and "inevitable," thereby cultivating the audiences' consent and silencing potential dissenting alternatives (Krebs 2015, 1–24). Not changing the current empirical picture that unfolds in US China policy notwithstanding, this finding suggests that this empirical picture is *not* an inevitable response to structural forces, but is contingent, incrementally constituted by narrative practices that are established, maintained, and can change.

Narrative practices of the US–China "tech war" have been so appealing to the US foreign policy audience because their competitive ways of sense-making have embedded themselves in, latched on to,[1] and sustained a persistent master narrative around US decline vis-à-vis China's rise, and the resulting great-power competition. While this master narrative has not had consistent currency for the performance of narrative practices in the economic realm, there are historical precedents for such connections. In the 1980s, narrative practices had portrayed both Japan and Germany as technological rivals, connecting their technological prowess with visions of US decline (Huntington 1988; Dietrich 1991).[2] Generally, technological development and superiority have long been characterized as highly significant for sustaining and strengthening US hegemonic power, making the "tech war" narrative practices appear a logical extension (McCarthy 2015; McDonald 2017). The 2008 global financial crisis strengthened such unfavourable comparisons between China and the United States, thus preparing the ground for "tech war" narrative practices.

Understanding this change in US China policy at the level of narrative practices allows us to capture the gradual, procedural, social dimension of US China policy's development over time. We hold that there is no grand, strategically executed plan that culminates in changes in US China policy. Rather, the policy shift results from multiple actors performing narrative practices of the "tech war," leading to an incremental build-up of intersubjective meaning and therefore change. There was not a dramatic transition from engagement to competition. Rather, focusing on narrative practices considers how various actors have performed such practices through and over time and how these have gradually changed US China policy as their intensity and number have increased.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows: First, we develop our theoretical argument about narrative practices and the US–China "tech war." The "tech war" narrative practices are embedded into the realist great-power competition master narrative, and, over time, their performance incrementally replaces the liberal master narrative that previously shaped US pro-engagement foreign policy towards China. Second, we reflect on our methodology: We conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of official US discourse on technology and China from January 2009 to March 2024. Therein, we abductively identified key plots animating "tech war" narrative practices, including techno-nationalism, strategic industries, global supply-chain vulnerability, and democracies versus autocracies. Third, we present our analysis that shows the slowly unfolding trajectory of the "tech war" narrative practices and the associated policies from the second Obama administration onward.

Narrative Practices and Foreign Policy Change

Narratives have gained increasing attention in IR scholarship as valuable analytical concepts for studying both the foreign policies of states and IR more broadly. The method of sense-making that narratives represent, and therefore their shaping effects on social reality, appears to be typically human (Suganami 1999; Kacowicz 2005; Sheshav 2006; Koschorke 2018): "narrative is a metacode, a human universal" (White 1980, 6). Narratives represent events in a meaningful, often sequential way (i) to suggest specific ways of making sense of the world, (ii) to shape possible responses to this sense-making, and (iii) to limit alternative ways of sense-making (Onega Jaén and García Landa 1999, 3; Wibben 2011, 59; Bode 2015, 47). In doing this, narratives reduce complexity and are therefore building blocks of how social reality is constructed in discourses and practices (Delgado 1989).

Drawing on narrative studies from both discursive and practice theoretical backgrounds, we develop a processual and relational understanding of narratives (Neumann 2002, 2012; Krebs 2015; Faizullaev and Cornut 2017; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019; Freistein and Gadinger 2020). To do this, we use the term *narrative practices* that locates narratives firmly in the realm of practices—understood as patterned actions in social context and as "a nexus of doing and saying" (Schatzki 2012, 15). Conceptualizing narratives as practices contributes to studying foreign policy change, thereby sustaining emerging connections between practice theories and foreign policy analysis (Loh 2020). Narrative practices offer an alternative conceptualization to the influential notion of strategic narratives. Defined as "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014, 2), strategic narratives presuppose a strategically executed, intended change of narratives on the part of foreign policy decision-makers. Narrating decision-makers are thought to exert considerable control over this change, which is typically caused by external drivers, for example, particular "smoking-gun" changes in China's behavior vis-à-vis the United States. Critics of strategic narratives would hold that the concept potentially overemphasizes the extent to which narrators can exercise their agency via narratives (Shepherd 2015).

By contrast, the processual, relational understanding attached to narrative practices allows us to conceptualize how policymakers perform these as part of an intersubjective, incremental process, resulting in instances of continuity and change (Certeau 1984, 70; Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 70). The particular social meaning that narratives elicit is therefore contingent and negotiable (Czarniawska 1998; Bode 2015, 47–9). Narrative practices need to be performed, produced, and maintained to unfold particular forms of social meaning (Freistein and Gadinger 2022, 7).

The construction of narratives that are then performed as narrative practices includes three typical elements. First, they have a plot or a structuring sequence of events with a more or less clearly defined beginning, middle, and end (Wibben 2011, 59); second, they feature a cast of characters that are frequently "structured across binary oppositions" (Polletta 2006, 14–5); and third, they include a normative solution or "lesson" (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 387). This lesson does not only make the narrative's ending de-

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[1] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this apt expression.

[2] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to these precedents.

sirable or undesirable but also includes suggested and preferred action possibilities for characters and the audience.

Narratives work at different levels of abstraction from the macro to the micro level, thereby defining a space of narrative practices. At the macro level, we find master narratives that hold a commonsensical appeal to audiences (Epstein 2008; Krebs 2015; Spencer 2016). Narrative practices co-constitute these master narratives—a process that unfolds incrementally over time and has a dual quality. On the one hand, in our case, how various US policymakers perform narrative practices constitutes these master narratives. The substance of master narratives is therefore contingent on, shaped, or sustained by the narrative practices performed at the micro level. On the other hand, master narratives tend to be persistent, long-standing, and sticky—they "permeate and structure knowledge" (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 388). Narrative practices that embed themselves into or latch on to such master narratives are therefore more likely to resonate, i.e., be successful in shaping intersubjective understanding, because of the ways in which they connect to, typically, long-established knowledge regimes (Krebs 2015; Freistein and Gadinger 2022, 7). Therefore, performing narrative practices has the potential to shape and therefore alter master narratives, but narrative practices that are firmly embedded in the knowledge structures of persistent master narratives are more likely to gain traction. More importantly, we need to think of both narrative practices and master narratives in the plural. They are embedded in a web wherein they may shape, support, or weaken each other by association (Van Peer and Chatman 2001).

We argue that narrative practices co-constitute US "tech war" policy towards China at three levels, utilizing the three elements of narrative practices introduced above: plot, characterization, and lesson (Figure 1).

First, we consider how actors perform various, changing narrative practices underlying US foreign policy towards China in the international economic realm at the micro level. The basic, more or less unified plot of narrative practices of engagement accepted a particular international economic division of labour and rested on the lesson that international economic cooperation and participation in international organizations would exert a socialization effect upon China, making it potentially more (economically) liberal and perhaps even democratic. By contrast, narrative practices of the "tech war" are animated by plots that understand engagement as a policy failure and consider the United States as a power in decline, not least because of China's rise. These plots question the international economic division of labour and view economic cooperation as more beneficial to China than to the United States. Consequently, the lesson of such narrative practices is to cap such cooperation and ensure that the United States invests domestically in its technological development to sustain and strengthen its power position. Figure 1 portrays the two sets of narrative practices associated with engagement and the "tech war," respectively, as ideal-typically separate analytical categories. Empirically, we expect there to be temporal overlap between how US policymakers perform these narrative practices, which becomes less pronounced over time as the narrative practices of the "tech war" gain hold.

Second, we examine how the respective narrative practices are based on different characterizations or intersubjective knowledge of China. Such characterizations are also significant for shaping the lessons inherent to the narrative practices, as described above. While narrative practices of engagement tend to characterize China as a liberalizing state and potential cooperation partner, "tech war" ones portray China as a rapidly emerging, revisionist adversary. Both characterizations of China are tendentially binary and limiting.

Third, both the performance of narrative practices of engagement and of the "tech war" co-constitute and reconstitute the master narratives animating US foreign policy towards China. These changes are particularly noticeable in the international economic realm where the narrative practices of the US–China "tech war" are situated. Here, narrative practices of engagement had previously shaped and been embedded in a liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative of economic interdependence as a source of economic prosperity and political stability and as potentially enhancing cooperation. Narrative practices of the "tech war," however, refer to, and are embedded in, a realist great-power competition master narrative. Such "tech war" narrative practices animate deeply competitive characterizations of China that have long shaped and resonated with narrative practices in the international security realm (Levy 2008). But "tech war" narrative practices firmly embed this form of sense-making into the international economic realm and culminate in fundamentally different "lessons" for US policymakers. Consequently, the relevant master narrative of US China policy in the international economic realm begins to change gradually from liberal engagement to great-power competition as it is reconstituted by US actors performing "tech war" narrative practices from the bottom up.

In sum, we study how the performance of narrative practices shapes and sustains US foreign policy towards China in the "tech war." Policy analysts and practitioners perform practices that constitute narratives at different levels of aggregation. At the micro level, narrative practices of the "tech war" challenge the international economic division of labor by prioritizing US domestic technological development and aiming to build China-free supply chains, thereby departing from previous engagement practices. These "tech war" narrative practices sustain the characterization of China as no longer a liberalizing power and a cooperation partner, at the very least economically, but as an adversary and a threat. Over time, the narrative practices performed as part of the US–China "tech war" reshape the relevant master narrative of US macroeconomic foreign policy towards China from the previously dominant liberal "capitalist peace" narrative toward a realist narrative of interdependence as risky, animating great-power competition.

Methodology: Qualitative Narrative Analysis

We adopt an interpretivist methodology to capture the change in US China policy as part of a *constitutive*, incrementally unfolding sense-making process enacted by US policymakers, instead of delving into causal mechanisms. To do so, we have conducted a qualitative narrative analysis, focusing on official, publicly available documents that cover the broad theme of technology and China from the Obama to the Biden administrations.[3] These documents include transcripts of speeches, press briefings, remarks, messages to Congress, executive orders, and special reports by the three presidents, as well as by other senior administration officials.

Our document corpus collectively represents narrative practices performed by senior administration officials and

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[3] We analyzed 118 documents in total: 15 across the first/second Obama administrations, 48 from the Trump administration, and 55 from the Biden administration. All documents are available on the administrations' national archives/websites. Documents were selected by searching for keywords such as "technology" and "China."
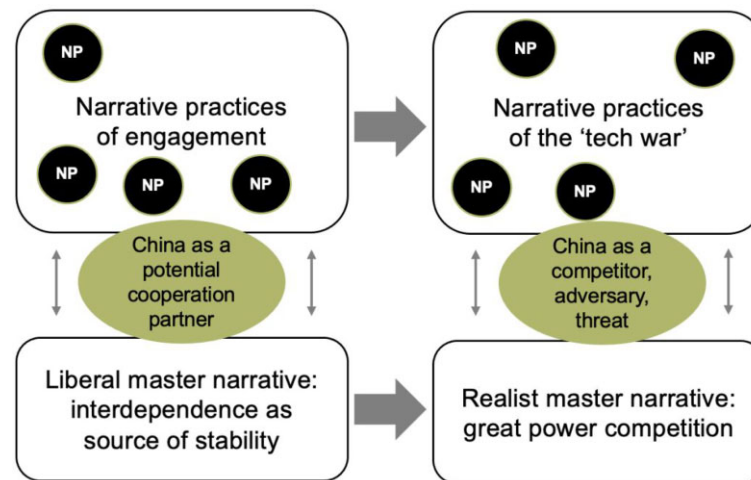
Figure 1. Narrative practices co-constituting US "tech war" policy towards China.

selected party representatives. It thus allows us to understand the changing US perception of, and position on, China and technology. In addition, we have also drawn upon key policy documents such as the National Security Strategies, as they offer valuable examples of US narrative practices on technology and China. Our study period ranges from January 2009 to March 2024, thereby allowing us to track the emergence and incremental intensification of "tech war" narrative practices over a substantial period. Our empirical analysis has also drawn out shifts in Chinese foreign policy behavior towards the United States during this time span to provide important context for changing narrative practices.

Our coding has followed an abductive approach, combining inductive and deductive components. In line with our interpretivist framework, our coding reflects intersubjectivity rather than generalizability and replicability. We started by identifying technology-relevant codes representing core plots associated with the liberal and realist master narratives that we would expect narrative practices to feature, e.g., "interdependence" and "cooperation" for the liberal master narrative and "techno-nationalism," "strategic industries," "supply-chain vulnerability," and "democracies versus autocracies" for the realist master narrative. We have deduced both sets of plots from a primary understanding and reading of the literature on the US–China "tech war," as well as from the texts under study. We then iteratively adjusted and refined our plots inductively from working more closely with the texts. At this stage, we also added codes revolving around US characterizations of both China (e.g., as a reliable partner, as a competitor, as a security threat) and of itself (e.g., a leader in decline) and narrative lessons arising from these. Coding therefore reflected the three levels of narrative practices identified in Figure 1.

China and the United States from Technological Engagement to Competition: The Slow Unfolding of Changing Narrative Practices

The following sections unpack how a gradual change in narrative practices performed by US policymakers that started in the second Obama administration has sustained the increasingly restrictive "tech war" policies implemented during the Trump and Biden administrations. Such narrative practices of the "tech war" have embedded themselves into a realist great-power competition master narrative rather than viewing economic interdependence as a source of prosperity and stability.

The Obama Administrations: The Beginning of the "Tech War"

During the two terms of the Obama administration (2009–2013; 2013–2017), narrative practices typically rested on portraying technology as an essential feature of innovation. Technology would "not only spawn new products, but create and awaken entire industries" (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2011a). At least in the initial stages, narrative practices performed by policymakers of the Obama administration featured the belief that the United States and China should cooperate on technology. Widespread narrative plots were centred on "interdependence" and "cooperation," thus emphasizing growing interdependence between the two states and the belief that US–China cooperation would mutually benefit their economies, as well as foster stability and peace.

To increase research and development investment in the US high-tech industry and maintain the profitability of the sector, US firms were encouraged to enter and tap into the profitable Chinese market (Foot and King 2019, 42). A prevailing narrative practice performed by senior US policymakers was therefore not promoting "decoupling" but the reverse. To this end, policymakers in the second Obama administration promoted, for example, the Information Technology Agreement "to boost trade in the computer and IT products that power the 21st century economy" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2014). Underlining this, Obama explained at a press conference with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping that such technological cooperation would also "increase the trade that helps grow our economies and creates jobs" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2014). The need and benefits of cooperating with China were further highlighted by then Vice President Joe Biden, who stressed collaboration on intellectual property (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2012).

Consistent with these narrative practices, the Obama administration showed a positive characterization of China as a partner with which the United States would cooperate

in various sectors, including science and technology (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2011). In addition, Obama's narrative practices displayed admiration for China's technological progress, which further sustained the belief to foster cooperation between the states:

> In addition to your growing economy, we *admire* China's extraordinary commitment to science and research – a commitment borne out in everything from the infrastructure you build to the technology you use. China […] now has the world's largest mobile phone network, and it is investing in the new forms of energy that can both sustain growth and combat climate change … (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2009; emphasis added)

We can clearly see how such narrative practices were embedded in and constituted the liberal master narrative of economic interdependence and cooperation leading to prosperity and growth *in both countries*, visible in then Vice President Joe Biden urging that "we need to deepen cooperation" (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2011b). He thus underlined the intention of the United States to foster more exports of high-tech products to China, allowing business between the two countries to grow (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2011b). Such narrative practices rested on portraying interdependence as mutually beneficial for both countries, which, according to the "lesson" featured, would inevitably grow from such exchanges and create more jobs and economic stability for the US population (The White House, Office of the Vice President 2011b).

That bilateral cooperation was mutually desirable was also reflected through narrative practices performed in relation to their common fight against cyber intellectual property theft and cyber espionage (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2013, 2015). Despite initial mutual accusations of cyber espionage (Brown and Yung 2017), the two countries managed to strike the 2015 US–China Cyber Agreement. At the joint press conference following the deal in September 2015, narrative practices performed by both leaders portrayed their collaboration as fundamental to countering *common* cyber threats, highlighting a shared sense of interdependence as beneficial. These narrative practices clearly reflect the plot of the "capitalist peace," portraying cooperation as beneficial not only from an economic point of view but also for national security, peace, and stability. The key narrative lesson drawn from this was therefore to increase cooperation and engagement with China.

Xi shared this view, stating that "China and the United States are highly complementary economically and there is huge potential for further cooperation" in different sectors, including technology (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2015), thereby doubling down on the cooperation and interdependence plots included in US narrative practices of engagement. He also stressed that "cooperation will benefit both, and confrontation will lead to losses on both sides" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2015). Despite the numerous mutual accusations preceding the 2015 agreement, most of the narrative practices performed by US policymakers in this period remained firmly embedded and sustained the liberal master narrative that cooperation and economic interdependence would eventually bring mutual benefits, including economic progress and stability.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that narrative practices performed among a broader group of US policymakers also began to feature an adverse characterization of China, typified by "a sense of hubris [. . .] following the financial crisis of 2008–09" (Steinberg 2019, 132–3). Such narrative practices began to embed themselves in a realist master narrative of great-power competition, resulting in a gradual extension of this master narrative's relevance in the international economic realm. Incremental changes to narrative practices were performed in relation to "a series of moments, mishaps, and scandals" in US–China relations rather than a "big bang moment" (Gramer and Lu 2023). Narrative practices by an initially tiny group of China hawks in the Obama administration began to gain traction, especially after a noteworthy case of Chinese espionage via a university graduate, known as the "Glenn Duffie Shriver Story" of 2004–2010 (Gramer and Lu 2023). A further backdrop to this period was clashes between the United States and China across other issues or policy domains, most notably the South China Sea (Heritage and Lee 2020). The Obama administration's 2011 "rebalance to Asia" can be read as a policy response to this (Tow and Stuart 2015; Campbell 2016). Disputes between the United States and China continued over the launch of both China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2013 (Hodzi and Chen 2017).

China's unveiling of both the 2015 "Made in China 2025" (MIC2025) and the 2017 "New Generation AI Development Plan" (NGAIDP) was detrimental to US–China technology relations. Both aimed to use state-led industrial policies to enable China to gain global economic and technology leadership (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2015). MIC2025 entailed heavy state intervention in the economy by guiding and funding Chinese state-owned enterprises, voiced China's ambitions to lead in each part of the supply chains, proposed forced joint ventures and technology transfer for state-backed companies such as Huawei and ZTE, and foreign acquisitions and talent recruitment (McBride and Chatzky 2019). The Chinese leadership has held that dual-use AI technology is crucial for global economic and military competition.

In the same decade (the 2010s), US narrative practices beyond the narrow area of technology in the international economic realm also began to be structured around more adverse characterizations of China. Such practices highlighted China's revisionist, expansionist, and assertive behavior towards the Asia-Pacific and its inclination to "weaponize economic interdependence," particularly through economic coercion against US allies, for example, Japan (in 2010), the Philippines (in 2016), South Korea (in 2016), and Australia (in 2020), to achieve politically motivated goals (Bade 2022; Cha 2023). Coupled with mounting concerns over Chinese acquisitions of US technologies, these coercive economic practices animated a rethinking on the part of US policymakers. This cast increasingly significant doubts about the appeal of narrative practices embedded into the knowledge structures of the liberal master narrative. Economic interdependence, assumed to be mutually beneficial for China and the United States, appeared to have instead enabled China to leverage its asymmetric domination over supply chains or access to its expansive consumer market.

These two "currents" in Chinese policy—assertive technology development and weaponization of economic interdependence—sustained a growing characterization of China as a rival and an unfair competitor in US narrative practices, giving rise to a hardening of policy. In their performance of narrative practices, an increasing number of policymakers were beginning to characterize China as a *potential* threat to US national security in the area of technology, thus embedding these practices in the great-power com-

petition master narrative. Towards the end of the Obama presidency, narrative practices of engagement thus became ever less prominent. This direction can be seen in the *2016 Third Offset Strategy*. First characterized both China and Russia as "peer adversaries," it sought to draw on US advanced technologies in, e.g., artificial intelligence and unmanned systems, to "offset" or "overmatch" China's and Russia's anti-access/area denial technologies (Gentile 2021). The Third Offset highlighted the US government's limited role in driving technological innovation, as new technologies were in the hands of the private sector, which was open to all, including US competitors. Such narrative practices culminated in the lesson that, if proceeding as before, the United States would eventually facilitate China's technological superiority.

A specific incident helps to illustrate how this changing performance of narrative practices affected US China policy. On December 2, 2016, President Obama, acting on the recommendation of the Committee on Foreign Investment, issued an executive order to block the acquisition of Aixtron, a California-based subsidiary of the German semiconductor firm Aixtron SE, by Grand Chip Investment GmbH, which proposed to acquire the German parent company. This decision was due to concerns over the ownership of Grand Chip Investment GmbH, which included Fujian Grand Chip Investment Fund and other Chinese state-owned enterprises, and over the funding being partly provided by Chinese government-supported entities (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2016). The blocking was an uncommon move—this was only the third time in more than 25 years that a US president prohibited a foreign investment (Franceski, McNabb, and Caine 2016). It was justified on the basis of "threatening to impair the national security of the United States" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2016)—clearly embedding this narrative practice and its adverse characterization of China in the realist great-power competition master narrative.

In sum, while narrative practices performed at the beginning of the Obama administration clearly supported a liberal master narrative of engagement, the later stages of his administration began to feature plots and characterizations that portended a wholehearted embrace of a US–China "tech war" in subsequent administrations. A new plot and associated characterization of China started to emerge from these practices: that China would seek unfettered access to advanced technology and be inclined to weaponize (asymmetrical) economic interdependence. The lesson that the United States purportedly needs to draw from these insights was manifest in the Third Offset—regarding China as a peer competitor and adversary that needs to be balanced to counter US decline.

The Trump Administration: Ending Narrative Practices of Engagement

Despite already starting to deteriorate in the later stages of the Obama administration, US–China relations in the areas of trade and technology soured drastically from the Trump administration (2017–2021) onwards. Trump administration officials increasingly performed narrative practices that shifted away from characterizing China as a partner to characterizing it as a fully-fledged security threat. These narrative practices revolved around "tech war" plots, including national security and techno-nationalism, unfair trade and competition, supply-chain vulnerability, an emphasis on strategic industries, and US decline. Lessons pointed toward taking aggressive actions in trying to limit China's threat and unfair competition while attempting to restore US lead-

ership. US narrative practices were thus closely embedded into the realist great-power competition master narrative, thereby reconstituting the relevant master narrative of US–China policy in the international economic realm.

A driving plot emerging during the Trump presidency was that of techno-nationalism. This refers to the idea that technological progress and leadership are key not only to a country's national security but also to its economic development and social stability (Evans 2020). This is, for example, evident from the Press Secretary's Statement regarding the 2020 "National Strategy for Critical and Emerging Technologies": "As our competitors and adversaries mobilize vast resources in these fields, American dominance in science and technology is more important now than ever, and is vital to our long-term economic and national security" (The White House 2020f). To this end, Trump administration officials emphasized the importance of investments in strategic industries and technologies, such as AI (115th Congress 2018, para. 889).

US shortages in medical supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), pharmaceutical ingredients, and antibiotics, during the COVID-19 pandemic (notably in 2020–2022) introduced another plot—"supply-chain vulnerability"—into the performance of "tech war" narrative practices. This plot centred around the risks of relying heavily on China to supply critical medical products while featuring the building of resilient supply chains outside China for hi-tech goods such as vaccines, semiconductors, and electric vehicle batteries as a key lesson for the United States (Sutter, Schwarzenberg, and Sutherland 2020; Cha 2023, 102–5). As Trump stated at the 2020 Council for National Policy Meeting: "We'll fully restore America's manufacturing independence, bring home our critical supply chains, and permanently end our reliance on China" (The White House 2020e).

Consistent with these "tech-war" narrative plots, the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) evidences how US narrative practices move away from embedding themselves in the liberal master narrative towards latching on to the great-power competition master narrative. The 2017 NSS explicitly criticized narrative practices of engagement animating US China policy as "false": rather, the newly competitive world "requir[ed] the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with *rivals* and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners" (The White House 2017a, 3, emphasis added).

Widely believed to have exerted a strong influence on the Trump administration, the 2018 DIUx Report also centred its narrative practices around "unfair trade and competition" and "national security and techno-nationalism" plots, arguing that China takes advantage of the open US economy to acquire advanced dual-use technologies through investment in and acquisition of US private companies. This adverse characterization of China therefore further supported the "tech war" narrative practices. The report concludes with the central lesson of all "tech war" narrative practices: If the United States allows China's access to these critical technologies, it may not only lose its technological superiority (and correspondingly military superiority) but, even more detrimentally, may "facilitat[e] China's technological superiority" (Brown and Singh 2018, 3; Foot and King 2019, 44). These narrative practices reject the plot of the liberal master narrative and embed themselves, instead, in the realist master narrative of great-power competition. Such narrative practices were echoed by both Vice President Mike Pence in

October 2018 and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in July 2020 (Pence 2018; Pompeo 2020). Pompeo declared, "the old paradigm of *blind engagement* with China simply won't get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it" (2020, emphasis added). Animated by a belief in the failure of engagement, the "tech war" narrative practices increasingly performed by US policymakers during the Trump administration further cast the Clinton administration's decision to allow China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a "mistake" for its adverse effects on US manufacturing, including job losses, deindustrialization, and a widening US trade deficit with China (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2021), as well as the rise of China's military power fueled by its rapid economic growth. Such narrative practices resonated strongly with Trump's main audience—"ordinary Americans"—who felt left behind by, and considered themselves victims of, globalization (Homolar and Ruiz Casado 2024).

Characterizations of China as a "technological and national security threat" in these narrative practices directly animated three executive orders. Two of these covered the Chinese apps TikTok and WeChat[4] while a third one concerned online censorship ranging from censoring information related to, for example, human rights and the protests in Hong Kong (The White House 2020c). The two executive orders on TikTok and WeChat firmly characterized China as a technologically mediated security threat for potentially collecting information about federal employees and using it for espionage and blackmailing (The White House 2020a,b). As the executive order argues, "The United States must take *aggressive* action against the owners of TikTok to protect our *national security*" (The White House 2020a,b, emphasis added). In other words, China and its actions were characterized as so threatening to US national security that only an "aggressive" response was deemed viable to counter such threat, doubling down on the main lesson to be collectively drawn from narrative practices of the "tech war."

Narrative practices that characterized China as a national security threat were also disclosed in the 2018 Special 301 Report (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018). This placed China on the Priority Watch List because of several cyber threats, ranging from online piracy, trade secret theft, and export of counterfeit goods (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018). The report further specified that the US Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive (ONCIX) shared such a characterization of China (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018, 18). Linked to this depiction of China, further narrative practices in this report also framed China as an unfair trading partner, e.g., accusing China of counterfeiting goods, including semiconductors (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2018, 21).

Characterizing China as a security threat, and consequently as an enemy, was therefore a recurring element of narrative practices performed by the Trump administration: US policymakers repeatedly accused China of "creat[ing] and exploit[ing] vulnerabilities in information and communications technology or services" to endanger US national security (Trump 2020). The claim that China was "weaponizing" economic interdependence was therefore key in sustaining "tech war" narrative practices during the Trump administration. Accordingly, as then National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien stated, "the PRC poses the single greatest national security threat to America today" (National

Security Council 2021). The narrative practices that sustained the Trump administration's restrictive trade and technology policies against China were therefore fundamentally based on constructing a "national emergency," especially in light of rising cybersecurity threats, intellectual property risks, and technological innovation in warfare (The White House 2018a,b; Trump 2019; The White House 2020f). All these elements allowed for close alignment of such practices with the realist master narrative in international economic terms.

Narrative practices performed by US policymakers also widely characterized China as a competitor, representing a threat to "the safety, security, and *economy* of the United States" (The White House 2020d, emphasis added). This was echoed by then Vice President Pence, who argued, "through the 'Made in China 2025' plan, the Communist Party has set its sights on controlling 90 percent of the world's most advanced industries, including robotics, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence" (Pence 2018). According to Christopher Wray, then Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, "China—the Chinese Communist Party—believes it is in a generational fight to surpass our country in economic and technological leadership." To do so, China makes "a whole-of-state effort to become the world's only superpower by any means necessary" (O'Brien 2020, 61).

Complementary to this narrative characterization of China as a threat to US security and economic supremacy is the characterization of the United States as a declining leader whose leadership needs to be restored: "[. . .] under the President's leadership, we will restore our proud legacy of leadership on this next, great frontier, and America will lead again" (The White House 2017b). The Trump administration was constructing a national sentiment that revolved around a "fall from a previously superior position" (Homolar and Ruiz Casado 2024, 5). In this respect, American leadership in the economic and technology spheres was portrayed as essential to the country's security and regaining of its status (The White House 2019), in line with techno-nationalist plots in narrative practices. Hence, the lesson to be drawn for the United States in light of China's characterization was to regain its leadership through more "aggressive" policies against China. This reconstituted the relevant master narrative animating US China policy in the international economic realm from a liberal to a realist one revolving around great-power competition and technological advancements as a way to regain the US declining leadership and outcompete China.

The narrative practices of the "tech war," along with their adverse characterizations of China, were made possible by "new thinking" of policymakers associated with the Trump administration. According to Cole Shepherd, a China specialist in the US Defense Intelligence Agency, "things started to change [in Xi's second five-year term, i.e., 2018–2023], primarily when it became clear that Xi Jinping was not going to continue down the liberal or opening-up road of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin" (Gramer and Lu 2023). This empowered frustrated China hawks, who believed that US past policy towards China was based on wishful thinking, to perform diverging narrative practices (Gramer and Lu 2023).

Within the Trump administration, there were three factions of policymakers drawing slightly different lessons from their changing narrative practices vis-à-vis China (Inkster 2020, 227–8). Paradoxically, Trump and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer led the mildest one, referred to as "economic rebalancers." They advocated the use of economic policy tools to gain advantage over China in trade and did not call for decoupling. In the midway were "macroeco-

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[4]*Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok* and *Executive Order on Addressing the Threat Posed by WeChat*.

nomic pragmatists" who, led by Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, promoted economic and financial stability while, in general, supporting Trump's policy stance on China. Another source alleges that because of the lingering performance of narrative practices embedded in the liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative among commercial and financial officials, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross had advocated boosting business and commercial ties with China, and the Treasury was reportedly "very opposed" to imposing a comprehensive ban on Huawei (Bade 2022). The third and hawkish faction was more concerned about national security. Its key leaders were Vice President Pence and Peter Navarro, Trump's trade adviser. The lesson that the hawks drew from their narrative practices was, among others, to "erect permanent barriers around technology and security investments" and a partial economic decoupling with China (Inkster 2020, 228).

The quick spread of "tech war" narrative practices in US trade policy towards China throughout the Trump administration can also be associated with how his administration enlisted the help of nonmainstream politicians, typically those with limited governmental and international trade experience. David Feith, a former *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in Hong Kong who served as US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in 2019–2021, characterized China as "hostile towards [the US-led liberal global order] and wanted to revise and subvert it" (Gramer and Lu 2023). Peter Navarro, another China hawk over trade but a novice at (inter)national policymaking, was appointed Director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy in 2017. He has claimed that because the Chinese government uses currency manipulation and export subsidies, a variation of the "unfair trade and competition" plot, "American companies cannot compete with their Chinese counterparts" (Navarro and Autry 2011). Believing that China under Xi was no longer a partner of the United States in maintaining the liberal international order, these China hawks performed narrative practices of the "tech war" at the heart of the Trump administration's economic and technology policy.

In the same time period, leading Democrat thinkers also underwent a similar "China reckoning" and adapted their narrative practices by noting that China, despite continued economic growth, had defied American expectations (Campbell and Ratner 2018). Echoing the Trump administration's "de-engagement" narrative practices, Campbell and Ratner admitted that two long-standing US assumptions about China were proven to be wrong: that it has the power to transform China into a liberal state congenial to the US-led liberal international order and that China, as a major beneficiary of the liberal international order, would have the incentives to preserve the same order (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 67). According to the presumptions, the IT revolution and US exports of high technology to China would encourage Chinese authorities to grant greater freedom to their citizens in order for them to be competitive in the information age (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 64). However, contrary to these expectations, the Chinese regime chose the path of state capitalism by promoting its state-owned enterprises and pursuing state-led industrial policies, as shown in the MIC2025 and the NGAIDP strategies. More detrimentally, China used IT to consolidate state control over society (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 62, 65). Campbell and Ratner (2018, 70), albeit Democrats, even commended the Trump administration for "[taking] a step in the right direction by interrogating past assumptions in U.S. strategy."

In sum, most narrative practices performed by US policymakers under Trump centred around plots of techno-nationalism, arguing that China "weaponizes" economic interdependence, that strategic industries such as advanced technologies require protection, and characterized China as not only a competitor but also a revisionist threat to US leadership and security. These narrative practices therefore clearly embedded themselves into the realist master narratives and included explicit critiques of the lessons championed in prior narrative practices of engagement associated with the liberal master narrative. By the end of the Trump presidency, narrative practices performed by US policymakers therefore almost uniformly reconstituted the relevant master narrative of US–China relations from a liberal to a realist one. Interestingly, Democrat thinkers outside of the administration began to perform narrative practices centred around similar characterizations and lessons. This prepared the ground for a continued performance of such narrative practices even as administrations changed.

The Biden Administration: Doubling Down on Practices of the "Tech War"

Under the influence of the Democrat's "China reckoning" and how such narrative practices were changing the relevant master narrative of US China policy, the Biden administration, albeit filled by many who had served in the Obama administration, doubled down on the "tech war." Narrative practices of the "tech war" under Biden revolved around the comprehensive plot that an illiberal China is determined to displace the United States from Asia, while the lessons of these narrative practices amounted to competition with, rather than a transformation of, China.

Key specific plots featured in narrative practices performed by US policymakers during the Biden administration (2021–2025) were not only "techno-nationalism," but also "strategic industries," such as semiconductors, and "supply-chain vulnerabilities," and "democracies versus autocracies." While these narrative plots began to emerge during the Trump administration, they had become ever more deeply entrenched during the Biden administration, portraying competition with China as the only viable option. In particular, the Biden administration heavily emphasized the vulnerabilities dictated by the interdependence of the supply chain. These narrative plots, together with an adverse characterization of China and the narrative lesson to adopt a more aggressive stance towards China, further fueled and sustained the realist great-power competition narrative characterizing current US policy toward China.

In his speech to a Virtual CEO Summit on Semiconductor and Supply Chain Resilience, Biden noted: "for too long as a nation, we haven't been making the big, bold investments we need to outpace our global competitors. We've been falling behind on research and development and manufacturing. And put it bluntly, we have to *step up our game*" (The White House 2021, emphasis added). This included paying close attention to the supply chain, a notion mentioned six times in Biden's short speech. At a later instance, Biden referred to the Chinese Communist Party's "[aggressive] plans to reorient and dominate the semiconductor supply chain" and his proposal to "create millions of jobs, rebuild America, protect our supply chains, and revitalize American manufacturing" (The White House 2021). In setting out the Biden administration's China policy in May 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken also emphasized technology, supply-chain security, and resilience.

This is also clearly in line with the plot of US declining leadership and the lesson to outcompete China. While pointing out that "America invented semiconductors" (The White House 2022d), the Biden administration spoke of a "decline in [their] nation's industrial and technological-innovation capacity," especially with respect to semiconductors (Deese 2022; The White House 2022d).

The characterization of the United States as a leader in decline further sustained the narrative lesson dictating that the United States should adopt more aggressive policies to outcompete China, which clearly reconstitutes a realist great-power competition. Speaking after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Blinken still argued that the United States would "remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order—and that's posed by the People's Republic of China" (Blinken 2022).

Even more evidently, Blinken drew three particular lessons for the United States from the plots animating narrative practices summarized above: to invest, to align, and to compete. First, the United States should step up—using Biden's term—its investments in scientific research, education, infrastructure, and workforce, especially in strategic industries, via industrial policy centering on technology (Blinken 2022; Siripurapu and Berman 2023). Second, the United States has to continue to "re-energize America's . . . network of alliances and partnerships" by strengthening ties with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, in addition to ASEAN (Blinken 2022). Third, and most importantly, aided by the first two lessons of US China policy, the United States needs to "outcompete China" in key areas, thereby reducing US "technological dependence" and safeguarding US "technological competitiveness":

> we'll boost supply chain security and resilience by reshoring production or sourcing materials from other countries in sensitive sectors like pharmaceuticals and critical minerals, so that we're not dependent on any one supplier. We'll stand together with others against economic coercion and intimidation. (Blinken 2022)

Emerging from this combination of plots and lessons was another key plot associated with the "tech war": "democracies versus autocracies." The 2022 NSS, for example, argues that the most pressing challenge to international peace and stability comes from "powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." Both Russia and China are the most typical authoritarian-revisionist powers for, among others, "leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression." China, however, is the "only" one that has both the intent and power to reshape the international order (White House 2022, 8, 18). This is particularly evident from narrative practices featured in the Final Report of the National Security Commission on AI:

> The United States must work hand-in-hand with *allies and partners* to promote the use of emerging technologies to strengthen democratic norms and values, coordinate policies and investments to advance global adoption of digital infrastructure and technologies, defend the integrity of international technical standards, cooperate to advance AI innovation, and share practices and resources to defend against malign uses of technology and the influence of *authoritarian states* in democratic societies. (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence 2021, 13, emphasis added)

The lesson to be drawn was that "the United States should build a coalition of like-minded nations" to counter autocracies like China (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence 2021, 502).

In addition to characterizing China as a security threat and a competitor while depicting the danger of US leadership in decline, the Biden administration also performed narrative practices centered around the plot of "techno-nationalism." In this regard, the CHIPS and Science Act (of August 2022) was also narrated as an effort to strengthen US supply-chain security "for the American economy and for American national security" (The White House 2022a). The Act aimed at investing around $280 billion in domestic semiconductor manufacturing and research "to lower costs, create jobs, strengthen supply chains, and counter China" (The White House 2022c). Accordingly, strengthening American manufacturing of the strategically important semiconductors was depicted as a fight not only for boosting American supply-chain security but also for its national security, its development in the fields of "nanotechnology, clean energy, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence," and the creation of jobs (The White House 2022c). The Biden administration thus described US manufacturing of semiconductors as "an economic and national security necessity" (US Department of Commerce 2022) and "an effective deterrent [. . .] for the future to keep our country safe" (The White House 2022d). The lesson to be drawn from the dual plots of supply-chain vulnerability and techno-nationalism was therefore, once again, to boost American manufacturing and technological progress to outcompete China.

Against the background of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden administration officials further highlighted the importance of semiconductors in the context of military aid to Ukraine and its own national security as part of their narrative practices (The White House 2022e). The notion of "small yard, high fence"[5] has been used to describe US critical technologies policy. In outlining the Biden administration's NSS in October 2022, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan argued that "[c]hokepoints for foundational technologies have to be inside that yard, and the fence has to be high—because our strategic competitors should not be able to exploit American and allied technologies to undermine American and allied security" (The White House 2022b).[6] In line with the "align" and "compete" narrative lessons, the United States proposed and led the establishment of a China-free "Chip 4 Alliance," officially known as the US–East Asia Semiconductor Supply Chain Resiliency Working Group, with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, the three major semiconductor producers in East Asia.

In sum, actors across the Biden administration had deepened the performance of narrative practices of the "tech war." While characterizations of China as a competitor and a threat remained stable in these practices, narrative practices performed by actors across his administration developed a range of plots further—chiefly supply-chain vulnerability, strategic industries, and techno-nationalism—culminating in more diversified lessons. All these narrative practices fully replaced the erstwhile relevant liberal master narrative dom-

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[5] This notion was first advocated by former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates (2006–2011) in 2010 (The White House 2010). This underlines the incremental build-up of narrative practices of the "tech war" rather than a perfect, strategic, intentional transformation of narratives across the administrations.

[6] US policymakers also repeatedly highlight the significance of AI as a key technology, but a more detailed analysis of this exceeds the scope of our paper.

inating US–China relations with a realist master narrative centred around great-power competition.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how changing narrative practices since the second Obama administration have incrementally produced the US–China "tech war" as a fundamental change in US China policy, especially in the economic realm. Rather than accepting the competitive direction in US China policy as an inevitable result of China's rise, we provide an alternative understanding that considers how great-power competition has been portrayed as increasingly justifiable and commonplace through narrative practices. Specifically, US policymakers have increasingly performed narrative practices of the "tech war" that are embedded in the realist great-power competition master narrative rather than the liberal "capitalist peace" master narrative. Animating plots such as techno-nationalism, strategic industries, supply-chain vulnerability, and democracies versus autocracies, such narrative practices have therefore reconstituted the relevant master narrative of US China policy in the economic realm. The performance of such narrative practices has been incremental and gradual rather than a reaction to one epoch-making event in US–China relations.

Key enabling factors for the incremental change in narrative practices and their resonance among US foreign policy audiences include a political context in which (i) US officials developed a different understanding of Xi's leadership and his grand strategy's ambitions (i.e., to dislodge the United States from Asia, if not the world); (ii) an initially nascent and small group of China hawks comes to prominence in national policymaking circles under the "unconventional" Trump administration; (iii) a similar self-reflective "China reckoning" by initially pro-engagement Democrat key thinkers; (iv) how the COVID-19 pandemic made US policymakers reflect on potential vulnerabilities of US supply chains; and (v) China continued shipment of dual-use technology products to Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through the performance of narrative practices, decoupling the United States from China in high-technology arena and forging alliances with like-minded liberal-democratic countries (friendshoring) has therefore eventually become "natural" and "normal" policy for the United States.

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