

The strategist's dilemma: Global dynamic density and the making of US 'China policy'

Hugo Meijer*

European University Institute (EUI)

Benjamin Jensen

American University and Marine Corps University

Abstract

Combining the English School of International Relations and the study of grand strategy decision-making processes, this article investigates how dynamic density – growing volume, velocity, and diversity of interactions within international society – alters states' strategy formation processes. By contrasting the perspectives of structural realism and the English School on the role of dynamic density in world politics, the piece illustrates the strategist's dilemma: as global dynamic density in the international society increases, the ability of great powers to formulate coherent grand strategies and policies potentially decreases. Specifically, it contends that growing global dynamic density generates processual and substantive fragmentation in strategy formation. Building on a large body of elite interviews, US policy toward China – and the so-called US 'rebalance' to Asia – is used as a probability probe of the central idea of the strategist's dilemma. In conclusion, we contrast our findings with complex interdependence theory and examine their implications for 'great power management' (GPM) as a primary institution of international society. We argue that, by generating processual and substantive fragmentation in strategy formation, global dynamic density complicates GPM by hindering the capacity of great powers to manage and calibrate the competitive and cooperative dynamics at play in a bilateral relationship.

Keywords

Grand Strategy; Great Powers; US-China Relations; English School; Dynamic Density

Introduction

There is a 'grand' interest in American grand strategy. In light of challenges such as rising powers, non-state actors and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), authors propose competing visions ranging from 'deep engagement' and 'selective engagement', to 'offshore balancing', to a 'grand strategy of restraint' – among others.¹ Of particular interest is the approach the

* Correspondence to: Hugo Meijer, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Villino, Villa Schifanoia, Via Boccaccio 121, 50133, Firenze, Italy. Author's email: hlemeijer@gmail.com

¹ Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for Americas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, 'Don't come home, America: the case against retrenchment', *International Security*, 37:3 (2012), pp. 7–51; Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, 'Come home, America: the strategy of restraint in the face of temptation', *International Security*, 21:4 (1997); John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2006); John Ikenberry and

United States takes towards its most likely near-peer competitor, the People's Republic of China (PRC). Scholars disagree on whether the US adopts a strategy of containment, engagement, con-
engagement, hedging, balancing, or strategic reassurance.² In the twenty-first century, a peculiar mix of economic interdependence and military rivalry characterises the relationship between the United States and China. For David Shambaugh, the US and China are 'tangled titans' bound 'together in innumerable ways – strategically, diplomatically, economically, socially, and in many other domains' who at the same time are in a 'cooperative-competitive dynamic'.³ The overlapping and intertwining of the logics of military rivalry and economic interdependence attest to the growing complexity of interstate rivalry in a globalised world.

While a rich body of work explores competing visions for American grand strategy in the twenty-first century, the question of how growing interconnectivity and interdependence in world politics affect a state's strategy formation process as well as great power relations remains under-explored. This article tackles this question by exploring the dilemma of forming a grand strategy in an interconnected world through investigating the contemporary US-PRC relationship. The interaction between the world's hegemon and its main potential competitor is an especially important case for reflecting on grand strategy. As China's power rises and the complexity of the Sino-American relationship increases, there is no guarantee that the United States will adopt a unified and coherent grand strategy and policy. In line with Colin Gray's work, 'grand strategy' and 'policy' can be analytically distinguished as follows. Policy refers to the *ends*, the objectives outlining purposes against which leaders form grand strategies. By extension, grand strategy encompasses *ways* and *means*, the direction and use made of the total assets (diplomatic, military, and economic) of a state 'in support of its policy goals as decided by politics'.⁴

The article takes a 'second-image reversed' perspective and maps how often neglected systemic attributes alter the process of strategy formation inside the state.⁵ Specifically, it focuses on how global dynamic density (also referred to as interaction capacity) – defined from an English

Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: US National Security in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Barry Posen, 'Stability and change in US grand strategy', *Orbis* (autumn 2007), pp. 561–7; Barry Posen and Andrew Ross, 'Competing visions for US grand strategy', *International Security*, 21:3 (winter 1996–7), pp. 5–53.

² Zalmay Khalilzad, 'Congage China', RAND Corporation, Issue Paper No. 187 (1999); Andrew Krepinevich, Robert Martinage, and Robert Work, 'Hedging against a hostile China', in *The Challenges to US National Security: Strategy for the Long Haul* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008), ch. 2; David Shambaugh, 'Containment or engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's responses', *International Security*, 21:2 (1996), pp. 180–209; James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Ashley Tellis, *Balancing without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

³ David Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans: the United States and China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), pp. 3, 15.

⁴ Colin Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18. For a discussion of the concept of 'grand strategy', see Nina Silove, 'Beyond the buzzword: the three meanings of "grand strategy"', *Security Studies* (2017), available at: [DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073].

⁵ Peter Gourevitch, 'The second image reversed: the international sources of domestic politics', *International Organization*, 32:4 (1978).

School perspective as the volume, velocity, and diversity of interactions within international society⁶ – shapes the strategy formation process.⁷ The article highlights the *strategist's dilemma*: as global dynamic density in the international society increases, the ability of great powers to formulate coherent grand strategies and policies potentially decreases. Specifically, rising global dynamic density leads to a larger number of issues on the diplomatic agenda and a corresponding cacophony of actors seeking to influence the making of a state's grand strategy. As a result of the fragmentation of the strategy formation process, the ability of great powers to forge a focused policy potentially decreases. Great powers must therefore constantly cope with the centrifugal forces (fragmentation) unleashed by dynamic density and the centripetal impetus (centralisation) required to develop, execute, implement, and sustain a clear policy.⁸

While the impact of a variety of systemic and domestic constraints on strategy formation has been investigated, global dynamic density, as a systemic property that affects the process of grand strategy and the substance of policy – as well as the stability of great power relations –, remains largely under-explored. Indeed, competing theoretical perspectives stress, to varying degrees, how international or domestic constraints narrow the strategists' decision space. Neorealists tend to focus on anarchy and the distribution of capabilities as the necessary condition shaping each particular state's security policy (that is, decisions to balance, bandwagon, seek regional hegemony, etc.).⁹ Work in neoliberalism and hegemonic stability literature builds on the premise of unipolarity and the post-Second World War institutions creating incentives for countries not to challenge the United States.¹⁰

⁶ Hedley Bull distinguishes an international system (or system of states) from an international society (a society of states). The first 'is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole'. The later refers to 'a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values [that] form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions'. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1977), pp. 9, 13.

⁷ On dynamic density (also referred to as interaction capacity), a concept borrowed from the sociologist Emile Durkheim, see for instance, John Barkdull, 'Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations: the international system as an abnormal form', *American Political Science Review*, 89:3 (1995), pp. 669–80; Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University, 1993), ch. 4; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), ch. 3. An earlier generation of International Relations scholars examined regional processes of functional integration. While there is a wide range of thinkers, two stand out: Karl Deutsch and Ernst Haas. See Karl Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); Ernst Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces 1950–57* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958); Ernst Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State. Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).

⁸ While here we focus on great powers, and although further comparative research is required to test our hypotheses, we posit that our core argument may also apply to other states. For a definition and discussion of the concept of great powers, see Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006), ch. 4.

⁹ Examples include work in offensive and defensive realism: Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). For neoliberal perspectives prefacing the benefits of hegemony, see John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ On disincentives to challenge the United States based on the power gap, see William Wohlforth, 'The stability of a unipolar world', *International Security*, 24:1 (1999), pp. 5–41.

Alternatively, liberal and neoclassical realist works stress how domestic conditions can also shape or constrain the formulation of grand strategy and policy. Domestic interest groups and coalitions can hijack strategy formation.¹¹ Small group dynamics in the foreign policy elite – such as groupthink and loss aversion – can also alter how a state seeks securing its interests.¹² Other theorists look to national strategic culture and enduring ways of war as narrowing the strategists' decision space.¹³ Peter Katzenstein has sought to show how diverging grand strategies can be explained by different norms, collective identities, and cultures.¹⁴ Multiple authors find distinct roles for national ideology and distinct schools of thought in the strategy formation process.¹⁵

However, while these perspectives show the existence of constraints on the making of grand strategy and policy formation, this article makes the case for previously unappreciated systemic factors that alter and complicate the very process of strategy formation. The systemic attributes at play in modern great power strategy formation are not just the distribution of capabilities under anarchy, but global dynamic density – how the quantity, velocity, and diversity of interactions fragment the ability of any state to forge a coherent grand strategy and policy. Specifically, the article contends that growing global dynamic density informs two measurable aspects of modern strategy formation. First, global dynamic density generates sectoral differentiation, which expands the range of sectors on the diplomatic agenda thereby creating new actors and interests.¹⁶ Governmental, transgovernmental, and societal actors collide producing contradictory requirements, increased complexity, and coordination problems. The result is *processual fragmentation*. Processual fragmentation of grand strategy, in turn, generates *substantive fragmentation* of policy: the tendency to misalign ends (that is, policy objectives), ways (that is, instruments of power) and means (that is, resources). In other words, dynamic density generates sectoral differentiation and the resulting processual fragmentation

¹¹ Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries, Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Norrin Ripsman, 'Neoclassical realism and domestic interest groups', in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, The State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹² Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Steven Lobell, 'The international realm, framing effects, and security strategies: Britain in peace and war', *International Interactions*, 32:1 (2006), pp. 27–48.

¹³ On strategic culture and the role of culture in international relations, see Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Ned R. Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On enduring ways of wars, see Antulio Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Mark Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Walter R. Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002). Colin Dueck contends there is a push and pull of realist, material factors and constructivist, cultural factors shaping American grand strategy overtime. Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*.

¹⁶ On sectoral differentiation, see Mathias Albert, *A Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), ch. 2; Barry Buzan and Mathias Albert, 'Differentiation: a sociological approach to International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:3 (2010), pp. 315–37; Barry Buzan and Mathias Albert, 'Securitization, sectors and functional differentiation', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 413–25; Philip Cerny, 'Plurilateralism: Structural differentiation and functional conflict in the post-Cold War world order', *Millennium*, 22:1 (1993), pp. 27–51.

makes it increasingly difficult to articulate and integrate, through sectoral linkages, the diplomatic, military and economic dimensions of grand strategy. Overall, this condition reduces the capacity of the state to forge a coherent grand strategy and policy.

The article proceeds as follows. First, by contrasting the perspectives of structural realism and the English School on the role of dynamic density in world politics, it establishes the theoretical foundation for showing how currently under-investigated systemic processes have a profound impact on strategy formation. The piece illustrates how, as global dynamic density in the international society increases, the ability of great powers to formulate coherent grand strategies and policies potentially decreases. Secondly, relying on a large body of elite interviews with American officials, governmental documents, official statements, and secondary sources, US policy toward China – and the so-called US ‘rebalance’ to Asia – is then used as a probability probe of the central idea of the *strategist's dilemma*.¹⁷ In conclusion, we contrast our findings on processual and substantive fragmentation in strategy formation with complex interdependence theory, and explore avenues for future research on the implications of these findings for ‘great power management’ (GPM) as a primary institution of the international society.¹⁸

Dynamic density, sectoral differentiation, and grand strategy formation

We propose that as the rate and volume of international interactions increase, the resulting complexity alters the conditions in which states form grand strategy and policies. Building on Emile Durkheim's insight that the ‘growth in the volume and dynamic density of societies ... modifies profoundly the fundamental conditions of collective existence’,¹⁹ several scholars – including Albert, Buzan, Jones, Little, Ruggie, and others – have explored the implications of the concept at the level of the international society.²⁰ We extend the logic to the fundamental conditions of strategy formation. Several studies have explored how the increase in the volume, velocity, and diversity of interactions (that is, dynamic density) has altered shared norms and institutions in the international society.²¹ However, no study has yet specifically examined the impact of global

¹⁷ On probability probes, see Harry Eckstein, ‘Case studies and theory in political science’, in Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (eds), *Handbook of Political Science, Volume VII* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975) and Jack Levy, ‘Case studies: Types, designs, and logics of inference’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25:1 (2008), pp. 1–18. This is also what Lijphart defines as an hypothesis-generating case. Aaron Lijphart, ‘Comparative politics and the comparative method’, *American Political Science Review*, 65:3 (1971), pp. 682–93.

¹⁸ A definition of GPM is provided below. On GPM as a primary institution of international society, see Shunji Cui and Barry Buzan, ‘Great power management in international society’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 181–210; Rosemary Foot, ‘Power transitions and great power management: Three decades of China–Japan–US relations’, *The Pacific Review*, online version, available at: {<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1303535>} accessed 13 May 2017; Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 3; Evelyn Goh, ‘East Asia as regional international society: the problem of great power management’, in Barry Buzan and Yongjin Zhang (eds), *Contesting International Society in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Yuen Foong Khong, ‘East Asia and the strategic “deep rules” of international/regional society’, in Buzan and Zhang (eds), *Contesting International Society in East Asia*; Richard Little, ‘The balance of power and great power management’, in Richard Little and John Williams (eds), *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Benjamin Zala, ‘Great power management and ambiguous order in nineteenth-century international society’, *Review of International Studies*, 43:2 (2016) pp. 367–88.

¹⁹ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 115.

²⁰ See fns 7 and 16.

²¹ Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*.

dynamic density on the dilemmas inherent in how great powers form grand strategies and policies and its implications for great power management. This article seeks to fill that gap by combining the English School of International Relations and the study of grand strategy formation processes. A core assumption of the English School is that the domain of international politics is an ‘anarchical society’²² characterised by a dialectic between the fragmenting logic of anarchy and the integrating logic of international society. Anarchy is compatible with an international society.²³ The latter is held together by ‘primary institutions’, namely ‘durable and recognized patterns of shared practices’ (such as diplomacy, great power management, war, or trade).²⁴ As detailed in conclusion of this article, by fragmenting strategy formation, dynamic density, as a systemic and emergent attribute, can alter great power management – a primary institution of international society.

The growth in the dynamic density in the international society (empirically substantiated in the next section) generates sectoral, or functional, differentiation.²⁵ As Buzan and Albert explain, functional differentiation, closely related to the division of labour, implies an ‘increasing division into legal, political, military, economic, scientific, religious and suchlike distinct and specialized subsystems or sectors of activity, often with distinctive institutions and actors’.²⁶ Indeed, as John Barkdull argues, for Durkheim, growing dynamic density creates competitive pressures on units leading them to differentiate themselves thereby creating new domains – or sectors – of activity and interaction (for example, political, military, societal, environmental, etc.).²⁷ This perspective contrasts with Kenneth Waltz’s seminal analysis of international relations and of the role of dynamic density therein. In *Theory of International Politics*, he argued that the functional differentiation generated by dynamic density operates only within states and not internationally.²⁸ Through focusing on how undifferentiated units interact in anarchy (that is, states as firms competing in a marketplace), Waltz emphasised the ways in which the distribution of capabilities drove system alignment and polarity. Furthermore, states in this system, via competition and socialisation, tended to converge and emulate one another reinforcing the tendency of political units to appear undifferentiated. Overtime, great powers’ security policies, even their weapons purchases and military organisations, appeared the same.²⁹ In this framework, Waltz echoed Durkheim’s distinction between organic solidarity, between highly differentiated units in a complex society, and mechanical solidarity, between like units in a segmental society.³⁰ Yet, throughout his career, Waltz held that dynamic density and functional differentiation should be seen as features of the units rather than

²² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²³ Hedley Bull, ‘Society and anarchy in International Relations’, in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

²⁴ Buzan, *From International to World Society*, pp. 164, 181. See also Kilian Spandler, ‘The political international society: Change in primary and secondary institutions’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:3 (2015), pp. 601–22.

²⁵ Buzan and Albert, ‘Differentiation’; Buzan and Albert, ‘Securitization, sectors and functional differentiation’.

²⁶ Buzan and Albert, ‘Differentiation’, p. 318.

²⁷ Barkdull, ‘Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations’. On the relationship between functional differentiation and security sectors, see Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998) and Buzan and Albert, ‘Securitization, sectors and functional differentiation’.

²⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MD: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–6.

³⁰ John Ruggie, ‘Continuity and transformation in the world polity: Towards a neorealist synthesis’, *World Politics*, 35:2 (1983), pp. 261–85.

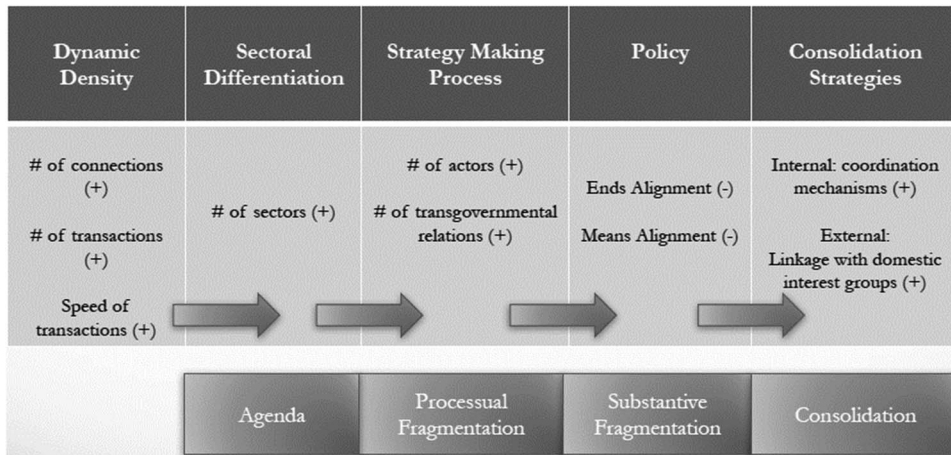


Figure 1. Dynamic density and grand strategy formation.

the system.³¹ Waltz therefore dismissed the possibility that dynamic density, through variations across states and the character of their collective interaction, could alter something like strategy formation. According to Barkdull, ‘Durkheim, Waltz tells us, did not think of dynamic density as a structural variable, and neither should we.’³²

Alternatively, multiple scholars hold out the possibility that dynamic density – as a systemic property – can shape statecraft.³³ For John Ruggie dynamic density can produce important differences in the character of the international society and hence diplomatic practice.³⁴ For Buzan, Little, and Jones, dynamic density, what they refer to as interaction capacity, shapes how the logics of anarchy and integration interact.³⁵ In other words, conceiving of dynamic density as a systemic property, rather than a property of the units, raises the central question of what type of dialectic emerges between the fragmenting logic of anarchy and the integrating logic of dynamic density. Freeing the concepts of dynamic density and functional differentiation of their Waltzian unit-level straightjackets, allows one to imagine the types of systemic forces that can alter processes like strategy formation. Dynamic density is a source of systemic change and thereby potentially affects the decision-making process of grand strategy and the substance of policy.

Specifically, growing dynamic density in the international society alters three aspects of strategy formation: (i) the content of the diplomatic agenda; (ii) the processes associated with grand strategy formation (*processual fragmentation*); and (iii) the control over policy outputs and the ability to align ends, ways and means (*substantive fragmentation*) (Figure 1).³⁶

³¹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Kenneth Waltz, ‘Reflections on theory of international politics: a response to my critics’, in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

³² Barkdull, ‘Waltz, Durkheim, and International Relations’, pp. 673–4.

³³ See fns 7 and 16.

³⁴ Ruggie, ‘Continuity and transformation in the world polity’.

³⁵ Buzan, Jones, and Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*.

³⁶ This tripartition builds upon the pioneering work by Edward Morse, *Modernization and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Free Press, 1976).

First, the increase in the volume, velocity, and diversity of interactions (that is, dynamic density) within international society generates sectoral differentiation that broadens the range of issues on diplomatic agendas. As the number of connections between political units, resulting transactions, and underlying speed of these interactions increase, this results in functional differentiation. Politicians and bureaucrats need to manage a broadening range of sectors and the resulting complexity. As noted by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ‘a new and unprecedented kind of issue has emerged. The problems of [commerce], energy, resources, environment, population, the uses of space and the seas now rank with the question of military security, ideology and territorial rivalry which traditionally made up the diplomatic agenda.’³⁷

Secondly, the broadening of issues on the national diplomatic agenda fragments the strategy formation process limiting the possibility of strategic coherence. Figure 1 reflects this proposition, illustrating that increasing the sectors involved in managing international interactions creates a larger number of political and bureaucratic actors as well as an overall rise in the number of transgovernmental relations. Ministries of Commerce, Finance, Energy – and many others – have come to engage in international negotiations dealing at the higher echelons with financial, trade, security, and other matters.³⁸ Furthermore, central control and strategic coherence become challenging as bureaucracies increasingly contact each other directly across national borders. For Risse-Kappen ‘transgovernmental networks among state officials in sub-units of national governments, international organizations, and regimes frequently pursue their own agenda, independently from and sometimes even contrary to the declared policies of their national governments’.³⁹ Similarly, Brian Hocking captures this dilemma of growing dynamic density for strategy formation: ‘management networks become increasingly diffuse and fragmented. The counterpart to growing intersocietal, transnational relations is expanding networks of transgovernmental relations as elements of what hitherto has been regarded as the “domestic bureaucracy” develop international interests and linkages.’⁴⁰

Growing connectivity creates coordination challenges at multiple levels. In pioneering work in game theory, Robert Putnam highlighted how foreign policy interactions between states involve simultaneous negotiations at the domestic level with various societal actors and coalitions and at the

³⁷ Henry Kissinger, ‘A new national partnership’, *The Department of State Bulletin*, 1860 (17 February 1975), p. 199. On this point, see also Maurice East, ‘The organizational impact of interdependence on foreign policy-making: the case of Norway’, in Charles Kegley and Patrick McGowan (eds), ‘The political economy of foreign policy behaviour’, *Sage International Yearbook of Foreign Policy Studies*, 6 (1981); Maurice East and Leif-Helge Salomonsen, ‘Adapting foreign policy-making to interdependence: a proposal and some evidence from Norway’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 16:3 (1981), pp. 165–82; Lauri Karvonen and Bengt Sundelius, ‘Interdependence and foreign policy management in Sweden and Finland’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:2 (1990), pp. 211–27; Jonathon Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen, ‘Globalization and the reorganization of foreign affairs ministries’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36:4 (2001), pp. 355–80; Bengt Sundelius, ‘Interdependence, internationalization and foreign policy decentralization in Sweden’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 192 (1984), pp. 93–120; Arild Underdal, ‘What’s left for the MFA? Foreign policy and the management of external relations in Norway’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 22:3 (1987), pp. 169–92.

³⁸ Elmer Plischke, ‘New diplomacy’, in Elmer Plischke (ed.), *Modern Diplomacy: the Art and the Artisan* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979).

³⁹ Thomas Risse-Kappen, ‘Bringing transnational relations back in: Introduction’, in Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Brian Hocking, ‘Adaptation and the foreign policy bureaucracy: the experience of federal states’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 5:1 (1994), p. 47.

international level with states.⁴¹ The central coordination challenge was to find ‘win-sets’ acceptable to domestic coalitions that do not significantly dilute the national interest. Today, the sheer range of domestic and transnational coalition networks seeking to influence the policy process is proliferating to the point where the management of the number of players in the game becomes increasingly difficult – resulting in a fragmented strategy formation process. As the number of players increases it creates coordination challenges and, potentially, principal-agent problems.

This *processual fragmentation*, in turn, generates *substantive fragmentation*, namely the decrease in goal clarity and coherence in the articulation of national security policy. As Colin Gray succinctly puts it, ‘just because a government drafts a document which proclaims the existence of a grand strategy ... there is no guarantee that baronies of officialdom will behave cohesively, coherently, and comprehensively’; the only difference between having and not having a grand strategy, ‘lies in the degree of cohesion among official behaviours’.⁴² The net result of processual fragmentation is precisely, in the words of Bengt Sundelius, that ‘with broader agendas and increasing numbers of policy objectives covering diverse areas, governmental leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to set priorities [and] avoid contradictory targets’.⁴³ In sum, processual fragmentation complicates the articulation of the multiple dimensions of grand strategy (diplomatic, military, and economic) – and their mutual linkages. It potentially decreases the capacity of states to align ends, ways and means and therefore to forge coherent policies. Policymakers can seek to manage the forces of fragmentation unleashed by dynamic density through adaptive strategies aimed at enhancing central coordination and direction in the decision-making process (that is, consolidation in the face of fragmentation):⁴⁴ first, internally, by enhancing coordination mechanisms within the broader governmental structures; second, outside the governmental setting, by developing links with domestic interests, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business.⁴⁵

Dynamic density thus produces contradictory forces and requirements that complicate and strain strategy formation: the centrifugal dynamics of processual and substantive fragmentation collide with the need to maintain centralised coordination over policy. Accordingly, the strategist’s dilemma raises the question of how to respond to these conflicting forces and requirements in strategy formation and of their implications for great power management.

The strategist’s dilemma in US policy toward the PRC

This article explores the impact of global dynamic density on great powers’ strategy formation processes examining the making of US policy *vis-à-vis* its most likely near-peer competitor, the People’s Republic of China. US ‘China policy’ and the so-called US pivot to Asia are used to probe the *strategist’s dilemma* – how growing dynamic density potentially decreases strategic coherence.

⁴¹ Robert Putnam, ‘Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games’, *International Organization*, 42:3 (1988), pp. 427–60.

⁴² Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, pp. 28–9.

⁴³ Bengt Sundelius, ‘Interdependence and foreign policy’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 15:4 (1980), p. 194.

⁴⁴ On this point, see Brian Hocking, ‘Introduction: Foreign ministries: Redefining the gatekeeper role’, in Brian Hocking (ed.), *Foreign Ministries: Change and Adaptation* (Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1999); Bengt Sundelius, ‘Interdependence and foreign policy’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 15:4 (1980), p. 197.

⁴⁵ This is what Hocking refers to as ‘catalytic diplomacy’. Brian Hocking, ‘Catalytic diplomacy: Beyond “newness” and “decline”’, in Jan Melissen (ed.), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Brian Hocking, ‘Adaptation and the foreign policy bureaucracy: the experience of federal states’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 5:1 (1994).

This dilemma should be observable in three mechanisms in the formation of American grand strategy and policy towards China. First, increased dynamic density, through sectoral differentiation, should broaden the agenda of the US-China relationship by expanding the range of sectors of diplomatic activity and interaction. Second, it should increase the number of governmental, trans-governmental and societal actors involved in a widening range of sectors thereby creating coordination problems in the making of US ‘China policy’ – indicative of processual fragmentation. Thirdly, there should be observable institutional patterns suggesting substantive fragmentation. This condition implies that there is an increase in the size of executive bodies used to coordinate policy (that is, in the United States the NSC/National Security Council Staff) and expansion in the number of strategies, strategy reviews and other strategic vision statements circulating at one time. As the number of strategies and initiatives by government bureaucracies increases, the probability that they are coordinated – implying an alignment of ends, ways, and means across different instruments of power – decreases. This multiplicity of interests encourages a fragmented strategy formation process and potentially leads to less coherent policy. Similarly major speeches and policy documents should also illustrate vague or contradictory language and increasingly ambiguous objectives.

Growing dynamic density in US-China relations

A rich array of works has shown the considerable rise in global dynamic density, such as those by Barry Buzan and George Lawson, Parag Khanna, Zeev Maoz, or Anne-Marie Slaughter.⁴⁶ To be sure, as J. M. Roberts and Odd Arne Westad have shown, the history of the world is a story of gradually increasing connectivity, differentiation, and acceleration of the pace of change ever since the appearance of *Homo sapiens*.⁴⁷ However, especially since what Buzan and Lawson refer to as the ‘global transformation’ of the nineteenth century, changes in physical infrastructures – the development of transportation and communications technologies such as railways, steamships, inter-oceanic canals, the telegraph, the radio, motor vehicles, the aircraft and, more recently, the Internet, etc. – have led to massive, still ongoing, quantitative and qualitative increases in dynamic density in the international society.⁴⁸ These developments ‘reduced the costs of transportation and communication, and increased both speed and carrying capacity’ thereby broadening and deepening global dynamic density: ‘they made the world a single space in terms of political economy and political-military interactions’.⁴⁹ This has led several authors to map the rise in global dynamic density. In *Connectography*, for instance, by juxtaposing physical geography and manmade connectivity, Parag Khanna seeks to map the complex web of connections between states, megacities, highways, railways, pipelines, Internet cables – and other physical infrastructures.⁵⁰ While there are certainly regional and subregional variations over time in the pace of increase in dynamic density – that go beyond the scope of this article and should be the object of further comparative research –, overall the international society that emerged from, and developed after, ‘the global transformation was radically different from that of earlier eras: ... the degree of economic, political, military and cultural contact and integration was much higher’.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*; Miles Kahler (ed.), *Networked Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Parag Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Global Network Revolution* (London: Hachette UK, 2016); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴⁷ J. M. Roberts and Odd Arne Westad, *The Penguin History of the World* (6th edn, London, Penguin Books, 2013).

⁴⁸ Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Khanna, *Connectography*.

⁵¹ Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*, p. 70

The growing number of connections and transactions is evident in global communication statistics. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of emails sent daily doubled to over 500 billion. During that same period, corporate workers sent 25 per cent of their day answers by emails.⁵² Though security measures and classification make it difficult to estimate, one can imagine that these numbers are similar if not higher for government employees involved in national security decision-making. The growth in emails bombarding decision-makers parallels the growth in worldwide Internet traffic. Internet hosts grew almost 1,000 per cent between 1993 and 2014.⁵³ In Asia, Internet usage grew 1,129 per cent between 2000 and 2015.⁵⁴ As you increase the communication pathways in a system, it produces both signal-to-noise ratio problems and new relational possibilities. We posit that this increase in the volume, velocity, and diversity of communications, all signs of global dynamic density, alters strategy formation.

Global dynamic density is also apparent in the news cycle. Studies of the changing media landscape find that ‘political information cycles may involve greater numbers and a more diverse range of actors than news cycles as they have traditionally been understood’ and are ‘not simply about an acceleration of pace’, but also ‘include many nonelite participants’.⁵⁵ If the rate and diversity of information bombarding decision-makers increases, it has the potential to dilute the decision-making process. As the volume of information increases, it can compromise rational decision-making. Earlier work in psychology on dilution effects suggests that ‘noise’ or undiagnostic information can actually dilute the decisional impact of more relevant information.⁵⁶ There is only so much information that any set of decision-makers can manage.⁵⁷ As Randall Schweller puts it, ‘having greater quantities of information ... has led to information entropy. As the volume of information processed or diffused increases, the information becomes noise. ... Information is routinely distorted, buried in noise, or otherwise impossible to interpret.’⁵⁸ Therefore as the volume, velocity, and diversity of exchange increase in the international society it should produce coordination challenges in the making of a policy.

The US-China relationship, and the level of dynamic density between the two countries, is a crucial case in the study of great power interactions under conditions of rising global dynamic density. To be sure, as previously mentioned, regional and subregional variations in the level of dynamic density – that is, their variations across time and space – will require further investigation. Also, the remarkable growth in US-China interactions is both the consequence of rising global dynamic density and of the Chinese and American decision, starting in the late 1970s, to open

⁵² Radicati Group, ‘E-mail Statistics Report 2009–2013’ (Palo Alto: the Radicati Group, 2014), available at: {<http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/email-stats-report-exec-summary.pdf>} accessed 26 June 2015.

⁵³ Internet Society, *Global Internet Report 2014: Open and Sustainable Access for All*, available at: {https://www.internetsociety.org/sites/default/files/Global_Internet_Report_2014_0.pdf} accessed 26 June 2015.

⁵⁴ The data is derived from internetworldstats.com, accessed 26 June 2015.

⁵⁵ Andrew Chadwick, ‘The political information cycle in a hybrid news system: the British prime minister and the “Bullygate” affair’, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 161 (2011), p. 7.

⁵⁶ James Goldgeier and Philip Tetlock, ‘Psychology and International Relations’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4:67 (2001), pp. 67–92; Henry Zukier, ‘The dilution effect: the role of correlation and dispersion of predictor variables in the use of non-diagnostic information’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43:6 (1982), pp. 1163–74.

⁵⁷ This insight derives from earlier work on bounded rationality by Herbert Simon, ‘Bounded rationality and organizational learning’, *Organization Science*, 2:1 (1991), pp. 125–34.

⁵⁸ Randall Schweller, ‘The age of entropy: Why the new world order won’t be orderly’, *Foreign Affairs* (16 June 2014).

diplomatic relations and enhance bilateral contacts. The two are intricately interwoven. However, they can be analytical distinguished as follows: the latter can be seen as a subregional variation in a longer-term trend at the systemic level. In other words, while there can be variations in time and space at the regional and subregional level, as a systemic property, the direction of change since the nineteenth century (if not earlier) is that of a generalised rise in dynamic density across the international society. And within this systemic trend, the US-China relationship is a crucial case given its contemporary importance for understanding, nuancing, or refuting the so-called ‘Thucydides’s Trap’ hypothesis.⁵⁹

The growth in dynamic density is evident in the US-China relationship. The relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China have become inextricably intertwined. The economies of the two countries have grown tightly interwoven. US-China bilateral trade has dramatically increased from \$5 billion in 1981 to \$536 billion in 2012 and the PRC is today the second-largest US trading partner.⁶⁰ China is the main foreign creditor of the United States, while the US is the first source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in China; also, up to two million people travel, on a yearly basis, between the two countries, with 150,000 Chinese students studying in the US and 20,000 Americans studying in the PRC.⁶¹ Indeed, Sino-American social and cultural relations have substantially deepened through growing interactions between universities, non-governmental organisations, think tanks, and foundations.⁶² As Peter Koehn and Xiao-Huang Yin have shown in their study of the transnational networks in the Asia-Pacific region, the two countries have witnessed a massive intensification of their interactions ‘across cultural, social, economic and political space on a scale that few imagined would occur’.⁶³

Processual fragmentation in US grand strategy toward China

As the volume and diversity of interactions between the US and the PRC has increased, the sectoral differentiation of the bilateral diplomatic agenda has dramatically expanded. This condition, in turn, has resulted in a growth in both the state and societal actors influencing the decision-making process, as well as in a broad range of transgovernmental relations. Consequently, the US government as a whole has experienced growing difficulties in coordinating the fragmented decision-making process. These trends attest to the processual fragmentation of US grand strategy making *vis-à-vis* China.

⁵⁹ Building upon the work of the homonymous Athenian historian on the mounting rivalry and subsequent war between Athens and Sparta, according to the ‘Thucydides’s Trap’ hypothesis, when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely – in not inevitable – outcome is war. See the Harvard Thucydides’s Trap Project that compares 16 historical cases, at: {<http://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/overview-thucydides-trap>} accessed 17 June 2017. See also the book by Graham Allison in which he summarises the findings of these case studies: Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), Appendix 1.

⁶⁰ Wayne Morrison, *US-China Trade Issues*, Congressional Research Service (17 July 2013), p. 2.

⁶¹ Department of Commerce, ‘2011 US Resident Travel to Asia’ (2012a), available at: {<http://tinet.ita.doc.gov>} accessed 19 July 2015; Department of Commerce, ‘2011 Market Profile: China, International Trade Administration, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries’ (2012b), available at: {<http://tinet.ita.doc.gov>} accessed 19 July 2015; Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, p. 3.

⁶² Terry Lautz, ‘The cultural relationship’, in Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, pp. 211–33.

⁶³ Peter Koehn and Xiao-Huang Yin, *The Expanding Roles of Chinese Americans in US-China Relations: Transnational Networks and Trans-Pacific Interactions* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).

The number of sectors

The intensification of relations between the US and China has resulted in a rapid expansion of the bilateral diplomatic agenda. As Bonnie Glaser explains, while before the 1970s the interactions between the US and the PRC were held sporadically mostly via ambassadorial-level talks, after normalisation and throughout the 1970s, US-PRC discussions were elevated to senior levels and the key issues on the bilateral diplomatic agenda became the strategic challenge of counterbalancing the Soviet Union and how to achieve a *modus vivendi* with Taiwan.⁶⁴ As Glaser puts it, as bilateral relationship has evolved, 'the depth and breadth of the diplomatic agenda has expanded dramatically. Today US-China discussions cover all four corners of the globe and address a panoply of issues that encompass virtually all the twenty-first century's regional and global challenges.'⁶⁵ Similarly, in his study of the making of US 'China policy' since normalisation, Qingshan Tan has shown how, over time, US-China relations have expanded rapidly from the diplomatic arena to exchanges involving security, trade, tourism, business, culture, education, health, environment, science, and technology.⁶⁶ The result is an increase in the number of sectors any grand strategy and policy seek to address.

The number of actors

This sectoral differentiation and the broadening of the diplomatic agenda have translated into an expansion and diversification of both the state and societal actors competing for influence in the formulation of US policy *vis-à-vis* the PRC. Sectoral differentiation has generated a pluralisation, decentralisation, and fragmentation of the decision-making process. In her analysis of the making of US 'China policy', Jean Garrison, who served in the State Department's China Desk, argues that 'as the variety of new issues and problems with China expands so does the relevance of multiple policy actors within the executive branch. The plethora of actors representing both different policy calculations and different means to pursue the bilateral relationship diffuse foreign policymaking authority to include important players across multiple bureaucracies'; this has 'empowered a new set of bureaucratic players in the US government that increasingly have a voice in the overall bilateral agenda'.⁶⁷ Indeed, the governmental actors involved in the making of US policy toward the PRC include today virtually every agency and bureau of the US government. They range from the Departments of State, Defense, Commerce, Treasury, Energy, Agriculture, Transportation, Education, USAID, the office of the US Trade Representative, the National Security Council Staff, the National Economic Council, the Council of Economic Advisors, the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, etc. Importantly, within each of these agencies, a broadening range of functional offices – as explained below – compete among themselves and with the regional bureaus for influence in the decision-making process. These functional bureaus, in turn, cover the entire spectrum of issues on the US-China bilateral diplomatic agenda, from intellectual property rights, to non-proliferation, law enforcement, food security, counterterrorism, criminal enforcement, market access, export controls, international trade, maritime security, climate and environmental policy, cybersecurity, etc. Robert Suettinger, former Director for Asian affairs on the National Security Council and National Intelligence Officer for East Asia at the National Intelligence Council (NIC),

⁶⁴ Bonnie Glaser, 'The diplomatic relationship', in Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, p. 151.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶⁶ Qingshan Tan, *The Making of US China Policy: From Normalization to the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

⁶⁷ Jean Garrison, 'Managing the US-China foreign economic dialogue: Building greater coordination and new habits of consultation', *Asia Policy*, 4 (2007), pp. 167–8. See also Jean Garrison, *Making China Policy: From Nixon to G. W. Bush* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005).

deserves being quoted at length. He stresses that ‘the US-China relationship has reached into virtually every arena of government interaction, from diplomacy to science, the environment, medicine, international finance, agriculture, military affairs, and many others. Just about every agency of the US government has significant exchanges with counterparts in the PRC. While these contacts develop and enrich the relationship through multilayered cooperation, they also tend to fragment policy and make it difficult to focus’; he adds that ‘although the Department of State has traditionally guided and shaped American foreign policy, it is no longer in a position to direct the activities of other large bureaucracies, partly because it is often divided in its own regional and functional bureaus and partly because the scale of the bilateral relationship has become so large and complex.’⁶⁸

Indeed, as David Lampton explains, the functional (or sectoral) differentiation of the US-China diplomatic agenda has translated not only in an enlargement of the range of actors involved in US ‘China policy’, but also in a growing specialisation in functional issues – with a mounting influence of functional bureaus *vis-à-vis* regional bureaus in most agencies involved in the US strategy formation process.⁶⁹ In the Department of State, he describes a ‘shift in the bureaucratic center of gravity’ toward functional bureaus, such as Political-Military Affairs, Economic and Business Affairs, or Oceans and International Environment and Scientific Affairs, with a concomitant loss of influence of geographic bureaus relative to functional bureaus. Furthermore, these combined trends of enlargement and specialisation have been largely replicated in other governmental agencies involved in US ‘China policy’ such as the Department of Treasury, the Department of Defense, and in the far-flung international community. In Lampton’s words, the net effect is ‘organizational constipation and growth’.⁷⁰

Transgovernmental relations

Thicker US-China relations have also led internationalised domestic bureaucracies to play an increasingly active role in the decision-making process and to engage in interactions with their Chinese counterparts. The institutionalisation of the bilateral relationship has been encouraged by Washington as a way to stabilise the Sino-American relationship.⁷¹ Yet, transgovernmental relations between internationalised agencies complicate the decision-making process. A former senior State Department official characterises the implications of growing dynamic density on the US-China relationship, and the role of internationalised domestic agencies therein, as follows:

There was a period where every US government interaction with China came through the China Desk at the State Department ... – and over the years our relation to China became a lot more regular. If you look at the Embassy in Beijing today, for instance, look at the number of agencies represented there: the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] is there, the Agriculture Department, etc. We have reached a point where each agency is off doing its own thing. ... What happened is the number of areas expanded. ... The areas where we are interacting with China have grown dramatically. ... So in terms of overall US-China relations there are more actors and things are more decentralized.⁷²

⁶⁸ Robert Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of US-China Relations, 1989–2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 426.

⁶⁹ David Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing US-China Relations, 1989–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 292.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Dongxiao Chen, ‘Complexity and transformational structure of China-US relations’, in Suishen Zhao (ed.), *China-US Relations Transformed: Perspectives and Strategic Interactions* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 58.

⁷² Interview by Hugo Meijer, 29 April 2010.

Qinshang Tan's work shows how the thickening and institutionalisation of US-China relations have rendered bureaucratic players more powerful in managing the day-to-day bilateral matters in a widened range of sectors; 'in doing so, bureaucratic agencies developed institutional interests in dealing with China affairs. And such interests motivated bureaucratic agencies to maintain and expand their "turfs" thus contributing to decentralizing US "China policy".'⁷³ Similarly, in describing the increasingly diverse and institutionalised US-PRC diplomatic agenda, Bonnie Glaser shows how, 'in addition to frequent exchanges of officials visits, over 60 bilateral dialogue mechanisms have been created to discuss issues of shared interests as well as differences'; 'these mechanisms are a testament to the institutionalization of the US-China relationships'.⁷⁴

In August 2004, the G. W. Bush administration launched the Senior Dialogue and the Strategic Economic Dialogue as key bilateral dialogue mechanisms. They were merged in 2009 by the Obama administration into the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), which was composed of a strategic and an economic track, each chaired respectively by US Secretary of State and Treasury (in 2017 it was replaced by the US-China Comprehensive Dialogue by President Donald Trump).⁷⁵ Under the Bush and Obama administration these structured bilateral dialogues and working groups have become a major 'platform to discuss an ever-broadening agenda of geographical and functional issues'; between 15 and 30 agency heads and cabinet level officials and a total of more than 150 officials from each country participate.⁷⁶ These dialogues and working groups cover virtually every issue on the bilateral diplomatic agenda. For instance, in addition to the different S&ED dialogues on energy (climate change, energy policy, oil and gas, renewable energy, advanced biofuels, etc.); on diplomacy (strategic security, human security, international security and non-proliferation, law of the sea, counterterrorism, etc.); and on economics (transportation, agriculture, science and technology cooperation, export controls, etc.), the bilateral working groups also included the various Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT) dialogues on trade, intellectual property rights and business sectors such as agriculture, textile, information industry, steel, travel and tourism, law enforcement, etc.⁷⁷ The military dialogues encompassed the defence consultative talks, defence policy consultative talks, the military maritime consultative agreement and the US-China nuclear experts dialogue. Other dialogues included the anti-corruption working group, the investment forum, the high-level consultation on people-to-people exchange, the joint commission on science and technology and the joint financial committee, among others.⁷⁸ In the words of a former senior State Department official working on the Asia-Pacific affairs, 'when you have 355 working groups' with US counterparts in China, working groups that are scattered 'across the US government, ... all these working groups are a necessary component of US "China policy" but they also lead to challenges, huge challenges, especially in the interagency world, with the State Department becoming

⁷³ Tan, *The Making of US China Policy*.

⁷⁴ Glaser, 'The diplomatic relationship', in Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, p. 158.

⁷⁵ See The White House, 'Statement from the Press Secretary on the United States-China Visit', Office of the Press Secretary (7 April 2017); and The White House, 'Briefing by Secretary Tillerson, Secretary Mnuchin, and Secretary Ross on President Trump's Meetings with President Xi of China', Office of the Press Secretary (7 April 2017). At the time of the writing the first meeting of the Comprehensive Dialogue has not yet taken place and thus cannot be discussed in any detail.

⁷⁶ Glaser, 'The diplomatic relationship', in Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, p. 172.

⁷⁷ This refers to the structure of dialogues under Obama, before President Trump's recent change. It is still unclear which processes will remain under Trump and his push for more transactional, bilateral exchange.

⁷⁸ Glaser, 'The diplomatic relationship', in Shambaugh, *Tangled Titans*, p. 158.

just one of many actors. ... There [are] probably too many of these working groups to even be managed from a senior level'.⁷⁹

The expansion of the actors at play in the decision-making process has not been limited to governmental agencies and actors. A broadening range of societal groups compete for influence in the making of US policy toward China. A number of scholars have indeed stressed the role and influence of the expanding range of economic interest groups, organised labour, ethnic groups, and NGOs – among others – seeking to influence US policy *vis-à-vis* China, thereby making the policy process increasingly complex.⁸⁰ For Steven Teles, the influence of this diverse group of societal actors is a consequence of growing US-China interactions, which, in turn, means that the bilateral agenda is increasingly filled with 'intermestic' issues, at the frontier between international and domestic concerns.⁸¹ Similarly, Robert Sutter shows that a wide range of organised groups – comprising businesses, labour groups, human rights organisations, religious groups, Chinese students, Tibetan activists, think tanks, scholars, and retired US officials – have been able to play a greater role in influencing US policies toward China.⁸²

Dynamic density complicates the interactions between governmental actors as well as between state and societal groups thereby affecting strategy formation. In the words of a former senior US official who worked both in the State and Commerce Departments, with the growing enmeshment of US-China relations 'you hear from a lot more actors, it increased the number of voices. ... You are going to have many more people expressing concerns and their point of views, a wide variety of industries, all the industries that have investments in China, semiconductors, computers, telecom, aerospace, etc.' In his view, this condition complicates the decision-making process: 'there are more things you have to consider, there is no doubt about that, you have to weigh in more factors in favor or against. You spend much more time, you have to meet more people, there are much more interests you have to balance, it is more complex.'⁸³

Coordination problems

Growing connectivity and interactions between the US and the PRC, by decentralising and fragmenting the American decision-making process, have led to growing coordination problems within the US government. In discussing the role of the NSC in coordinating US policy, the former National Security Adviser under the Obama administration, retired ex-Marine general, James Jones, asserted

The world that we live in has changed so dramatically ... that organizations that were created to meet a certain set of criteria no longer are terribly useful. ... The whole concept of what constitutes the membership of the national security community ... which, historically has been,

⁷⁹ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 14 February 2017.

⁸⁰ John Dietrich, 'Interest groups and foreign policy: Clinton and the China MFN debates', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 29:2 (1999), pp. 280–96; Kerry Dumbaugh, 'Ten years in US-China policy: Interest groups and their influence, 1989–2000', *Congressional Research Service* (12 December 2000); Kerry Dumbaugh, 'Interest groups: Growing influence', in Ramon H. Myers, Michel C. Oksenberg, and David Shambaugh (eds), *Making China Policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton Administrations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Robert Sutter, *US Policy Towards China: An Introduction to the Role of Interest Groups* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

⁸¹ Steven Teles, 'Public opinion and interest groups in the making of US-China policy', in Robert Ross (ed.), *After the Cold War: Domestic Factors in US China Relations* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁸² Sutter, *US Policy Towards China*.

⁸³ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 12 April 2010.

let's face it, the Defense Department, the NSC itself and a little bit of the State Department, to the exclusion perhaps of the Energy Department, Commerce Department and Treasury, all the law enforcement agencies, the Drug Enforcement Administration, all of those things ..., has got to embrace a broader membership.⁸⁴

In the economic realm, the National Economic Council – a loose equivalent of the NSC for foreign economic policy – was created in the 1990s ostensibly to improve coordination in the economic affairs. In creating yet a new centre of authority, however, it actually contributed to exacerbating policy coordination problems.⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, the size of the NSC staff has considerably expanded in the last decades, going from a small number of around twenty policy advisers in 1960s, to one hundred by the end of the George W. Bush administration, to over 300 people under President Barack Obama.⁸⁶ As stressed by David Auserwald, the trend line shows of successive administration have increasingly relied on an expanding NSC staff for the coordination of the strategy formation process.⁸⁷

In addition, the coordination problems generated by a broader agenda and a wider range of competing actors trickle down from the NSC and the NEC down to the individual bureaucracies. As David Lampton explains, 'the functional departments at the US State Department have proliferated to a point that a Secretary of State's span of control is too broad, which in turn creates the ever present dangers of policy inattention, perpetual bureaucratic wrangling and sending mixed messages abroad'.⁸⁸ For Jean Garrison, because so many actors have a stake in the policymaking process, the 'breadth of bureaucratic and policy interests creates competing policy agendas' and 'provides a daunting picture for effective policymaking'.⁸⁹

Policymakers can seek to manage, and adapt to, processual fragmentation by devising ways to enhance central coordination either through interagency mechanisms and/or through linkages with domestic social actors. A former Pentagon official identifies two main venues used to attempt to coordinate US 'China policy'. The first are heads of state visits and summits:

As those visits approached we had a tremendous amount of planning that we did through. The whole government used the NSC process as a way to synchronize all of the different pieces and to debate how we would balance different things. So for example: there is always quite a bit of discussion in the run-up to these visits on how much friction we want [in the US-China relationship]. We at the Pentagon wanted to push for a tough dialogue on cyber, the South China Sea or on North Korea. The Departments of State and Commerce and the US Trade Representative might say 'we do not want to rock the boat too much' [as] we are trying to

⁸⁴ Quoted in Karen DeYoung, 'Obama's NSC will get new power', *The Washington Post* (8 February 2009).

⁸⁵ Garrison, 'Managing the US-China foreign economic dialogue', p. 177.

⁸⁶ See Michael Hirsh, 'Team of bumlbers? Are Susan Rice and Chuck Hagel equal to today's new national security challenges?', *Politico* (26 October 2014), available at: {http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/10/susan-rice-chuck-hagel-team-of-bumlbers-112208_full.html?print} accessed 11 February 2015; and The Brookings Institution, 'National Security Council Structure and Organization' (2014), available at: {<http://www.brookings.edu>} accessed 18 June 2015.

⁸⁷ David Auserwald, 'The evolution of the NSC process', in Roger George and Harvey Rishikof (eds), *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), p. 34.

⁸⁸ Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams*, p. 308.

⁸⁹ Jean Garrison, 'Understanding Prospects for Cooperation and Competition in US-China Relations', paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1–5 March 2005, p. 2.

make progress on climate change, on trade issues, etc. So we would use these visits and the run-up to these visits as a way to debate and solve how we were going to solve that out' and manage the degree of cooperation and competition in the bilateral relationship.⁹⁰

The second venue was the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED).⁹¹ 'The S&ED really [does] cover everything from endangered species to climate change, from trade to security and cyber etc., you name it. And in the run-up to that there was an enormous amount of preparation behind the scenes that allowed to try to coordinate.'⁹²

Despite such attempts at managing processual fragmentation, coordination challenges remain pervasive. As a former official in the National Security Council and State Department puts it,

coordination is a challenge just because of the enormity and complexity of our relationship. ... The time when everything comes to a head is US-China bilateral summits or heads of state visits ... But even over the span of several meetings over two days, you can cover only so many issues and in a very broad and superficial way. ... Even if it is only 8, 9 or 10 issues you really cannot go in depth and that is only the tip of the iceberg of all the issues [on the bilateral diplomatic agenda]. So the challenge of coordination is massive, it is a real challenge.⁹³

Similarly, according to a former senior official in the White House, the breadth of issues on the diplomatic agenda and the wide range of actors in the decision-making process 'makes it harder sometimes to develop [the policy]. The policy development pathway is more complex because you have more issues, more interests.'⁹⁴

The previous analysis shows how growing dynamic density leads to sectoral differentiation and to a broadening of the US-China diplomatic agenda. The concomitant expansion of the range of state and societal actors competing in the formulation of America's grand strategy and policy produces coordination problems and a fragmented process. Dynamic density generates processual fragmentation. Policymakers can devise mechanisms to cope with such fragmentation through consolidation. But coordinating the multiplicity of interests and calibrating the balance between cooperation and competition in the bilateral relationship remains a daunting challenge. By causing processual fragmentation, dynamic density generates conflicting push and pull forces – a dialectic between fragmentation dynamics and the requirement of maintaining centralised coordination on the strategy formation process as well as on its implementation.

Substantive fragmentation in US policy toward China

Processual fragmentation, in turn, generates substantive fragmentation. The broadening and pluralisation of the decision-making process can reduce the capacity of the US government to coordinate and integrate, through sectoral linkages, the multiple diplomatic, economic, and military facets of US policy toward China. Dynamic density risks reducing strategic coherence. If, as Hal Brands puts it, strategy formation 'is a discipline of trade-offs',⁹⁵ increasing international interactions complicate the management of these trade-offs, and the question then becomes to what extent is the American government (still)

⁹⁰ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 13 February 2017.

⁹¹ The S&ED has been replaced by the US-China Comprehensive Dialogue by the Trump administration.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Interview by Hugo Meijer with a former Pentagon official, 14 February 2017.

⁹⁴ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 17 February 2017.

⁹⁵ Hal Brands, *The Promise and Pitfalls of Grand Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), p. 5.

able to manage the trade-offs involved in the expanding dimensions of US policy *vis-à-vis* China? We use the US pivot to Asia as a plausibility probe to explore this strategist's dilemma.

Since taking office in 2009 the Obama administration called for a 'rebalance' toward the Asia-Pacific.⁹⁶ First, the region became the centrepiece of new diplomatic activity ranging from presidential and cabinet-level bilateral engagements to a renewed emphasis on multilateral engagement through organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).⁹⁷ Second, the Department of Defense issued new guidance and defence concepts – including the 'Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons', previously known as AirSea Battle concept – signalling its capacity to sustain power projection and uphold alliances in the region.⁹⁸ Third, the Obama administration stressed that 'the economic dynamism of the East Asia Pacific' was 'vitaly important for US interests'.⁹⁹ In support of these economic interests, the US government pursued a broad range of national, bilateral, and multilateral economic initiatives including the National Export Strategy, increasing foreign aid in the region, and seeking out new free trade agreements (such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, from which President Donald Trump withdrew in 2017).¹⁰⁰

Collectively, US decision-makers stress that these actions are not aimed at containing China.¹⁰¹ Rather, the mixture of cooperative and competitive actions highlights a differentiated sector-by-sector approach across multiple issue areas (for example, nuclear proliferation, energy security, terrorism, climate change, military modernisation, cyber security, financial reform, etc). Washington has sought to expand the areas of potential cooperation with Beijing while managing the areas of bilateral differences and frictions.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Hugo Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia: Diplomatic, Military, and Economic Dimensions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁹⁷ Public pronouncements of this shift include Hillary Clinton, 'America's pacific century', *Foreign Policy* (1 October 2011) and Barack Obama, 'Remarks to the Australian Parliament', Parliament House, Canberra, Australia (17 November 2011).

⁹⁸ Benjamin M. Jensen and Eric Y. Shibuya, 'The military rebalance as retcon', in Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia*, pp. 81–106; Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate over US Military Strategy in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Sam LaGrone, 'Pentagon drops AirSea Battle name, concept lives on', *USNI News* (20 January 2015).

⁹⁹ Scott Marciel, 'Economic Aspects of the Asia Rebalance', Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (18 December 2013).

¹⁰⁰ William Cooper, Mark Manyin, Remy Jurenas, and Michaela Platzer, *The US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA): Provisions and Implications*, Congressional Research Service (7 March 2013); Robert G. Sutter, Michael E. Brown, and Timothy J. A. Adamson, *Balancing Acts: The US Rebalance and Asia Pacific Stability* (Washington, DC: Sigur Center for Asian Studies, The George Washington University, 2013), p. 2; Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee, *National Export Strategy 2011*, Washington, DC (11 July 2011).

¹⁰¹ Hugo Meijer, 'The reconfiguration of American primacy in world politics: Prospects and challenges for the US rebalance to Asia', in Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia*. See also Philip Saunders, 'Rebuttal: the US isn't trying to contain China ... and China's neighbors don't want it to anyway', *Foreign Policy* (23 August 2013).

¹⁰² Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), pp. 6, 11; David Lampton, 'China and the United States: Beyond balance', in James B. Steinberg, Thomas B. Fargo, Aaron L. Friedberg, J. Stapleton Roy, David M. Lampton, and Wallace Gregson (eds), *Turning to the Pacific: US Strategic Rebalancing toward Asia, Asia Policy*, 14 (2012), pp. 40–4; David Lampton, 'Cooperative Balance in Asia', testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (7 February 2013); Meijer (ed.), *Origins and Evolution of the US Rebalance toward Asia*.

The American rebalance to Asia, which can be seen as a cumulative evolution rather than as a radical departure from previous administrations' policies in the region, marked a re-hierarchisation of US foreign policy priorities after a decade of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, it exhibited manifestations of substantive fragmentation that is observable in an expansion in the number of strategies, strategy reviews and other strategic vision statements aimed at redefining, at each stage in the process, the orientation of the policy; secondly, from major speeches and policy documents illustrating sometimes contradictory or vague language reflecting the strategist's dilemma. What emerges is the growing challenge for the US of calibrating the competitive and cooperative forces in the US-China relationship through centralised processual coordination.

In an October 2011 article titled 'America's Pacific Century', then-Secretary Hillary Clinton outlined a number of key lines of action for a multifaceted US policy in the region: (1) strengthening bilateral security alliances; (2) deepening US working relationships with emerging powers, including China; (3) engaging with regional multilateral institutions; (4) expanding trade and investment; (5) forging a broad-based military presence; and (6) advancing democracy and human rights.¹⁰³ One year later, in his speech at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta described the goals of the pivot as encompassing the following: (1) promoting international rules and order; (2) deepening and broadening bilateral and multilateral partnerships; (3) enhancing and adapting US presence; and (4) making new investments in capabilities needed to project power and operate in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁰⁴ Michael Green, former Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and Senior Director for Asia at the NSC, argues that while these four components have remained the central objectives of the security dimension of the rebalance, 'shifting descriptions of the rebalance appeared in US government documents' and 'senior officials' statements have often been inconsistent and sometimes contradictory'; the reason is that 'they were not built on an interagency process marrying strategy and resources – ways and means – to objectives'.¹⁰⁵ He stresses how, for instance, a 2013 White House factsheet on the pivot dropped the emphasis on 'forging a broad-based military presence' replacing it with 'pursuing a stable and constructive relationship with China'.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the same year, the State Department released another factsheet stressing that the US would 'ensure our military posture in the region effectively supports the full range of our engagement'.¹⁰⁷ These contradictory depictions of the end-ways-and-means of the US Pivot to Asia – and of the desired balance between cooperation and competition in US-China relations – are indicative of the difficulties of devising a coherent policy.

The challenges of achieving strategic coherence in the making of US policy toward China have led to repeated calls for the creation of an *Asia-Pacific Strategy Review*. In 2013, a bipartisan group of Congressmen sent a letter to National Security Adviser Susan Rice asserting that:

what is now required is a clear, interagency guidance enabling a broad effort and empowering departments and agencies to implement the guidance. ... Currently, agencies outside of the

¹⁰³ Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century'.

¹⁰⁴ Leon Panetta, 'Shangri-La Security Dialogue', speech delivered at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore (2 June 2012).

¹⁰⁵ Michael Green and Zack Cooper, 'Revitalizing the rebalance: How to keep US focus on Asia', *The Washington Quarterly*, 37:3 (2014), pp. 25–46.

¹⁰⁶ The White House, 'Fact Sheet: The Fiscal Year 2014 Federal Budget and the Asia-Pacific', available at: {http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/asia_pacific_rebalance_factsheet_20130412.pdf} accessed 18 May 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Department of State, 'The East Asia-Pacific Rebalance: Expanding US Engagement' (16 December 2013), available at: {<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/pl/2013/218776.htm>} accessed 5 July 2015.

White House, including the Department of Defense, Department of State, and country teams at various Asia-Pacific Embassies lack the specific direction that will be required for the implementation of this strategy. ... The rest of the US government and our officials in Asian capitals have been left to try and parse policy from speeches, interviews and articles. ... Therefore, in order to better define the ends-ways-means of the Administration's strategic objectives in this region, we urge you to lead an interagency Asia-Pacific Strategy Review.¹⁰⁸

The issue of substantive fragmentation was thus the source of bipartisan concern in Congress. It was also raised by several think tanks. A report by the Center for New American Security urged the National Security Council to produce 'a document that articulates, in one place, its strategy for the Asia-Pacific region', which would also 'track the implementation of the various components of the Rebalance'; furthermore, the report urged the NSC to 'issue classified strategic guidance on its objectives' pursued through the Rebalance, and that such 'guidance should take stock of Rebalance progress to date across agencies and should set comprehensive goals It should issue agency-specific guidance to the Pentagon, State Department, Treasury Department, and others, framing each agency's role in the Rebalance.'¹⁰⁹ Similarly, according to researchers at the Center for Strategic and International Studies,

a unified interagency strategy for the Asia-Pacific is necessary not only for internal consistency and effective implementation, but for external consumption as well. Such a document would reassure US allies and partners of US intentions and support more proactive engagement with the Congress, on which development, articulation, budgeting, and implementation of the rebalance depend. The process should be organized under the National Security Council because of the need for integration of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic [tools].¹¹⁰

Besides calls for the establishment of an *Asia-Pacific Strategy Review* and for centralised coordination, US policymakers have also exhibited a tendency to create quadrennial strategy reviews in almost all the dimensions of US strategy formation, including defence, intelligence, homeland security, diplomacy and development, and energy. In the military facet of grand strategy, in 2010, an independent panel of twenty defence experts concluded that the *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* had been an ineffective strategic planning mechanism and even recommended discontinuing the review.¹¹¹ Jim Thomas, a participant in several *QDRs*, bluntly commented, 'I can't think of a worst way of making good strategy than a quadrennial defense review. Getting a couple of thousand people involved from across the bureaucracy, having lots of working groups, the coordination process, ... as well as folks in your military and then industry, you've got too many audiences in play.'¹¹² Similarly, strategy reviews have proliferated to every other dimension of grand strategy, including *The Quadrennial Intelligence Community Review*, *The Quadrennial Homeland Security Review*, *The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, and *The Quadrennial Energy Review*.

¹⁰⁸ 'Bipartisan letter to Susan Rice calling for Asia-Pacific strategy review', *RealClearDefense* (17 July 2013), available at: {http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2013/07/24/bipartisan_letter_to_susan_rice_calling_for_asia-pacific_strategy_review_106707.html} accessed 17 May 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Mira Rapp-Hooper, Patrick M. Cronin, Harry Krejsa, and Hannah Suh, *Counterbalance: Red Teaming the Rebalance in the Asia-Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, 2016), pp. 54–5.

¹¹⁰ Green and Cooper, 'Revitalizing the rebalance', p. 67.

¹¹¹ Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel, *The QDR in Perspective: Meeting America's National Security Needs in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

¹¹² Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'Preparing for the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review' (2013), available at: {http://csis.org/files/attachments/130125_panel1_transcript.pdf} accessed 15 July 2014.

While these strategy reviews are not specifically directed at the US-China relationship, the more individual government bureaucracies initiate strategy reviews in their own sector, the higher the probability of a lack of overall alignment of ends, ways, and means across the government. This condition signals growing challenges in achieving strategic coherence – that is the risk of substantive fragmentation – all the more so in developing a policy toward the country, China, with which the United States is simultaneously increasingly entangled and the greatest military competitor.

In the words of a former senior Pentagon official, ‘the US-China relationship is characterized by cooperative and competitive elements [and the] tension between these elements’ makes it difficult to ‘harmonize your goals in a relationship as complicated as the one between the US and China’.¹¹³ Another former senior official who worked on East Asian affairs eloquently summarises the strategist’s dilemma in the making of US policy toward China as follows: ‘Foreign policy is identifying issues, areas for cooperation and competition, developing policy toward those ends.’ The mixture of rivalry and growing entanglement between the US and the PRC

makes it more complicated for two reasons: first, the proliferation of actors [in the strategy formation process]; second, it makes the broader relationship much more complicated. When we are just competitors, it is rather easy to put together a policy, but once we become partners, and a very important partner, it makes the policy much more complex. ... It is very difficult for the US to have a long-term coherent policy toward China.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

This article investigated how dynamic density – growing volume, velocity, and diversity of interactions within international society – affects states’ strategy formation. By combining the English School of International Relations and the study of grand strategy decision-making processes, we illustrated how conceiving of dynamic density, and the functional differentiation that it produces, as systemic properties – rather than as properties of the units as structural realism does – allows to explore how global dynamic density alters strategy formation. The article has argued that as growing global dynamic density, as a systemic attribute, increases, the coherence of great powers’ grand strategies and policies potentially decreases. To probe the plausibility of the argument, it focused on the making of US policy *vis-à-vis* its most likely near-peer competitor, the People’s Republic of China. While further comparative research is required to test our hypotheses, the findings of the article have potentially major implications for understanding the ramifications of global dynamic density for great power relations also beyond US-China relations. They open fruitful avenues for future research on how dynamic density, by shaping strategy formation processes, can thereby affect great power management (GPM) as a primary institution of international society.

For Evelyn Goh, through great power management, which can range from collaborative to competitive, ‘great powers consolidate and sustain the privileges of their special position in international society by promoting the very order that produces these benefits for them. This management is aimed at preserving the society of states itself by regulating the boundaries within which great powers exercise their influence.’¹¹⁵ In particular, for Hedley Bull, great powers contribute to international order in two

¹¹³ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 13 October 2017.

¹¹⁴ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 11 March 2010.

¹¹⁵ Evelyn Goh, ‘East Asia as regional international society: the problem of great power management’, in Buzan and Zhang (eds), *Contesting International Society in East Asia*, p. 169.

main ways:¹¹⁶ by managing their relations with one another through bilateral mutual constraint (crisis management and war limitation); and ‘by exploiting their preponderance in such a way as to impart a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole’. He further adds that these ‘two main roles or functions’ of GPM, mutual constraint and central direction, ‘are closely interconnected and difficult to separate in historical reality: the steps the great powers take to manage their relations with one another lead directly to the attempt to provide central direction [to] the affairs of international society as a whole; [and] the steps they take to exploit their preponderance in relation to the rest of international society presuppose some effective management of their relations with one another’.¹¹⁷

In contrast to ‘complex interdependence’ theory, which assumes that great power rivalry fades as the complex interdependence of actors decreases the utility of military power and coercion, by generating processual and substantive fragmentation dynamic density might well complicate and destabilise great power relations – and specifically the two core dimensions of GPM, mutual constraint and central direction.¹¹⁸

First, central direction of the affairs of the international society requires finding common ground and joint action on some issues of common interest.¹¹⁹ However, dynamic density entails a growing number of interactions on an ever-expanding number of issues (non-proliferation, environment, trade, cyber, etc.), with more actors and coordination challenges. To be sure, as one former White House official puts it, having more issues in bilateral relations can ‘give you a larger palette of diplomatic and negotiating options that you can bring together, a larger palette to find some win-wins in’.¹²⁰ On the other hand, however, decreased processual and substantive coherence mean that a broadening range of actors, seeking to coordinate a widening range of issues on the diplomatic agenda, can find it increasingly complex to hierarchise competing priorities. These internal challenges can make it more difficult for great powers to coordinate among themselves on such a large scale of issues, especially when friction in one area can hamper cooperation in other areas – thus hampering the capacity to impart central direction.

Second, and relatedly, mutual constraint entails carefully fine-tuning the competitive and cooperative forces at play in a bilateral relationship. But by generating processual and substantive fragmentation, dynamic density can complicate mutual constraint by hindering the capacity of great powers to manage and calibrate the competitive/cooperative forces in their interactions and to delineate the desired degree of cooperation and rivalry. The more institutions, interest groups and individuals compete in the strategy formation process, and the greater the coordinating challenges, the more chances that frictions and conflicting interests can push and pull a bilateral relationship in different directions.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ ‘International order’ is defined by Bull as a pattern of activity between and among states that sustain the basic goals of the society of states (or international society), which include: the goals of all social life (security from violence, the honouring of agreements and the stability of possessions); the preservation of state system of states; the maintaining independence of the separate units; and the preservation of peace. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (3rd edn, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), ch. 1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–1.

¹¹⁸ On ‘complex interdependence’ theory, see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977) and Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, ‘Power and interdependence Revisited’, *International Organization*, 41:4 (1987), pp. 725–53.

¹¹⁹ See Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 201.

¹²⁰ Interview by Hugo Meijer, 17 February 2017.

¹²¹ On this point, see also Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberthal, ‘An overview of the US-China relationship’, in Nina Hachigian (ed.), *Debating China: The US-China Relationship in Ten Conversations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 7.

The centripetal forces unleashed by dynamic density in the strategy formation process can thus make it harder to manage and sustain a desired and consistent balance of cooperation and competition in great power relations and to impart central direction. Any breakdown in the ability of a state to forge a clear, coherent grand strategy and policy *vis-à-vis* another produces push and pull forces between the two. As such, dynamic density muddles and potentially hampers great power management and increases the risks of miscalculation, missignalling, and unintended consequences. Far from the inevitability of the ‘Thucydides’s Trap’ hypothesis, it is the capacity to manage the conflicting dynamics and contradictory logics at play in the anarchical international society – the dialectic between the fragmenting forces of anarchy and the integrating forces of rising dynamic density –, and their impact on strategy formation processes, that might well decide the (in)stability of great power relations and the prospects of great power conflict, or its absence, in the twenty-first century.

Biographical information

Dr Hugo Meijer is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the European University Institute (EUI), Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

Dr Benjamin Jensen holds a dual appointment as an Associate Professor at Marine Corps University and as a Scholar-in-Residence at American University, School of International Service.