

Mind the Gap

Chinese academic views on Sino—US decoupling



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Mind the Gap: Chinese Academic Views on Sino-US Decoupling

By Caleb Hoyle

Executive summary

This report examines the Chinese-language academic discourse on Sino-United States (US) decoupling as articulated in mainland Chinese academic journals. It identifies four salient themes—changes in the balance of power between China¹ and the US, ideology and political systems, economic nationalism and globalisation, and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic—and briefly examines the policy recommendations put forward to negotiate decoupling.

It finds significant differences in the treatment of the factors that contribute to decoupling and limited engagement or genuine consideration of US concerns. The importance of bridging the conceptual gulf that exists between Chinese language and English discourses is significant, particularly given the current rising levels of polarisation and the contraction of spaces within which genuine dialogue can be had between Chinese and US scholars.

Changes in the balance of power between China and the US were widely discussed by scholars in the Chinese-language literature. The US was often presented as hegemonic (and in decline) and made anxious by China's increase in relative strength - particularly in economic, science and technology and military spheres. The US' concern at China's rise was seen as fundamentally altering its engagement with China and motivating it to contain China through economic nationalist strategies such as decoupling.

Ideology and political systems were perceived as having returned to positions of prominence in the Sino-US relationship. Some scholars saw the differing political systems and ideologies of China and the US as putting the two countries in conflict with one another on a fundamental level. China's system was viewed as advantageous when countering the risks of decoupling and the adverse effects of globalisation, while its socialist market economy was regarded as a subject of concern for the US. Donald Trump's America First policy was seen as inflaming tensions between China and the US and increasing decoupling pressures.

¹ In this report 'China' is used to refer the People's Republic of China.

Sino-US decoupling was contextualised within the broader decline of globalisation. Problems with globalisation were addressed and a China-backed alternative was approvingly discussed. China was portrayed as positively engaged in globalisation, in stark contrast to the US. The US was perceived to be unfairly trying to constrain China by targeting key areas such as science and technology with decoupling policies. Some scholars held that rather than force China to address US concerns, US moves to decouple would make China more self-reliant and possibly lead to increased levels of state intervention in the Chinese market.

The emergence of Covid-19 as a global public health crisis was seen as upending the period of relative calm in the bilateral relationship that had followed the signing of the Sino-US phase one trade deal. The pandemic was viewed as exacerbating pre-existing issues in the relationship and increasing decoupling pressures. The differences in the Chinese and US responses to the pandemic lifted confidence in the Chinese system of governance and its ability to cope with Sino-US competition.

When considering how China should respond to decoupling – respond being the operative word as decoupling was widely viewed as being driven by the US – scholars often recommended that China take a two-pronged approach: continuing to open up to the world while strengthening self-reliance and reducing vulnerability to external shocks. Some highlighted the need to improve communication with the US. Others advocated for a defensive strategy to gain the moral high ground and international support.

Introduction

This report explores the Chinese-language academic discourse, as articulated in mainland Chinese academic journals, on Sino-US decoupling. It is motivated by the paucity of English-language studies on the subject. Many of the key issues in the English-language discourse are already well known – for example – US concerns about barriers facing US companies operating in China, intellectual property theft, the US trade deficit with China and the diminished state of the US’ manufacturing industries all feature prominently, alongside others.² Given the global ramifications of decoupling between the world’s two largest economies,³ it is important to understand the various discourses taking place in both China and the US, particularly at this present time of heightened bilateral polarisation.

The articles used in this report were sourced from the China Knowledge Infrastructure website (CNKI; 中国知网) and found using keyword searches for terms such as ‘Sino-US decoupling’ (中美脱钩), ‘decoupling’ (脱钩) and ‘Sino-US trade war’ (中美贸易战). Articles were chosen for their relevance and the number of times that they had been cited and accessed. The impact that their date of publication had on these metrics was also considered.

All articles were published in academic journals from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and as such, they exist within the permission space of PRC academia. This is noted not with the intention to belittle the views of their authors, nor to say that the articles do not represent the genuinely held views, simply that they were published within a specific context.

To provide insight into the Chinese academic discourse on Sino-US decoupling, this report explores four broad salient themes taken from the literature: changes in the balance of power between China and the US, ideology and political systems, economic nationalism and globalisation, and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. Finally, policy recommendations by Chinese academics are briefly examined.

Overall, this report finds a strong consensus that decoupling is a US-initiated process aimed at containing China. The differences between the Chinese and US political

² See for example Shambaugh, David, ‘Dealing with China: Tough engagement and managed competition’. *Asia Policy*, 23, (2017): 4-12; Foot, Rosemary and Amy King, ‘Assessing the deterioration in China-U.S. relations: U.S. governmental perspectives on the economic security nexus.’ *China International Strategy Review*, 1(1), (2019): 39-50; Friedberg, Aaron, L., ‘A new U.S. economic strategy towards China?’ *Washington Quarterly*, 40(4), (2017) 97-114; and Friedberg, Aaron, L., ‘Competing with China’. *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 60(3), (2018): 7-64.

³ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?most_recent_value_desc=true

systems and ideologies are viewed not only as representing areas of significant conflict but also as a source of strength for China. The US is presented as taking a nationalistic approach that is detrimental to globalisation, while China is argued to be a responsible and active global citizen. Further, the coronavirus pandemic is seen as exacerbating many of the difficulties facing the Sino-US relationship and demonstrating the strength of the Chinese system.

Decoupling

The usage and connotations of the term decoupling (脱钩) have undergone significant changes since the global financial crisis (GFC; 2008-2009). Prior to the crisis, the term was commonly associated with 'decoupling theory' (脱钩理论). This broadly held that due to internal political and economic changes and an expansion of regional trade, emerging economies would be better able to withstand external economic shocks and their economic growth would no longer be dependent on developed countries. In this context, Sino-US decoupling was seen as 'positive' (良性) for China, 'conducive to the healthy development of China's economy (有助于中国经济健康发展)⁴ and providing insulation from the impacts of the US slowdown.⁵

However, following the GFC, decoupling frequently related to concerns about China's economic growth prospects, in particular, that the US' economic recovery was not stimulating China's economic growth as a result of measures taken by the US to 'actively weaken its economic relationship with China' (主动弱化与中国的经济关系).⁶

More recently, and particularly since the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, decoupling has been utilised in broader analyses of the Sino-US relationship. For example, Wang and Chen argued that in international relations the concept of decoupling is 'not only economic, but also political and strategic' (不仅是经济上的, 也是政治与战略上的). In this usage, decoupling primarily refers to the reduction of linkages in the economic relationship between two countries, as well as alienation in the political relationship and the weakening of strategic cooperation. While, the authors note that different aspects of decoupling display different characteristics, the term primarily describes a 'negative state of relations between two countries' (两国关

⁴ Li, Xiao and Xiangyu Pei, "A study on the evolution Sino-US decoupling and its measurement (中美经济脱钩演进及其测度研究)." *World Economy Studies* 11 (2015): 3-39.

⁵ Cao, Xiaolei, "Research on Sino-US economic and trade relations from a decoupling perspective" (基于脱钩视角的中美经贸关系研究). *Forum of World Economics and Politics*, 6, (2013): 81-90.

⁶ Ibid

系所处的一种消极状态) in which bilateral interdependence and willingness to cooperate are reduced.⁷ Decoupling has been used in the literature to examine many facets of the Sino-US relationship including finance,⁸ science and technology⁹ and at a person-to-person level.¹⁰

Within the literature, scholars have presented vastly different perspectives on whether China and the US are decoupling and the likelihood and extent of future decoupling. Naturally, such analyses have been heavily influenced by the ongoing deterioration of the bilateral relationship. Consequently, there is a correlation between recentness and pessimism about the health of the relationship. This includes predictions early in the Trump Presidency that estimated the probability of a 'large-scale trade war' (大规模贸易战) occurring within the Trump Administration's first term at less than 5%,¹¹ and that the momentum of the Sino-US relationship meant that relations between the two countries would not suffer major disruption.¹² Others argued that strategic decoupling was beginning to occur and argued that only through the 'joint efforts' (共同努力) of both countries could decoupling be arrested.¹³ Some saw, in the long-term, a trend towards economic decoupling.¹⁴ Others who felt that decoupling was occurring argued that the extensive economic linkages and benefits that have accrued as a result of decades of 'mutually beneficial cooperation' (互利合作), meant that 'full decoupling' (全面脱钩) would be almost impossible.¹⁵ Li cautioned against predictions of how bad the relationship would become whilst noting the possibility that the US' 'economic containment' (经济遏制) strategy of 50 years ago may re-emerge if the economic

⁷ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, "Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling" (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

⁸ Zhu, Caihua, "Markets, states, and the reconstruction of the international economic and trade rule system" (市场、国家与国际经贸规则体系重构). *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 1-33.

⁹ Li, Zheng, "Underlying motivations and long-term trends in the US-driven science and technology "decoupling" (美国推动中美科技“脱钩”的深层动因及长期趋势). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2020): 33-40.

¹⁰ Li, Wei, "From engagement to competition: The transformation of US economic strategy toward China" (从接触到竞争:美国对华经济战略的转型). *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 54-80.

¹¹ Zhang, Yuyan and He Niu, "Trump's success and limitations: A concurrent discussion of Sino-US Trade Relations" (特朗普的成功及其限度: 兼论中美经贸关系). *International Economic Review*, 2 (2017): 9-17.

¹² Wu, Xinbo, "The Trump administration and the direction of China-US relations" (特朗普执政与中美关系走向). *International Studies*, 2 (2017): 15-28. Others such as Tao were similarly optimistic, see Tao, Wenzhao, "The great debate on US policy toward China" (美国对华政策大辩论). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2016): 19-28.

¹³ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, "Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling" (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

¹⁴ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, "The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations" (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

¹⁵ Zhu, Caihua, "Markets, states, and the reconstruction of the international economic and trade rule system 市场、国家与国际经贸规则体系重构." *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 1-33.

competition between the two countries escalated and a resolution was unable to be quickly found.¹⁶

Balance of Power

One of the most frequently visited themes in the literature is the changing balance of power between China and the US. These changes, reflected in Chinese leader Xi Jinping's oft-repeated statement (or variations of it) that 'at present, the world is undergoing major changes unseen in a century' (当今世界正处于百年未有之大变局),¹⁷ were seen as a significant contributor to the trend towards decoupling. Indeed, the sentiment of many scholars echoed the prediction of Yan and Qi, that the superficial nature of the Sino-US relationship means that as the gap in 'overall strength' (综合实力) between China and the US narrows, conflict over each country's respective interests will be exacerbated.¹⁸

In the face of an ascendant China, the US was often portrayed as the defensive hegemon, challenged, and made anxious by China's rapid development and increase in national strength and acting in ways that present fundamental challenges to the Sino-US relationship. Mei argued that while China (or 'our side' '我方') has made 'tremendous efforts' (巨大努力) to stabilise and develop the Sino-US relationship (something that was 'obvious to all' (有目共睹)), the crux of the conflict is that the hegemonic US is trying to contain China - the 'emerging power' (新兴大国).¹⁹ Wang and Chen also perceived changes in relative strength to be a 'fundamental factor' (根本性因素) in the Sino-US relationship becoming more competitive and highlight China's continued strides in the economic, science and technology and military spheres as being of particular import.²⁰ Wang and Li argued that China's economic²¹

¹⁶ Li, Wei, "From engagement to competition: The transformation of US economic strategy toward China" (从接触到竞争:美国对华经济战略的转型). *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 54-80.

¹⁷ Li, Jie, (2018). "Deeply understand and grasp the world's 'major changes unseen in a century,'" (深刻理解把握世界“百年未有之大变局”) 3 September 2018, *Study Times*, accessed 24 November 2020 at http://www.cssn.cn/qjgxx/qj_qqwt/202012/t20201218_5234442.shtml Yang, Na and Huiting Wang, (2020).

"Global governance and China's participation in the context of major changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局下的全球治理及中国参与). *North East Asia Forum*, 6(152): 39-50.

¹⁸ Yan, Xuetong and Haixia Qi, "Prospects for Sino-US competition: Superficial friends, not a new Cold War" (中美竞争前景: 假朋友而非新冷战). *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, 31, (2012): 1-23.

¹⁹ Mei, Xinyu, "An analytic study of the Sino-US trade war and its prospects" (中美贸易战评析与展望). *Journal of China University of Labor Relations*, 33(2), (2019), 1-8.

²⁰ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, "Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling" (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

²¹ China's replacement of Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010 while the US was mired in the impacts of the global financial crisis was singled out as of particular importance – as was also noted by other

and technological development has ‘caused a level of concern in US strategic circles unseen since the end of the “Cold War”’ (使得美国战略界出现了自“冷战”结束以来前所未有的担忧), prompting a shift in the US from an “engagement” strategy’ (“接触”战略) to a “whole-of-government” strategy of competition toward China’ (“全政府”对华竞争战略) – of which decoupling forms a part.²² For some, China’s ‘leadership in 5G technology and applications’ (5G 技术和应用的领先) has given the US a ‘small-scale “Sputnik shock”’ (小规模“斯普特尼克冲击”). This was viewed as forcing the US to reflect on whether it’s national innovation and science and technology diplomacy can adapt to ‘the demands of an era of great power competition’ (大国竞争时代的需求); potentially fuelling a decoupling of the ‘international standards for underlying technologies’ (底层技术的国际标准).²³ Others argued that ‘if the US does not constrain China’ (美国如果不制约中国), then in the ‘next decade or so’ (再过十年左右) the size of China’s ‘economic aggregate’ (经济总量) will be greater than the US’.²⁴ Li went somewhat further with the discussion of US’ hegemonic desires further, arguing that the US’ ‘fundamental objective’ (根本目的) is to ‘turn China into a vassal of the US’ (要把中国变成美国的附庸).²⁵ Some put forward that a greater symmetry in strength would enhance China’s capacity to shape Sino-US relations and that this balance should be used to prevent the relationship from ‘slipping onto the path of “strategic confrontation”’ (滑入“战略对抗”的通道).²⁶

Although China’s increased strength was the most commonly cited factor in the changing power dynamics between China and the US, discussions also touched on the US no longer being the power that it once was. Some scholars contrasted a ‘rising China’ (崛起的中国) eager to be active in international affairs in order to ‘realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (实现中华民族的伟大复兴) with a ‘declining US’ (衰落的美国) which perceives such actions as ‘overreach’ (过于张扬).²⁷

authors such as Wenzhao Tao in “The great debate on US policy toward China” (美国对华政策大辩论). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2016): 19-28.

²² Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “United States’ China decoupling strategy and response in the context of the impacts of the global pandemic,” *North East Asia Forum*, 151(5), (2020): 47-62. 全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对

²³ Li, Zheng, “Underlying motivations and long-term trends in the US-driven science and technology “decoupling” (美国推动中美科技“脱钩”的深层动因及长期趋势). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2020): 33-40.

²⁴ “Shen, Wei, “Thucydides’ logic and rules containment and counter-containment: The deep-seated causes behind China-United States trade friction (修昔底德”逻辑和规则遏制与反遏制 - 中美贸易摩擦背后的深层次动因). *Frontiers*, 1, (2019): 40-59.

²⁵ Li, Shenming, ‘Appropriate responses to the US-initiated Sino-US trade war’ (妥善应对美国挑起的中美贸易战). *World Socialism Studies*, 7, (2019): 4-18.

²⁶ Ruan, Zongze, ‘Trump’s “new vision” and China’s diplomatic options’ (特朗普“新愿景”与中国外交选择). *International Studies*, 2, (2017), 1-14.

²⁷ Xie, Tao. ‘China and the United States in the Trump era: A new type of great power confrontation? (特朗普时代的中国与美国: 新型大国对抗关系?). *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*, 5, (2019): 14-28. However, for Xie

The domestic problems facing the US were highlighted by some. Li and Li argued that the US' failure to reverse the decline in its manufacturing capabilities, stem the rise of its balance of payments deficit and its increasingly high levels of national debt (exacerbated by increased military spending), are key factors in the economic problems facing the US. Its promotion of industrial decoupling was perceived as a manifestation of these domestic challenges.²⁸

Ideology and Political Systems

Differences in ideology and political systems, and the implications of these differences for the Sino-US relationship, were frequently discussed in the literature. For some, these issues have once again become prominent in the Sino-US relationship, with the US seen as having 'largely abandoned' (基本放弃了) its approach of 'making China more like itself' (让中国变得更像自己). This, they argue, is evidenced by measures such as the labelling of China as a 'revisionist power' (修正主义大国) whose 'values and interests run counter to those of the US' (与美国的价值观和利益背道而驰) and the high level of consensus among US strategists about the need to engage in strategic competition with China.²⁹ Some held that if Sino-US relations are to fall into the 'Thucydides trap' (修昔底德陷阱), ideology may be a 'core factor' (核心因素).³⁰ For others, ideological opposition (and the narrowing of the economic gap between China and the US) has made it impossible for the US to abandon its 'hostility and containment of China' (对中国的敌视和遏制).³¹

The importance of China maintaining its political status quo was emphasised. For example, Li stated that when dealing with Sino-US relations, certain principles must be upheld. Domestically these are, most crucially, to 'adhere to the socialist path' (坚持社会主义道路) and to 'uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party' (坚持中国共产党的领导). While noting that, although the US and China have much in

gives more weight to changes in US domestic politics as the reason for worsening Sino-US relations than the changing power balance between China and the US.

²⁸ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, 'A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures' (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37. – the 37 indicates that it also has a bit on page 37.

²⁹ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, 'Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling"' (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

³⁰ Zhao, Minghao, 'The Trump administration and the strategic transformation of China-US relations (特朗普执政与中美关系的战略转型). *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, 5, (2018): 26-48.

³¹ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, "The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations" (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

common, Li argued that capitalism and ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (中国特色社会主义), at a fundamental and long-term level, are opposed to one another.³²

US views of China’s economic system were also discussed, along with the implications of such views on the Sino-US relationship. For Wang, the US’ perception of the ‘Chinese system’ (中国的体制) is the ‘deep-seated reason’ (深层次原因) behind it ‘launching a trade war against China’ (发起对华贸易战).³³ Consequently, if the US’ understanding of China remains unchanged and there are no substantial changes to the Chinese system, harmonious economic and trade relations between the two countries will not materialise. Economic and trade exchanges will, however, continue.³⁴ Others such as Li also discussed US concerns over China’s status as a market economy (and economic practices). This included the US’ public refusal to recognise China’s status as a market economy, the labelling of China’s economic system as ‘state capitalism’ (国家资本主义) and the contribution of these positions to ‘economic competition’ (经济竞争) replacing ‘economic engagement’ (经济接触) as the ‘new normal’ (新常态) in the Sino-US relationship.³⁵

Several scholars held that China’s ‘socialist market economy system with Chinese characteristics’ (中国特色社会主义市场经济制度)³⁶ confers advantages on China - such as the government’s greater role in the allocation of resources (as opposed to capitalist economies like the US). This, it was argued, will enable China to take ‘strong countermeasures’ (强有力的反制措施) if US politicians ‘lose their heads’ (疯狂起来) and force US companies to decouple from China and cut off supplies to Chinese companies.³⁷

The US government was seen as harbouring concerns about China using its advantages in state investment to close the gap in ‘disruptive cutting-edge technologies’ (颠覆性前沿技术) such as 5G and artificial intelligence. At the same time, the US was regarded as being unable to demand private investment focus on ‘cutting-

³² Li, Shenming, ‘Appropriate responses to the US-initiated Sino-US trade war’ (妥善应对美国挑起的中美贸易战). *World Socialism Studies*, 7, (2019): 4-18.

³³ Wang highlights US views that the Chinese economy, contains barriers, forces technology transfers and is subject to high levels of government intervention and is not seen as a market economy or on the path to becoming one.

³⁴ Wang, Zihong, ‘System perception/recognition and economic and trade disputes – An analysis of the causes of the US trade war on China’ (体制认定与经贸纠纷 - 美国对华贸易战的原因分析). *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, 5, (2018): 49-65.

³⁵ Li, Wei, ‘From engagement to competition: The transformation of US economic strategy toward China’ (从接触到竞争: 美国对华经济战略的转型). *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 54-80.

³⁶ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, ‘A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures’ (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37.

³⁷ Ibid

edge technologies' (前沿技术) of high risk and with uncertain returns.³⁸ The post-Cold War shift in the US of science and technological innovation moving from the military to the private sector was viewed as problematic. It was argued that because of this, China has, through legal means, been able to access advanced technologies that have both civilian and military usages – an issue of concern for the US - making the resetting of controls on exports to China a priority for the US.³⁹ Others highlighted the Chinese system's 'natural advantages' (天然优势) in dealing with the disturbances caused by globalisation – something that Western countries were seen as failing to do.⁴⁰

A number of authors also discussed Donald Trump's 'America First' (美国优先)⁴¹ stance. It was seen as making non-political issues the subject of politicisation and populism, and as the 'primary source of legitimacy for a series of unilateral actions by the Trump administration' (特朗普政府采取一系列单边行动的主要合法性来源).⁴² Trump's America First policy was viewed as worsening Sino-US relations,⁴³ pursuing protectionism, limiting immigration,⁴⁴ causing the US to 'shirk' (推卸) its international responsibilities and having various other negative impacts on globalisation and the multilateral system.⁴⁵

Economic Nationalism and Globalisation

Discussions of globalisation and economic nationalism were also widely present in the literature. Sino-US decoupling was situated within the broader context of the 'ebb of globalisation' (全球化的退潮), with the adverse impacts of globalisation and the tensions between developed economies attempting to revive their domestic manufacturing industries noted on the one hand, and the intention of emerging

³⁸ Li, Zheng, "Underlying motivations and long-term trends in the US-driven science and technology "decoupling" (美国推动中美科技“脱钩”的深层动因及长期趋势). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2020): 33-40.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Zhu, Caihua, "Markets, states, and the reconstruction of the international economic and trade rule system 市场、国家与国际经贸规则体系重构." *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 1-33.

⁴¹ Also written as 美国第一 by some authors such as Yang and Wang in "Global governance and China's participation in the context of major changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局下的全球治理及中国参与). *North East Asia Forum*, 6(152), (2020): 39-50.

⁴² Li, Zheng, "Underlying motivations and long-term trends in the US-driven science and technology "decoupling" (美国推动中美科技“脱钩”的深层动因及长期趋势). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2020): 33-40.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Sheng, Bin and Wei Zong, "Trumpism and the myth of anti-globalisation" (特朗普主义与反全球化迷思). *Nankai Journal (Philosophy, Literature and Social Science Edition)*, 5, (2017): 38-49.

⁴⁵ Yang, Na and Huiting Wang, (2020). "Global governance and China's participation in the context of major changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局下的全球治理及中国参与). *North East Asia Forum*, 6(152): 39-50.

economies to upgrade theirs on the other.⁴⁶ Others acknowledged problems with globalisation and endorsed modifications put forward by China based on the concept of a 'community with shared future for mankind' (人类命运共同体).⁴⁷ Some argued that the economic globalisation of the present era is no longer a form of economic globalisation with US interests at its core. Instead, it was viewed as a globalisation with the 'objective of building a community with shared future for mankind' (以构建人类命运共同体为目标), seeking mutual development, benefits and win-win cooperation between countries – a system within which China has a 'position of irreplaceable importance' (不可取代的重要位置) in the industrial supply chain.⁴⁸

China and the US, and their respective leaders, were presented as having starkly different approaches to globalisation. Former US President Donald Trump's view that globalisation and free trade were the 'source' (根源) of many of the problems facing the US was explored alongside the 'protectionist' (保护主义) policies⁴⁹ that it was seen to drive. Sheng and Zong contrasted Trump's stance with Xi Jinping's declaration that China would 'defend globalisation and free trade' (捍卫全球化和自由贸易), China's active provision of 'international public goods' (国际公共产品) such as the Belt Road Initiative (一带一路), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (亚洲基础设施投资银行) and the Silk Road Fund (丝路基金) and its preparedness to assume responsibility if the US turns away from globalisation.⁵⁰

Similarly, Ruan presented China as supporting and guiding globalisation to become more balanced and inclusive, supporting free trade, and advocating for a community with a shared future for mankind and win-win cooperation. Conversely, the US was 'anti-globalisation, anti-immigration, anti-free trade' (反全球化、反移民、反对自由贸易) and intent on using "America First", protectionism and economic nationalism to

⁴⁶ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, "Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling" (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

⁴⁷ Yang, Na and Huiting Wang, (2020). "Global governance and China's participation in the context of major changes unseen in a century" (百年未有之大变局下的全球治理及中国参与). *North East Asia Forum*, 6(152): 39-50.

⁴⁸ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, 'A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures' (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37. Indeed, for Li and Li, this was a key reason while Sino-US industrial decoupling would not happen.

⁴⁹ While most discussion of US policies focussed on the Trump-era, some examined US protectionist policies that preceded the Trump administration, for example Obama-era policies aimed at bringing traditional manufacturing industries back to the United States, which the Li and Pei note "gave Sino-US trade and economic relations an unprecedented test" (给中美经贸关系带来了前所未有的考验). See Li, Xiao and Xiangyu Pei, "A study on the evolution Sino-US decoupling and its measurement (中美经济脱钩演进及其测度研究)." *World Economy Studies* 11 (2015): 3-39.

⁵⁰ Sheng, Bin and Wei Zong, "Trumpism and the myth of anti-globalisation" (特朗普主义与反全球化迷思). *Nankai Journal (Philosophy, Literature and Social Science Edition)*, 5, (2017): 38-49.

“make America great again” (“美国优先”、保护主义以及经济民族主义来“让美国重新强大”).⁵¹ Such comparisons were made by several other scholars.⁵²

Decoupling and economic nationalist policies in the areas of science and technology were frequently addressed. It was argued that in these fields the US was using measures such as export controls and increased scrutiny of foreign investment in an attempt to slow China’s technological development and industrial upgrading.⁵³ Wang and Li referred to similar measures as ‘bullying’ (霸凌)⁵⁴ aimed at China’s growing science and technology innovation capacity and its ‘digital economy innovation system’ (数字经济创新体系).⁵⁵ Scholars regarded the US as targeting industries related to China’s ‘Made in China 2025’ (中国制造 2025) strategic plan such as bio-pharmaceuticals, agricultural equipment and new-generation information technology.⁵⁶ Zhang, singling out the US Trade Representative’s Section 301 Investigation, argued that US actions were not to remedy ‘so-called trade unfairness’ (所谓贸易不公平) but were instead aimed at ‘suppressing’ (抑制) China’s development in ‘strategic emerging industries’ (战略性新兴产业).⁵⁷

It was commonly held that rather than force China to behave in a way that conforms to the strategic objectives of the US, attempts to implement decoupling policies have stimulated China’s resolve to speed up ‘self-reliant innovation’ (自主创新) to free itself of being dependent on others for core technologies and key components.⁵⁸ This inward turn was seen as leading to an increased focus on developing China’s internal

⁵¹ Ruan, Zongze, Trump’s “new vision” and China’s diplomatic options’ (特朗普“新愿景”与中国外交选择). *International Studies*, 2, (2017), 1-14.

⁵² Including Wang, You and Dingding Chen, “Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic “decoupling” (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.; and Yang, Na and Huiting Wang, (2020). “Global governance and China’s participation in the context of major changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局下的全球治理及中国参与). *North East Asia Forum*, 6(152): 39-50.

⁵³ Zhu, Caihua, “Markets, states, and the reconstruction of the international economic and trade rule system 市场、国家与国际经贸规则体系重构.” *Foreign Affairs Review*, 36(5): 1-33.

⁵⁴ A phrase also used by Li Wen in regard to the US tariffs – ‘trade bullying’ (贸易霸凌), similarly, Zhao also referred to the US’ ‘blackmailing, bullying measures’ (讹诈性、霸凌性手段) which included the trade war - see Zhao, Minghao, ‘The Trump administration and the strategic transformation of China-US relations(特朗普执政与中美关系的战略转型). *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, 5, (2018): 26-48.

⁵⁵ Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “The US’ China “decoupling” strategy and China’s response in the context of the pandemic’ (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

⁵⁶ Shen, Wei, “Thucydides’ logic and rules containment and counter-containment: The deep-seated causes behind China-United States trade friction (修昔底德”逻辑和规则遏制与反遏制-中美贸易摩擦背后的深层次动因). *Frontiers*, 1, (2019): 40-59; Wang, You and Dingding Chen, “Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic “decoupling” (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

⁵⁷ Zhang, Youwen, ‘China-US trade war: Strategic competition not market competition’ (中美贸易战：不是市场竞争而是战略竞争). *Nankai Journal (Philosophy, Literature and Social Science Edition)*, 3, (2018): 8-10.

⁵⁸ Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “The US’ China “decoupling” strategy and China’s response in the context of the pandemic’ (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

market and domestic demand and possibly to greater state involvement in efforts to catch up to the US technologically.⁵⁹

Scholars also viewed the US' decoupling strategy as stemming from the 'idealized assumption' (理想化假设) that decoupling will weaken China's national innovation system while benefitting the US. It was argued that, in practice, this would come at a significant cost to the US as its national innovation system's primary advantage lies in the openness and diversity of its technology, qualified workers and capital.⁶⁰ For Zheng, decoupling was seen as having short-term negative impacts for some Chinese companies, but in the long-term, it was viewed as something that would spur on measures for China's tech import substitution strategy and help to reduce the costs of market competition.⁶¹

Coronavirus Pandemic

Another notable theme was the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on decoupling, and Sino-US relations more broadly. While only a relatively recent occurrence, the pandemic was seen by a number of scholars as an important variable in Sino-US relations and featured prominently in several articles published in 2020. The pandemic was viewed as upending the relative calm that followed the short period between the signing of the phase one trade deal between China and the US and the beginning of the global health crisis. It was seen as a 'catalyst' (催化剂) for the deepening of the 'containment' (遏制) of China by the US and the acceleration of its push for decoupling, including bipartisan attempts to turn their 'hard-line political stance toward China' (强硬的对华政治表态) into legislation and other measures.⁶²

Some saw the US' (in)ability to control its epidemic as an important factor in whether decoupling pressures would be controlled or worsen.⁶³ Zheng viewed the Trump administration as trying to deflect from the problems facing the US, the 'epicentre' (震中) of the pandemic. They argued that such actions worsened Sino-US relations and argued that high unemployment in the US has increased nationalism and xenophobia

⁵⁹ Wei, Li, 'From engagement to competition: The transformation of US economic strategy towards China' (从接触到竞争: 美国对华经济战略的转型). *Foreign Affairs Review*, 5, (2019): 54-80.

⁶⁰ Li, Zheng, "Underlying motivations and long-term trends in the US-driven science and technology "decoupling" (美国推动中美科技"脱钩"的深层动因及长期趋势). *Contemporary International Relations*, 1 (2020): 33-40.

⁶¹ Zheng, Yu, 'Will the coronavirus pandemic cause China and the United States to decouple?' (新冠肺炎疫情是否会造成中美脱钩?). *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism*, 3, (2020): 69-72.

⁶² Wang, Da and Zheng Li, "The US' China "decoupling" strategy and China's response in the context of the pandemic' (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华"脱钩"战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

⁶³ Ibid

and will increase uncertainty around the election and ‘lead to the US’ China policies becoming more extreme’ (导致美国对华政策的极端化).⁶⁴ Others also felt that ‘animosity towards China’ (对华敌意) among the US population had intensified, causing Republicans and Democrats to compete against each other on being tough against China. This was seen as ‘radicalising’ (极端化) US China policy and aggravating the strategic contest between the two countries.⁶⁵ Some viewed the disruptions to China’s supply chain that occurred early in the pandemic as providing an opportunity for some US politicians to make disingenuous calls for supply chains to be moved out of China.⁶⁶

The pandemic was also seen as demonstrating the strength and importance of China’s manufacturing capacities,⁶⁷ and the fragility of the global production network,⁶⁸ while also causing concern for both China and the US about over-reliance on the other, adding to decoupling pressures on both sides.⁶⁹

Confidence was found by some in China’s response to the pandemic. Chen argued that, relative to other countries, China’s success in controlling the pandemic reflected China’s ‘great overall strength and the superiority of its institutional system’ (强大的综合实力与制度体系的优越性) and a test that has enabled China to better recognize its economic and institutional advantages. This success was seen as strengthening China’s resolve to implement an economic and political system that is different to the US’ and take a development path that suits its own characteristics. It was also perceived as providing a confidence boost to China as it competes against the US.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Zheng, Yu, ‘Will the coronavirus pandemic bring about China-United States decoupling?’ (新冠肺炎疫情是否会造中美脱钩?). *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism*, 3, (2020): 69-72.

⁶⁵ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, “The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations” (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56. It should be noted that bipartisan support for tough policies was also discussed prior to the pandemic, for example, Zhu Feng also writes of unprecedented bipartisan support for the Trump administration’s ‘unreasonable suppression policies’ (蛮横打压政策) in areas such as trade and science and technology.

⁶⁶ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, ‘A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures’ (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37. – the 37 indicates that it also has a bit on page 37.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “The US’ China “decoupling” strategy and China’s response in the context of the pandemic’ (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

⁶⁹ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, “The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations” (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

⁷⁰ Ibid

Chinese Scholars' Policy Recommendations

A number of scholars provided recommendations for how China should respond to the US' push for decoupling. While varied, these suggestions did contain a significant amount of uniformity. It was commonly suggested that China should 'adopt a two-pronged approach' (采取两条腿走路的办法).⁷¹ This included continuing to open up to foreign businesses and investment, while at the same time increasing self-reliance in important areas, implementing substitution strategies and addressing internal shortcomings to, as Li and Li wrote, prevent external parties from having 'a stranglehold over us' (卡我们的脖子).⁷² It was argued that while continuing to open up to the world, China should follow an 'independent and self-reliant development path' (走独立自主、自力更生的发展道路).⁷³ It was also recommended that China 'adhere to a development path that suits itself' (坚持走好适合自己的发展道路).⁷⁴

Dependence on the US (and more generally, vulnerability to external shocks) was commonly seen as needing to be reduced. It was suggested that this should be done through means such as 'actively expanding domestic consumption' (积极扩大国内消费) and diversifying China's export markets.⁷⁵ It was recommended that China's large domestic market be utilised to drive China's economic growth and to increase the importance of the Chinese market to other countries in order to help China 'gain a favourable position in the international contest (在国际博弈中取得有利地位)'.⁷⁶

Increasing China's involvement in regional trade was proposed by several scholars. Zheng suggested that China should continue to uphold principles of 'inclusiveness and openness' (包容性和开放性) in promoting regional integration and enhance its influence in the setting of the international trade agenda.⁷⁷ It was also put forward that 'regional economic cooperation' (区域经济合作) should be increased to counter the multilateral alliance system that the US has built to 'encircle' (围堵) China. At the same

⁷¹ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, 'A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures' (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, "Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic "decoupling"" (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31.

⁷⁴ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, "The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations" (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

⁷⁵ Guo, Qing and Weiguang Chen, 'A dynamic CGE model-based analysis on the economic effects of China-United States trade frictions' (基于动态CGE模型的中美贸易摩擦经济效应分析). *World Economy Studies*, 8, (2019): 103-117.

⁷⁶ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, "The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations" (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

⁷⁷ Zheng, Yu, 'Will the coronavirus pandemic bring about China-United States decoupling?' (新冠肺炎疫情是否会造成中美脱钩?). *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism*, 3, (2020): 69-72.

time, China should continue to deepen economic and trade relations with EU countries.⁷⁸ Others advocated for greater interdependence between China and other countries to be accompanied by ‘increasing the costs of “de-Sinification” of the world economy’ (提高世界经济“去中国化”的成本)⁷⁹ and ‘increasing the cost of shifting investment out of the Chinese market’ (增大投资转出国内市场的成本).⁸⁰ It was also argued by a number of scholars that BRI should play an important role in achieving future trade objectives.⁸¹

Some emphasised the need to accelerate negotiations with the US⁸² and the importance of strengthening bilateral communication with the US to avoid strategic misjudgements and prevent conflicts from escalating.⁸³ Others called for China to adopt ‘active defence’ (积极防御) strategies and tactics to draw international support to its cause.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “The US’ China “decoupling” strategy and China’s response in the context of the pandemic’ (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, “The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations” (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

⁸¹ Wang, You and Dingding Chen, “Trends and implications of Sino-US economic and strategic “decoupling”” (中美经济与战略“脱钩”的趋势及影响). *Contemporary International Relations*, 7 (2018), 24-31; Wang, Da and Zheng Li, “The US’ China “decoupling” strategy and China’s response in the context of the pandemic’ (全球疫情冲击背景下美国对华“脱钩”战略与应对). *North East Asia Forum*, 29(5), (2020): 47-62.

⁸² Guo, Qing and Weiguang Chen, ‘A dynamic CGE model-based analysis on the economic effects of China-United States trade frictions’ (基于动态 CGE 模型的中美贸易摩擦经济效应分析). *World Economy Studies*, 8, (2019): 103-117.

⁸³ Chen, Jiyong and Ge Yang, “The novel coronavirus epidemic and the reshaping of Sino-US relations” (新冠疫情与中美经贸关系重塑). *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 5 (2020): 48-56.

⁸⁴ Li, Wenzeng and La Li, ‘A study of the China-United States industrial decoupling issue and its countermeasures’ (中美两国产业脱钩问题及其对策研究). *Industrial Innovation*, 16, (2020): 1-3; 37. – the 37 indicates that it also has a bit on page 37.

Conclusion

This report, through an examination of prominent themes and policy recommendations discussed by scholars writing in Chinese academic journals, provides a brief overview of the Chinese language scholarly discourse on Sino-US decoupling. The motivation for this work stems from concern at the limited attention that the Chinese-language discourse has received in the English-language literature - despite its importance.

Although this report does not engage in an analysis of the English-language academic discourse on decoupling, it is apparent that the English and Chinese language literatures contain significant differences in their treatment of the factors (and even what is considered to be a factor) that contribute to decoupling and how they should be negotiated.

Further, while the literature examined in this report contains some engagement with US concerns, the validity of these concerns often received little genuine consideration before being dismissed or discarded, and critical analysis of China's actions was seldom undertaken.

Future systematic analysis of both Chinese and American academic writing would be useful in gauging the extent to which these academic communities are simply talking past one another and how conceptual gaps may be bridged, or at least narrowed. At a time when meaningful bilateral discussion is under significant, and seemingly rising pressure (itself a manifestation of decoupling), such an understanding would be of considerable utility.

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