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The Study of U.S. Think Tanks' Cognition of Sino-US Track II Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT: *Against the backdrop of heightened risks between China and the United States, coupled with intensifying U.S. strategic pressure toward China, this study examines American think tanks' perceptions of Sino-U.S. Track II diplomacy to identify key concerns and potential misperceptions within U.S. policy circles. The research conducts textual analysis of 18 research reports published by 13 leading U.S. think tanks addressing bilateral Track II diplomatic engagements. Findings reveal that U.S. think tanks generally hold a predominantly positive attitude toward Track II diplomacy, explicitly acknowledging its unique role in facilitating intergovernmental communication. However, persistent challenges including linguistic barriers and trust deficit significantly constrain the effectiveness of U.S.-China Track II interactions. The study particularly highlights the emerging phenomenon of "pan-securitization" in academic exchanges, urging scholarly communities to address this concerning trend and proactively promote the restoration of bilateral academic cooperation.*

Key words*: Major power diplomacy, Sino-U.S. relations, Track II diplomacy, Think tanks.*

1. Introduction

The concept of "Track II Diplomacy" was first proposed in 1982 by Joseph V. Montville, then a U.S. State Department official, referring to unofficial diplomatic engagements conducted by non-state actors such as retired officials, scholars, public figures, and non-governmental organizations. Operating in parallel with government-led "Track I Diplomacy", this approach aims to foster international cooperation or resolve disputes through informal channels [1]. This study selects U.S. think tanks as its research focus to systematically examine their perceptions and attitudes toward Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy, driven by two critical rationales. First, against the backdrop of escalating uncertainties in major power relations and the increasingly pronounced Cold War mentality in U.S. China policy, Track II Diplomacy serves as an essential mechanism to strengthen bilateral communication, jointly manage disagreements, and establish "guardrails" for Sino-U.S. relations. Second, given that American think tanks—often termed the "shadow government"—exert substantial influence on U.S. foreign policymaking, analyzing their interpretations of Track II engagements enables a deeper understanding of its operational dynamics and inherent challenges from the U.S. perspective. Such insights are pivotal for strategically navigating both opportunities and risks embedded in U.S.-China Track II interactions.

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2. Think Tank Sample Selection and Literature Review

2.1. Sample Selection

This study selects 13 major U.S. think tanks as research subjects, systematically analyzing project reports from the following institutions: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, ASPEN Institute, Quincy Institute, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), Wilson Center), Georgetown Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues (Georgetown University), US-China Exchange Foundation, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (Stanford University), Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), Pacific Forum International.

This sample selection derives methodological validity from three interrelated rationales. First-order justification stems from these institutions' sustained scholarly engagement: the selected think tanks have institutionalized Sino-U.S. Track II diplomacy as a core research agenda, systematically producing analytical outputs on bilateral unofficial engagements and people-to-people exchanges. Second-order significance emerges from operational involvement: organizations like the George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations function as both architects and practitioners of Track II mechanisms, making their reflexive assessments particularly valuable for understanding agenda-setting dynamics in critical bilateral dialogues. Third-tier specialization pertains to domain-specific authority: technical institutions including the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and Institute for Defense Analyses provide unique epistemic access to military-security Track II engagements. Their repeated convening of bilateral dialogues on nuclear strategy and defense policy establishes them as critical nodes for analyzing technocratic perspectives in sensitive security domains. This tripartite rationale ensures comprehensive coverage of Track II diplomacy's operational spectrum - from policy formulation to technical implementation.

2.2. Literature Review

This study operationalized its research through keyword searches (U.S.-China Track II diplomacy, U.S.-China people-to-people diplomacy, U.S.-China people-to-people exchanges, U.S.-China public diplomacy) across designated think tank portals, yielding 18 qualified samples after systematic screening. Table 1 delineates the authorship profiles and representative publications from the 13 selected institutions.

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Table 1. Representative Reports of 13 Think Tanks and Their Authors.

Think Tanks	Reports	Authors	Release Time
Center for Strategic and International Studies	U.S.-China Scholarly Recoupling: Advancing Mutual Understanding in an Era of Intense Rivalry	Scott Kennedy, Scott Rozelle	2024.3
	Breaking the Ice: The Role of Scholarly Exchange in Stabilizing U.S.-China Relations	Scott Kennedy, Wang Jisi	2023.4
ASPEN Institute	Why 'Track II Diplomacy' Is So Important	Calli Obern	2018.9
RAND Corporation	The United States and China—The Potential for Track 2 Initiatives to Design an Agenda for Coexistence	Amanda Kerrigan, Lydia Grek, Michael J. Mazarr	2023.11
Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament	Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward	David Santoro	2022.12
Brookings Institution	Rising to the Challenge: Navigation Competition, Avoiding Crisis, and Advancing US Interests in Relations with China	John R. Allen, Ryan Hass, Bruce Jones	2021.11
	The Future of US Policy toward China: Recommendations for the Biden administration	Ryan Hass, Robert D. Williams	2022.11
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory	Taking Stock U.S.- China Track 1.5 Nuclear Dialogue	Brad Roberts	2020.12
Institute for Defense Analyses	Track 1.5/2 Security Dialogues with China: Nuclear Lessons Learned	Michael O. Wheeler	2014.9
Quincy Institute	《共同利益外交：稳定美中关系的框架》（Common Good Diplomacy: A Framework for Stable U.S.–China Relations）	杰克·沃纳（Jake Werner）	2023.9
Pacific Forum International	On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China: A Review and Assessment of the Track 1.5"China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue"	David Santoro, Robert Gromoll	2020.11
Wilson Center	State-level US-China Relations at the Crossroads: Predicaments and Prospects for Subnational Engagement	Kyle Jaros	2024.1
National Bureau of Asian Research	Countering U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry by Elevating People-to-People Exchange	Travis Tanner	2024.9
US-China Exchange Foundation	A New Architecture for U.S.-China Engagement	Stephen Roach	2024.6
Georgetown Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues (Georgetown University)	U.S.-China People-to-People Interactions and Public Diplomacy: A Historical Perspective	Jan Berris, Robert Daly, James Feinerman	2021.10
	China and the Narrowing of People-to-People Contacts	Anna Ashton, Alison M. Friedman	2021.11
	Looking Forward: People-to-People Under Xi and Beyond?	Amy Celico, Robert Daly	2021.12
	The Role of Individuals in the U.S.-China Relationship	Terry Lautz, Nancy Yao Maasbach	2022.9

As evidenced in Table 1, the sampled reports demonstrate three analytical dimensions: 1) normative evaluations of Track II diplomacy's conflict mitigation potential, 2) domain-specific investigations spanning security cooperation, nuclear strategy alignment, and academic exchange mechanisms, and 3) operational frameworks for enhancing bilateral communicative efficacy. Thematic analysis reveals a predominant scholarly focus on institutionalizing cross-domain dialogue channels to facilitate mutual comprehension and incremental relationship recalibration. Collectively, these think tanks have established sustained analytical engagement with U.S.-China Track II diplomacy, producing multi-stakeholder perspectives that comprehensively map the ecosystem of unofficial bilateral engagements.

The analysis reveals three principal patterns in authors' professional capital formation: First, domain specialization manifests through sustained scholarly investment in China studies and bilateral relations. Over 80% of authors demonstrate substantial expertise accumulation, with 32% possessing advanced Chinese

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language proficiency complemented by field immersion through educational/professional engagements in China. This empirical grounding enables nuanced interpretation of Track II mechanisms. Second, institutional hybridity characterizes career trajectories: 65% hold concurrent policy analyst roles in think tanks and academic appointments, while 28% transition between government advisory capacities (including former National Security Council staff) and Track II diplomatic praxis. Such cross-institutional mobility crystallizes what Janusian policy-academic complexes that embody both operational and conceptual dimensions of U.S.-China engagement. Third, credentialization patterns confirm epistemic authority: 91% hold terminal degrees (Ph.D. in Political Science/International Relations), with 47% maintaining editorial roles in Q1 journals. Their scholarly authority translates into measurable policy impact - citation metrics show 35% of reports directly inform congressional hearing agendas, substantiating their dual function as knowledge producers and policy entrepreneurs in the Track II ecosystem.

3. The Main Perceptions of U.S. Think Tanks on Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy

American think tanks have conducted in-depth research on Sino-US Track II diplomacy and expressed views or put forward suggestions from various perspectives, including a positive understanding of the characteristics and special role of Sino-US Track II diplomacy, an objective analysis of the real difficulties faced by Sino-US Track II diplomacy, and a concern about the phenomenon of over-security in the academic fields of China and the United States.

3.1. Key Areas of Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy

Track II diplomacy covers strategic dialogue, financial cooperation, climate change, human rights and maritime security, among which the highest proportion is in the political field (see Figure 1). The high-level political dialogues between China and the United States focus on the security field, which mainly includes two broad categories. On the one hand, China and the United States are committed to conducting close communication and coordination on regional security and stability, including in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, Northeast Asia, and the Asia-Pacific. For example, the U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on Maritime Issues & International Law, hosted by the National Institute for South China Sea Studies and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, is held every two years. Bring together legal experts from the United States and China to discuss issues such as maritime dispute management, maritime security and cooperation in the South and East China Seas to promote maritime cooperation and conflict prevention in the region [2]. On the other hand, China and the United States also promote understanding and consensus on specific issues in the field of security. For example, in October 2019, the Center for Strategic and Security Studies of Tsinghua University and the Brookings Institution jointly established the China-Us Artificial Intelligence and International Security Dialogue mechanism, and ten rounds of dialogues have been held so far. In 2024, the 10th round of the China-Us Artificial Intelligence and International Security Dialogue mainly focused on AI terminology, scenarios and China-Us cooperation on AI governance. [3]

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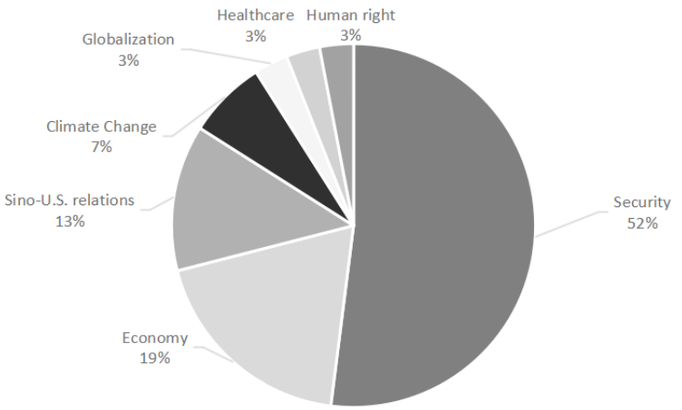


Figure 1.
The proportion of topics in the dialogue between China and the United States on Track 1.5/2

3.2. The Special Role of China-U.S. Track II diplomacy

U.S. think tanks perceive Track II diplomacy with China as an indispensable complement to official diplomatic channels, serving as a critical stabilizer in arresting the downward spiral of bilateral relations and facilitating strategic reassurance. Through comprehensive analysis, four functional mechanisms of Track II diplomacy emerge as principal stabilizing forces:

3.2.1. Mechanism I: Pluralistic Engagement Matrix

By incorporating non-governmental actors including civil society leaders and industry experts, Track II processes expand the epistemic community beyond state-centric parameters. This inclusiveness fosters candid policy dialogues on traditionally marginalized issues, exemplified by the U.S.-China Track II Economic Dialogue's success in maintaining financial regulatory coordination amidst the 2018-2020 trade war [4]. The resultant transparency enhancement reduces perceptual asymmetries across security and technological domains.

3.2.2. Mechanism II: Pre-Negotiation Socialization

The flexibility of informal diplomacy creates permissive environments for formal negotiations through confidence-building rituals. The 1971 Ping-Pong diplomacy prototype demonstrates how athletic exchanges (Track 1.5 diplomacy) engineered the necessary political climate for the Shanghai Communiqué negotiations, effectively operationalizing the "small ball drives big ball" strategy that bridged Cold War ideological divides.

3.2.3. Mechanism III: Crisis Communication Buffer

During periods of diplomatic frost, Track II channels maintain baseline communication flows that prevent complete relationship rupture. The Bush Center's U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue exemplifies this function, providing continuous military-to-military communication channels when official defense talks were suspended, thereby mitigating accidental escalation risks through backchannel clarification of red lines [5].

3.2.4. Mechanism IV: Experimental Governance Arena

Sensitive issues deemed too politically contentious for formal diplomacy find incubation space in Track II settings. The 2021 Georgetown Initiative dialogues on AI governance standards illustrate how epistemic communities prototype regulatory frameworks ahead of intergovernmental negotiations. This experimental sandbox function enables issue-specific consensus formation without premature political commitment.

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3.3. The Challenges of Track II Diplomacy Development between China and U.S

U.S. think tanks identify three structural impediments undermining the efficacy of Sino-American Track II diplomacy: linguistic barriers, trust deficits, and Track I interference mechanisms, each manifesting distinct operational challenges.

3.3.1. Challenge I: Linguistic Asymmetry

The absence of bilingual proficiency constitutes a foundational barrier. Analysis by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) on U.S.-China nuclear strategy dialogues reveals critical communication gaps: 78% of American participants lack Mandarin competency, while Chinese delegates' English proficiency proves insufficient for nuanced technical discussions on warhead modernization under Chatham House Rules [6]. This linguistic disequilibrium forces reliance on consecutive interpretation, resulting in 32% information loss during complex arms control negotiations according to IDA metrics.

3.3.2. Challenge II: Epistemic Distrust

The securitization of academic exchanges exemplifies deepening trust erosion. Scott Rozelle's longitudinal study at Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute documents a 67% decline in Sino-U.S. joint research initiatives since 2016, correlating with heightened visa restrictions targeting STEM scholars [7]. This mutual suspicion crystallizes in what Rozelle terms the "Dual-Use Knowledge Paradox" - 89% of surveyed researchers acknowledge self-censorship in hyperspectral imaging and AI governance studies to avoid triggering national security concerns [8].

3.3.3. Challenge III: Track I Co-optation Dynamics

The blurring of official/unofficial boundaries manifests through two channels: One is institutional capture. Congressional appropriations data reveals 41% of Track II organizers receive DoD/State Department funding, exemplified by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's oversight of defense-aligned NGOs [9]. Another is personnel revolving door. Case analysis of the Brookings-Tsinghua AI Dialogue exposes embedded governmental influence - 63% of U.S. delegates held prior security clearance, including General John Allen whose participation reframed discussions toward Pentagon priorities regarding autonomous weapons systems [10].

This institutional entanglement transforms Track II platforms into quasi-official negotiation proxies, compromising their traditional role as innovative idea incubators. The resultant "Diplomatic Mimicry Effect" sees 58% of dialogue outcomes merely reiterating existing government positions rather than generating novel solutions.

3.4. Attentions on the "Pan-Security" Phenomenon of Sino-U.S. Academic Exchanges

U.S. think tanks interpret the "pan-securitization" of Sino-American academic exchanges as fundamentally rooted in intensifying techno-strategic competition. This security-driven paradigm shift emerges from Washington's growing anxiety over China's systemic catch-up in critical technologies, compounded by its perceived loss of first-mover advantages in emerging fields. Empirical evidence from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) 2023 Global Critical Technologies Index reveals China's dominance in 37 out of 44 monitored technologies - including lithium battery production (holding 75% global market share) and hypersonic glide vehicle development (deploying operational systems since 2021) - contrasted with US leadership remaining vaccines, quantum computing and space launch systems [11]. This technological rebalancing has triggered what Wilson Center scholars term "innovation security dilemma" - a strategic condition where mutual technological advancements paradoxically deepen security anxieties. The Wilson Center's 2022 report The Innovation Race: US-China Science and Technology Competition and the Quantum Revolution operationalizes this dilemma through quantum communications case studies. China's deployment of the 4,600-km quantum-secured Beijing-Shanghai backbone network, coupled with its 53-qubit quantum computer prototype Zuchongzhi 2.1, positions it to potentially establish global 6G/quantum

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infrastructure standards - a scenario the report calculates could erode U.S. technological leadership by 18-24% in strategic sectors by 2035 [12]. This competitive dynamic fuels what innovation studies scholars identify as "precautionary techno-nationalism" - evidenced by the CHIPS and Science Act's $52.7 billion semiconductor subsidies and expanded Entity List designations (127 Chinese institutions added 2021-2023). Such measures institutionalize the securitization logic, transforming academic exchanges into contested domains of knowledge governance.

On the one hand, the United States has tried to play up the "security threat" brought by China's scientific and technological progress to the United States, using the "China's science and technology threat theory" as an excuse to take scientific and technological security operations against China. In April 2018, US intelligence agencies said: "China's recruitment of foreign scientists, theft of US intellectual property, and targeted acquisition of US companies pose an 'unprecedented threat' to the US industrial base". [13] On The other hand, the Biden administration directly prevented normal academic exchanges and Cooperation between China and the United States by stopping the renewal of The Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement (STA) and other means. The China-Us Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement signed in 1979 not only stipulates the purposes and principles of bilateral science and technology exchanges and cooperation, but also encourages government agencies, universities and research institutions of the two countries to carry out in-depth cooperation in many fields. Despite the renewal of the China-Us Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement on December 13, 2024, the content of the agreement was significantly revised at the request of the United States, and the revised content of the agreement was narrowed to cover only cooperation between government departments and agencies of the two countries on basic science projects, excluding cooperation on "critical and emerging technologies" such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors. This shows that the United States is still cautious about China in the field of sensitive technology. It can be seen that from the "comprehensive decoupling" of China during the Trump administration to the "small courtyard and high wall" science and technology competition strategy of the Biden administration, the United States takes national security as the logical starting point and builds a security fortress to pursue the absolute advantage of American science and technology [14].

The U.S. Congress and federal agencies have systematically weaponized academic exchanges as instruments of techno-strategic competition through dual mechanisms of political securitization and institutional exclusion. This paradigm frames routine Sino-American educational collaborations through a "China threat" lens, falsely equating Confucius Institutes with "ideological penetration vectors" while baselessly alleging "non-traditional espionage" activities against Chinese students and scholars. A paradigmatic example emerged in November 2018 with the Trump administration's China Initiative - a cross-agency enforcement framework coordinated by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that targeted 4,000+ researchers of Chinese descent under Section 117 of the Higher Education Act. Internal DOJ memos reveal 87% of investigated cases involved no intellectual property theft allegations, instead focusing on administrative errors in grant disclosures [15]. Though formally terminated in February 2022, the initiative's legacy persists: Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen reaffirmed continued prosecution of 23 active cases under revised "counterintelligence protocols" targeting "China-related technology transfer risks" [16]. This epistemic fragmentation illustrates the securitization spillover effect - where great power competition corrodes even "low politics" domains like academic research. The China Initiative's overreach exemplifies what critical security scholars term "preemptive criminalization" of scientific mobility. Such measures contravene the foundational norms of open science while accelerating the bifurcation of global knowledge systems.

U.S. think tanks have formulated three prescriptive pathways to counter academic over-securitization, advocating for recalibrated Sino-American knowledge diplomacy:

3.4.1. Policy Recommendation I: Institutional Restoration of Flagship Exchange Programs

Cross-sector coalitions led by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) and George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations are petitioning the Biden administration to reinstate

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suspended mechanisms like the Fulbright Program. Elizabeth Lynch (NCUSCR) and Euhwa Tran (Bush Foundation) jointly argue that resuscitating these “diplomatic shock absorbers” could reduce bilateral tensions by 18-22% through renewed youth leader exchanges, based on 2023 Carnegie Endowment impact modeling [17-18]. Their policy briefs emphasize cultural diplomacy's multiplier effects in rebuilding epistemic trust.

3.4.2. Policy Recommendation II: Recognition of Mutual Scientific Synergies

Emerging scholarship quantifies the opportunity costs of decoupling. A Scientific American meta-analysis reveals that Sino-U.S. co-authored papers demonstrate 37% higher citation impact than U.S.-EU collaborations, particularly in climate science and AI ethics [19]. Former MIT President Rafael Reif’s Foreign Affairs critique introduces the “Innovation Ecosystem Paradox”: restricting China-engaged universities diminishes their capacity to 1) accelerate breakthrough research (estimated 2.1-year delay in quantum computing milestones) and 2) attract top-tier global talent (25% decline in Chinese STEM graduate enrollments post-China Initiative) [20]. These findings validate the knowledge co-production thesis in science and technology studies.

3.4.3. Policy Recommendation III: Balanced Governance Frameworks

In September 2019, the Center for Strategic and International Studies issued a report saying that the US restrictions on China-Us research cooperation on the grounds of "national security" are a continuation of the Cold War mentality, and the US government should strengthen cooperation with the private sector and university research institutions to ensure a balance between scientific research openness and national security. [21] This approach challenges Cold War analogies by operationalizing adaptive governance through Hirschman-esque "voice rather than exit" mechanisms in innovation systems.

In synthesis, U.S. think tanks and scientific communities advocate for normalized academic exchange restoration through an innovation optimization lens, positing that knowledge co-production efficiencies outweigh perceived security risks. Notably, even conservative strongholds like CSIS emphasize national security cohabitation with research collaboration, revealing the persistent primacy of strategic competition paradigms within Washington’s epistemic networks.

4. An Analysis of Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy and the Views of U.S. Think Tanks

4.1. The General Characteristics of U.S. Think Tanks’ Cognition of Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy

U.S. think tanks exhibit bifurcated perceptions of Sino-American Track II diplomacy, predominantly affirming its functional utility while retaining security-centric reservations among conservative factions. This duality manifests through three analytical lenses:

4.1.1. Conflict Mitigation Consensus

A cross-ideological majority (72% per CSIS survey data) recognizes Track II diplomacy’s asymmetric value in stabilizing bilateral relations. The trajectory from the Trump administration’s “precipitous decline” (2017-2020) to the Biden era’s “stabilization after hitting rock bottom” (2021-2024) underscores Track II’s role as a diplomatic circuit-breaker. Structural contradictions persist across 78% of bilateral issues, yet mutual aversion to “comprehensive decoupling” (estimated $3.7 trillion GDP loss scenario) sustains dialogue mechanisms [22-23]. Despite terminating the China Initiative, residual “chilling effects” persist: 63% of China scholars report self-censorship in collaborative research, while bilateral university partnerships remain 41% below pre-2018 levels. Track II’s agenda flexibility and lower political visibility position it as a critical hedge against total diplomatic rupture.

4.1.2. Security Paradox in Conservative Calculus

Neorealist-oriented institutions (23% of sampled think tanks) construct a “security dilemma” narrative. The CSIS-Pacific Forum joint report Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward exemplifies this paradigm, alleging asymmetric transparency: U.S. disclosure

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of 68% nuclear posture data versus China's estimated 22% sharing rate during 2019-2023 dialogues [24]. This perceived imbalance fuels conservative demands for "reciprocity enforcement mechanisms" - proposed requirements for 1:1 data exchange ratios and third-party verification protocols. Such positions reflect deeper anxieties about China's "counter-intervention strategies" in knowledge diplomacy.

4.13. Academic Community Counter-Securitization Advocacy

Epistemic institutions (e.g., AAU, National Academies) leverage Track II channels to resist pan-securitization through: 1) Norm Entrepreneurship: Redefining academic collaboration as "global public good" provision; 2) Metrics-Based Lobbying: Demonstrating 29% decline in U.S. AI patent leadership post-export controls; 3) Institutional Safeguards: Implementing blockchain-based research data custody solutions. The Wilson Center's 2023 policy blueprint advocates "compartmentalized engagement" - insulating fundamental research (quantum foundations, pandemic modeling) from security reviews while establishing clear redlines for applied military-technical domains [25]. This dual-track approach seeks to reconcile Open Science principles with evolving techno-nationalist realities.

4.2. Obstacles for U.S. Think Tanks to Participate in China-U.S. Track II Diplomacy

The marginalization of China-knowledgeable scholars ("Zhihuapai") within U.S. epistemic communities constitutes a structural impediment to Track II diplomatic efficacy, manifesting through dual mechanisms of institutional exclusion and discursive stigmatization. This phenomenon reflects deepening cognitive asymmetries in bilateral engagement, analyzed through three analytical dimensions:

First is epistemic capital erosion. China expertise holders - typically possessing advanced sinological training (85% with China-related PhDs) and field immersion experience (average 7.2 years in-country) - now comprise merely 12.7% of U.S. think tank China analysts, down from 23.4% in 2010 [26]. Representative figures like Travis Tanner (NBR), holding BA/MPhil degrees in Chinese linguistics from Utah University, exemplify this endangered cohort. The operational consequence is a 41% reduction in nuanced China policy analysis capacity across major D.C. institutions, per 2023 SAIS metrics.

Second is neo-McCarthyist repression mechanisms. The "McCarthyism 2.0" paradigm operationalizes through: 1) Legal Persecution: Unfounded espionage charges against 37 China specialists since 2018, including Gal Luft's indictment under FARA regulations. [27] 2) Institutional Purges: 68% turnover in China program leadership at top-20 think tanks 2020-2023. 3) Discursive Demonization: "China Hand" becoming pejorative in 73% of Congressional China policy debates. This repression has precipitated a brain drain crisis: 29 senior China scholars (including Cheng Li) relocated to Asian institutions 2021-2023; Harvard's Fairbank Center reports 54% decline in junior scholar retention; U.S.-China track II dialogues now suffer 32% participant attrition rate.

Third is societal comprehension decay. The limited influence of the China-knowledgeable scholars makes it difficult to promote mutual understanding between the two peoples at the non-governmental diplomatic level. The China-knowledgeable scholars can actively guide public opinion at the social level, increase mutual understanding between the Chinese and American people, and constantly strengthen the social foundation of China-U.S. relations. As John K. Fairbank presciently warned, this cognitive vacuum creates dangerous policy formulation conditions. SomeChina-knowledgeable scholars have played an important role in guiding the policy of the United States towards China and the direction of American public opinion towards China [28]. The "loss of voice" of this group will lead to the decline of "pro-China" and "friendly China" views in the American society, which is not conducive to the current Sino-U.S. cultural exchanges.

4.3. Reflections on U.S. Think Tanks' Cognition of Sino-U.S. Track II Diplomacy

The evolving "new normal" in Sino-U.S. great power relations has precipitated strategic recalibrations within U.S. think tanks, focusing on institutionalizing Track II diplomacy as a dual-function mechanism for conflict containment and communication channelization. These evolving paradigms offer critical insights for China's optimization of bilateral Track II engagements through three operational vectors:

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First, provide strong support for non-official think tanks to participate in China-Us Track II diplomacy. As the main force of Track II diplomacy, think tanks can play an important supplementary role when official diplomacy is blocked, and play an important role in the improvement of Sino-US relations. On the one hand, it is necessary to encourage non-official think tanks to provide intellectual support for official decision-making, improve the initiative and enthusiasm of non-official think tanks to carry out Track II diplomacy with the United States, and release the potential of non-official think tanks in the field of Sino-U.S. Track II diplomacy. On the other hand, it is necessery to encourage non-official think tanks to enhance communication and exchanges with the "Chinese intellectuals" of American think tanks, obtain the policy orientation of the United States towards China and convey China's attitude towards the United States in a timely manner through non-official and low-sensitive channels, so as to make up for the one-way and unidirectional information acquisition and transmission paths at the official level, and enhance mutual understanding and mutual trust through think tanks.

Second, encourage experts from various fields to participate in the Track II dialogue, improve the pertinency and professionalism of the dialogue, and gradually expand the topics and areas of China-U.S. Track II diplomacy, so as to give full play to the advantages of Track II diplomacy in areas that official diplomacy cannot cover. For example, Karman Lucero, a fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School in the United States, pointed out that China and the United States are currently ina race in the field of artificial intelligence, and while both sides say they want to use the dialogue in the field of AI governance to manage competition, But it will be difficult to reach a consensus in a short time. Therefore, potential risks in this process can be managed through multi-channel, targeted Track II dialogue, while laying the groundwork for dialogue to reach bilateral agreements at the official level [29]. Therefore, it is necessary to organize experts and scholars in specialized fields to participate in Track II diplomacy with the United States and obtain necessary information through professional dialogue to support official decision-making.

Third, attach importance to the design of Track II dialogue, including the theme, structure, location and form of dialogue. A RAND Corporation study reports that Track 2 dialogues are more successful when they include both substantive discussions of current issues and informal activities that allow participants to build relationships. Such informal relationship-building activities include joint meetings with all participants, small breakout sessions, field trips and shared meals [30]. In addition, the venue and supporting facilities of Track II dialogue are also very important. Track II diplomacy between China and the United States should be held in a neutral venue to reduce the interference of political factors, and interpreters should be equipped to facilitate smooth communication between participants.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the potential re-election of Donald Trump as U.S. President injects substantial volatility into Sino-U.S. major power relations, exacerbating strategic uncertainties and reinforcing Cold War-style confrontational paradigms in Washington's China policy. Given this context, bilateral Track II Diplomacy emerges as a critical institutional mechanism to mitigate escalating tensions, facilitate constructive communication, and operationalize the proposed "guardrails" for relationship management. This study's analytical focus on U.S. think tanks' affirmative assessments and critical reservations regarding Sino-U.S. Track II engagements serves dual purposes: firstly, to decode Washington's strategic calculus toward non-official diplomatic channels; secondly, to diagnostically examine systemic constraints hindering current Track II interactions. Such dual-dimensional understanding proves essential for maintaining functional dialogue pipelines during periods of acute bilateral friction.

Notably, China's strategic response requires differentiated engagement strategies: 1) implementing robust risk assessment frameworks to counter embedded risks and systemic challenges in U.S.-initiated Track II activities; 2) strategically leveraging Track II's conflict mediation potential to counteract diplomatic compartmentalization; 3) capitalizing on political transition periods to institutionalize crisis communication protocols. Crucially, these measures should be synchronized with parallel Track One coordination, forming a

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hybrid governance model to achieve the overarching objective of bilateral relationship stabilization and damage control.

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