



# National Identity and Strategic Competition: The Logic of Identity Politics in the U.S.-China Tech War

Jinglin Zhang

Penn State University, State College, PA 16802, USA

Zeric6666@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This article explores how national identity narratives shape the framing and escalation of U.S.-China technological rivalry. Current studies have primarily interpreted this rivalry through material and strategic lenses, and emphasize power transition, national security, industrial policy, and economic coercion. These approaches indeed offer great insights; however, they do not fully explain how technology is incorporated into broader narratives of national purpose, historical mission, and legitimate international role. In order to address this gap, this article will conduct a case study, with the qualitative comparative method, and with discourse analysis, which will focus on official U.S. and Chinese documents produced between 2018 and 2025. The analysis shows that the United States treats technological leadership as a core requirement to global leadership and national security, while China frames technological self-reliance as the foundation to national rejuvenation and autonomy. This article argues that these competing identity narratives intensify the rivalry, as they are transforming technological competition into a bigger struggle over status and legitimacy. This article, therefore, contributes to the literature by showing that U.S.-China technological rivalry could be understood not only through material and strategic explanations, but also through identity-based narratives, which give it deeper symbolic and political force.

**Keywords.** National identity, Strategic competition, U.S.-China relations

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Recently, the competition between the U.S. and China has become a very important bilateral relationship in the world. As the economic interactions of both countries deepen, the technological rivalry also increases. It is also increasing, and it makes the situation more complex because the nature of competition has changed a lot compared with before. In the past, scholars and researchers often discussed trade disputes and market access, but now it is framed as a struggle over national security and strategic leadership, and the future distribution of global power is also involved in this process. Technologies such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence are treated by both states as connected to military capability and national strength, so technology can relate to economic development and national security at the same time. From this

understanding, technology becomes a key area for both countries to compete and challenge each other. It is worth noting that this competition can continue for a long time, and it may affect the global order in many aspects.

This rivalry is important. It can affect economic factors. Also, it influences national security and domestic politics. The competition regarding advanced technology can influence supply chains and investment flows. At the same time, it changes the institutional rules for innovation and economic exchange. It is important to note that the U.S. uses export controls and industrial subsidies, and it tries to coordinate with allies on secure supply chains. This shows a shift to security-centered technology policy. On the other hand, China emphasizes innovation-driven development and technological self-reliance. It seeks breakthroughs in core sectors. These developments show that the technological sphere is related to questions of sovereignty and status. Also, it connects to the international order. So, from this view, to understand modern geopolitics, the technological rivalry between China and the U.S. should be examined.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

Some of the existing scholarships can help to examine this topic from different angles. One body of literature examines the role of identity in foreign policy. In fact, they argue that states define interests through historical self-understandings and conceptions of appropriate international roles, not just material terms. Chafetz, Spirtas, and Frankel show that identity influences how states interpret the external environment, and Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf further show that identity can matter for how states imagine international order and their own place within it [1, 2]. From this perspective, foreign policy behavior can be difficult to understand if one only looks at material incentives, because the meaning of power and threat can be shaped by identity.

Other scholars try to concentrate more on national identity in the United States and China. For the U.S. side, Restad says that American foreign policy is shaped by exceptionalist self-understandings and belief in a distinctive national mission [3]. For the Chinese side, Zhao and Gries et al. say that nationalism and national identity can shape China's external orientation and its attitudes to the United States [4, 5]. Then, Pu says that China's identity as a rising power can have tension between recognition and aspiration, as well as insecurity, and this can be seen in its foreign policy behavior [6]. In fact, these works suggest that both countries can understand their international roles through narratives beyond simple strategic calculation.

Lastly, a closer look at the third body of research addressing the U.S.-China technological rivalry itself. These studies examine geoeconomic competition, industrial policy, and export controls, and they also look at how technological interdependence becomes securitized when states view technology transfer through the lens of national security rather than economic efficiency in the context of U.S.-China relations. Weiss argues that U.S. economic statecraft can be reorganized around great-power competition [7]. Zhang points out that technology and strategic emerging sectors are central in the current rivalry [8]. It should be noted that recent work by Retzmann and Bode, Ducci, and Lee suggests the "tech war" can be shaped by

narratives and practices that construct technology as a political and security issue rather than merely an economic one[9,10]. In fact, this literature can be valuable. It shows that the rivalry is not just about material capabilities, and it is also about how those capabilities can be interpreted and politicized.

These scholars examine the technology rivalry from different angles, but a key gap remains. Most previous scholars looked at the U.S.-China technological rivalry from a materialist or strategic perspective. They focus on power transition, national security, industrial policy, and economic coercion. These explanations are important. But they do not capture how technology is framed as part of national purpose and historical mission, together with a legitimate world role. It is worth noting that there is still a lack of comparative explanation about how the United States and China fit technology within broader identity narratives. These narratives can intensify the rivalry. They turn technological competition into a contest over status and national destiny.

### **1.3 Thesis**

This article argues that U.S.-China technological rivalry can be intensified by competing national identity narratives: the US views technological leadership as important for global leadership and security, and China sees technological self-reliance as central to national rejuvenation and autonomy. In fact, technological competition is more than a debate about innovation or industrial policy. It can be seen as a struggle about how each state sees itself and its place in the international order.

## **2 Methodology**

This article conducts a case study using the qualitative comparative method. And at the same time, it uses discourse analysis. Together, these methods will help to examine how national identity narratives shape the interpretation of U.S.-China technological rivalry directly or indirectly. This method is chosen because to understand the broader framework, it is necessary to examine what policies the United States and China adopt. At the same time, it will help to look at how each state frames technology in political and strategic terms. As Yin argues, case study research is useful for analyzing bounded contemporary phenomena in depth, and Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili show that discourse analysis is suitable for International Relations research focusing on identity, meaning, and how legitimacy is constructed [11, 12].

The empirical focus of this article is the period from 2018 to 2025, with more attention on semiconductors, advanced computing, and similar strategic technologies. The reason for choosing this period for analysis is that it demonstrates clearly the transition from an earlier way of engagement between China and the U.S. to a more explicit language of strategic competition and technological restriction. On the U.S. side, official documents and statements from the government leadership increasingly framed relations with China with the language of strategic competition, while policy documents often connect semiconductors, export controls, and industrial policy to national security and technological leadership. On the Chinese side, official discourse released by the government generally focuses on technological upgrading, breakthroughs in core technologies, and greater self-reliance in science and

technology [13, 14, 15]. Looking at both sides at the same time, it is not hard to draw the conclusion that these developments make 2018-2025 a coherent period for analyzing how technology became embedded in national identity narratives on both sides.

For this article, the analysis draws primarily on official and quasi-official documents. For the United States, these documents include strategy statements, Department of Commerce speeches, CHIPS-related materials, and other policy documents on export controls and microelectronics. For China, documents include "Made in China 2025", statements on technological self-reliance, and official government announcements on innovation, development, and digital security. These documents can help to show how state elites define national purpose, identify threats, and legitimate policy. The documents are examined through discourse analysis to identify recurring topics and themes: leadership, security, self-reliance, containment, national rejuvenation, and prestige. In this way, the method aligns directly with the research question by treating official discourse as a key site where national identity narratives are constructed and expressed.

### **3 Application (Empirical Analysis)**

#### **3.1 U.S. identity narrative and technological rivalry**

A recurring theme of recent U.S. discussions is the notion of technology as strategic leadership in place of economic advancement. That's how advanced technology has been associated—and indeed linked to it, with America's innovation base, rule-setting, and security. Official U.S. materials increasingly present competition with China not as a temporary trade dispute but as part of a broader strategic contest in which technological leadership is essential to preserving national strength. This logic reflects Restad that American exceptionalist self-images are so key in foreign policy [3]. It also reflects Weiss' conclusion that US economic policy has returned to the great power order. For the U.S., the phrase "strategic competition" is, in many ways, how the U.S perspective is toward the PRC today [7].

The identity narrative plays out most clearly in the US view of semiconductor policy. In an address in November 2022, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo called the new export control regime "stricter and targeted and tied advanced technology restrictions to America's national security. The CHIPS guardrails in 2023 were also part of the logic of this rationale, namely that any technological or innovation funding under these laws-for-peace (CHIPS and Science Act) would not be given under attack by other nations and would bring about the development of U.S. technological and national security. And technology is not sold as just protection but a commodity at the same time: as an essential ingredient but also as a boundary between a security measure and a threat, a protection measure, and a source of security with security by threat, and as well as an alternative (U.S. Department of Commerce) for the private sectors and industries from the people's economic, security of innovation through technology to the national security or innovation [16, 17].

The same language is also prevalent in broader strategic documents. The 2025 National Strategy on Microelectronics Research states that microelectronics hold a critical role in U.S. health, the economy, and national security, and it explicitly calls for sustaining and advancing global leadership by the United States and its allies in this field. That language matters because it demonstrates that the policy language goes beyond refusing technologies to China: American leadership in strategic technologies is presented in what is framed as something inevitable (as in the case of technology), and good politics can only work. In this sense, technological rivalry is woven into the nation's image of a world of innovation, security, and dominance [18].

Recent scholarship has made the debate much stronger: Weiss demonstrates how U.S. economic statecraft has indeed reorganized into rivalry with long-time world powers, and Zhang demonstrates that the core of current U.S./China competition is technology and what is at the heart of strategic emerging space [7, 8]. Bode, Ducci, and Lee suggest that the “tech war” shouldn’t be just a momentary response to shifts in material power [10]. They do, to say the least, demonstrate that it is also shaped by dominating narratives that make interdependence sound secure in nature. And so from a global perspective, U.S. discourse does not simply support controls. It reimagines technology as a moral and strategic test of whether the United States can remain that same kind of state as it portrays itself as: secure, innovative, and globally leading.

That is why the U.S. side of the rivalry is such a challenge to materialize in that context, which is no longer purely material management. Technological competition can carry greater symbolic weight when it is done so in a language of leadership, resilience, fairness, national security, and so on. But it’s not just the issue of whether China has better tools at its disposal in the field in terms of technology that matters, but also how to be on top of the world and make sure that the American advantage does not fade away, and American primacy is kept. These are not only tools of statecraft, but they are also performances of national identity. Retzmann’s work on storytelling in the “tech war” is especially informative here as well; a novel example of how narratives make certain objects (chips and AI systems, to name only 2) a place of geopolitical contestation [9].

### **3.2 Chinese identity narrative and technological rivalry**

The U.S. narrative emphasizes leadership and security. In contrast, the Chinese narrative gives more attention to national rejuvenation and self-reliance, which can help the country escape from vulnerability. Made in China 2025 treated manufacturing as the foundation of national strength, and it is a key pillar of the national economy. This was proposed long before the recent export-control escalations. The official government materials from 2015 and later English-language summaries show that the strategy can upgrade Chinese manufacturing and strengthen new capacity. At the same time, it should support China’s emergence as a manufacturing power. It is worth noting that this language shows developmental ambition. Also, it has a civilizational scale: technological upgrading can be seen as part of the longer historical effort to make China strong again. That broader framing can support Zhao’s argument that Chinese nationalism shapes China’s international orientation [4].

This discourse has become stronger recently. In January 2024, Xi Jinping called for "high-level sci-tech self-reliance". He said breakthroughs in key fields are important. Also, other official documents in 2024 stressed the need for "greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology." It is worth noting that these formulations matter because they frame the technology development as a question of national autonomy and dignity, as well as the long-term historical mission. China does not only want to get richer. It is trying to reduce vulnerability and overcome external pressure, and secure what its leadership presents as the country's rightful place in the world as a major power capable of independent innovation. This narrative can match Pu's description of the "controversial identity" of a rising China [6].

When Chinese officials respond to foreign restrictions, the identity logic can show itself. In fact, in a 2025 statement on ICT and cyber issues, the Chinese Foreign Ministry argued that some countries had overstretched the concept of national security and they politicized digital issues while expanding containment from individual firms to a broader digital ecosystem. This language casts China not as an aggressor seeking domination but as a state responding to unfair suppression and exclusion. That is to say, the discourse combines technological self-strengthening with a narrative of external pressure. So self-reliance becomes a developmental strategy, and it is also a moral response to containment. This pattern can be consistent with the findings of Gries, Zhang, Crowson, and Cai's that forms of Chinese national identity structure attitudes toward the United States and U.S. policy [5].

Previous studies on Chinese identity can help explain why this framing works well. Zhao shows that Chinese nationalism shaped China's international orientation, and Gries et al. show that national identity can structure Chinese views of the United States. Also, Pu's concept of "controversial identity" can be useful here because it captures the tension between China's search for recognition as a major power and its sensitivity to vulnerability, exclusion, historical humiliation, and other issues. In fact, in the technological sphere, that tension appears as a drive for world-class innovation combined with acute concern about dependency, and technology can become a symbolic measure of whether China has risen or is still exposed to outside control [4, 5, 6].

It should be noted that this narrative does not reject international openness entirely. In the Chinese official discourse, words like cooperation and development are all over the place. But the value hierarchy has shifted. Openness can be accepted only on terms compatible with security and indigenous capacity, which can support national advancement. In practice, technological policy is embedded in a larger story about historical recovery and sovereign capability, and this means technology is not just about the economy. The U.S. narrative fears decline, and the Chinese narrative fears renewed dependence. Both are full of identity. They attach different emotional and political weights to the same technological arena.

#### 4 Comparative discussion: interaction and escalation

In fact, taking a closer look at narratives from the U.S. and China, it is clear that technology has become a site where material competition and identity politics can be intertwined in a complex way that is not easy to separate because both sides view technology as more than just tools. Both states portray advanced technology as economically valuable. Also, they think it is strategically necessary. But neither side speaks about it in purely instrumental terms. On the U.S. side, technology can be bound up with leadership and security, and it is also connected to the preservation of a legitimate world role. On the Chinese side, technology is tied to rejuvenation and autonomy, as well as the overcoming of vulnerability. In the language of Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf, identity can shape how states imagine their place in the international order. In the U.S.-China case, this means technology policy becomes more than policy, and it becomes a language of national self-definition [2].

This can explain why the rivalry hardens easily. Each side interprets its own actions as defensive with historical reasons but views the other side's actions as a sign of hostile purpose. U.S. export controls are described as necessary security measures to protect leadership and reduce risk. Chinese industrial upgrading and self-reliance are seen as a needed response to exclusion. Because each side's identity narrative gives moral support for its own view, compromise can become harder in a political sense: concession can be seen at home not as a strategic adjustment, but as weakness, decline, and national humiliation. Bode, Ducci, and Lee describe this dynamic and show how the "tech war" is narrated and practiced through security-related categories that can make the interdependence look dangerous. Retzmann also shows that technology's salience comes from storytelling on both sides [9, 10].

Recent scholarship on the "tech war" strongly supports this interpretation. Zhang demonstrates that industrial policy has become central to the rivalry, while Liu shows that the United States increasingly uses digital coalitions to preserve technological leadership and supply-chain security against China [8, 19]. Read together with Bode et al. and Retzmann, these studies suggest that the rivalry is not simply a direct function of material power transition [9, 10]. It is also produced and deepened through narratives that define what technology means for each state's identity and future.

The comparative implication is significant. Once technology becomes a marker of national destiny, policies such as subsidies, export controls, coalition-building, investment screening, and industrial upgrading are no longer seen as temporary instruments. They begin to look like necessary expressions of who the state is and what historical role it must play. That is why the U.S.-China technological rivalry has become so difficult to depoliticize. It is not only a struggle over chips, platforms, and supply chains. It is also a struggle over status, recognition, and the symbolic boundaries of national power.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has tried to argue that the U.S.-China technological rivalry is shaped not only by material competition over strategic industries, but also by the national identity narratives, through which each side understands advanced technology in its frame. In answer to the research question, the analysis shows that identity narratives help shape both the framing and the escalation of the rivalry: the United States increasingly presents technological leadership as essential to national security, global leadership, and the preservation of its international role, while China presents technological self-reliance as central to national rejuvenation, dignity, and resistance to external containment. Methodologically, this article used a qualitative comparative case study combined with discourse analysis to examine how official U.S. and Chinese texts construct technology as a site of security, status, and national identity.

Ultimately, this article seeks to understand this rivalry, with the foundation based upon the scholar literatures, by showing that the U.S.-China technological rivalry should be understood not only through material and strategic explanations, but also through the identity-based narratives that give technological competition its deeper symbolic and political force.

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