

# From Partner to Competitor: The Proximization Analysis of the National Security Strategy of the United States of America from Three Administrations

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**Abstract.** At present, Sino-US relations are changing rapidly. The game and cooperation between China and the United States play an important role in the world. Therefore, it is very important for the two nations to analyze the counterpart's discourse to further extract the detailed ideologies. Critical discourse analysis can excavate the ideology in language. In recent years, the proximization theory is a new method for critical discourse analysis. Based on the proximization theory, this paper discusses the ideologies transmitted by the three presidents, that is, Barack Hussein Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr in China-related issues of the National Security Strategy of the United States of America. It is found that in the reports issued by three American presidents, the orientation of the US government towards China is changing from partner in Obama's administration to competitor in Trump and Biden's administration. Obama's attitude towards China is relatively friendly, and he believes that China is one of the allies of the United States in building a world framework. Trump shows the worst attitude towards China, positioning China as a rising threat, and guiding people to fear China, thus making excuses for the implementation of his America first policy. Biden's attitude towards China is rather bad, and he constantly interferes in China's internal affairs. At the same time, he slanders the lack of human rights in some regions of China, which makes the American people feel sympathy and resentment, thus making it easier to implement his foreign policy.

**Keywords:** National Security Strategy of the United States of America; Proximization Theory; Legalization; Critical Discourse Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Politics is closely related to language, therefore, it is necessary to analyze political discourse. Political discourse analysis focuses on how to realize political power, power abuse, or domination through political discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, henceforth) can be traced back to the 1970s, and it is an important tool used to excavate the relationship between discourse events and social, political, and cultural factors, especially how discourse is influenced by power relations in ideology.

Chilton's discourse space theory (2004) is a cognitive linguistics research model with high recognition in critical discourse research. Based on Chilton's discourse space theory, Cap (2008) added the elements of time and axiology, initially put forward a spatial-temporal-axiological model, and then formed the proximization theory. The proximization theory mainly studies the strong construal mechanism of discourse (Cap, 2013). This theory is widely used in discourse analysis of literature, environment, politics, etc. (e.g., Cap, 2008; Cao & Wu, 2020).

The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* is a national strategy regularly submitted to Congress by the president of the United States, usually explaining the government's political position, which has attracted much attention from the international community. Therefore, in order to explore the change in the American government's attitude towards China, this paper selects the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* published by Obama in 2015, Trump in 2017, and Biden in 2021 (*Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*) as the research data. Using the proximization theory as an analysis framework, the present study analyzes how Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations construct China's image to realize the legalization of their political discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Proximization Theory

Proximization theory is a discourse strategy, which gradually projects distant events and states in space, time, and axiology into the physical and psychological space of listeners and readers so that the latter can realize that the real threat is approaching and may cause great harm to themselves, so they should take immediate measures to reduce the danger. Proximization theory is used to realize the legitimacy of the speaker's actions and policies.

According to proximization theory, the threats from the marginal entities of discourse space are considered the outside-deictic-center (ODC), which can cross the discourse space to invade the inside-deictic-center (IDC), that is, the speaker and the addressees. The threats have three properties: time, space, and axiology, which are embodied in Spatial-Temporal-Axiological Analytical Model (STA, henceforth). Spatial proximization refers to the intrusion of ODC into IDC in physical space, so IDCs should take effective measures to deal with it. Temporal proximization refers to the invasion of IDC on the timeline, especially in the past and future, creating an urgent atmosphere, so IDCs should immediately respond and take preventive measures to eliminate it. Axiological proximization approaches ODCs to IDCs, forming ideological conflict, which is likely to evolve into concrete conflict, thus damaging IDC.

### 2.2 Empirical Research on Proximization Theory

Since Cap (2008) put forward the proximization theory, many scholars are constantly applying this theory to different discourse analysis. At present, there are two types of empirical studies on discourse analysis using the proximization theory, one is comparative studies of different languages, and the other is different political identities and monolingual empirical research.

In terms of the comparative studies of different languages, there are three categories, that is, the comparison among different countries, the different administrations on the same topic, and the comparison between the source language and the target language. Concerning the comparison of different countries, Yan and Zhang (2018) used the proximization theory to analyze the different strategies in the process of the US, the attacking party, trying to achieve its own legitimacy, China, the attacked party, banning the legality of the US behavior, and Britain, the third party, commenting on the legality of both sides' behavior in the Sino-US trade war.

The research topics of Non-comparative research are rich, including literature (e.g., Fang & Yu, 2019), energy (e.g., Zhao & Lin, 2021), politics (e.g., Liao & Wu, 2019), Internet rumors (Yang, 2019), environment (e.g., Guo, 2020), classroom (Sun, 2018). For example, Zhao and Zhao (2021) applied proximization theory to the analysis of nontraditional security discourse, confirming that Trump evokes the American public sense of the imminence of energy threats by exaggerating the conflict of energy interests between China and the United States.

To sum up, proximization theory shows a relatively complete theoretical framework and systematic analytical methods. Proximization theory is not only applied in comprehensive fields such as trade dispute discourse, public health discourse, environmental protection discourse, classroom teaching discourse, etc. but also changes from single to multiple comparisons, making the analysis more diverse. However, at present, there is little research on the application of the proximization theory to analyze the attitude and trends of the different administrations in the United States towards China. Therefore, in order to explore the change in the American government's attitude towards China, this paper selects the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* published by Obama, Trump, and Biden, respectively, and analyzes how Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations use the discourse strategy to build China's image to realize the legalization of their political discourse.

### 3. Research Data

*National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Report, henceforth)* mainly judges the current international security environment, especially the top strategy made by the United States when it faces threats. Therefore, a timely evaluation of the *Report* is also the most effective way for other countries to analyze the US strategy. Therefore, in order to analyze the attitudes of successive American governments toward China, this paper selects the national strategic security reports released during Obama's second term, Trump's term, and Biden's term as the data, aiming at revealing the orientation and change of the attitudes of the three American administrations towards China.

When Obama published the *Report* in 2015, the world situation was relatively stable. Western intervention in the Middle East is gradually decreasing, and the traditional global economic governance system is weak, forcing unprecedented changes in the pattern of economic power. New positive signals are constantly emerging in the interaction between global governance and big powers. When Trump published the national strategic security report in 2017, the international situation was characterized by instability and uncertainty, and the fission in the West continued to deepen. Around the world, protectionism and populism are on the rise, and globalization has not yet gone out of the headwind. When Biden published the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in 2021, the world situation was surging. The COVID-19 epidemic rages all over the world. The number of people who died from various diseases climbed, and the unemployment rate in the western capitalist world increased.

The *Report* embodies the national security and strategic diplomacy of American presidents. The analysis of the *Reports* of Obama, Trump, and Biden is helpful to explain the changes in American policy towards China in different periods, and it is of great reference significance for the Chinese government to respond quickly and actively.

### 4. Research Results

By analyzing the national security strategy reports issued by three American presidents during their terms, it is not difficult to see that the US government's positioning of China has gradually changed from a partner in Obama's administration to a competitor in Trump's and Biden's administrations. In particular, Trump's administration has regarded China as its strongest competitor. Therefore, starting from the STA model of proximization theory, this paper analyzes the legalization strategies in the *Reports* of the Trump and Biden administrations.

#### 4.1 Spatial Proximization

**Table 1.** The Spatial Proximization in Trump's and Biden's *Reports*

Category	Trump's project	Biden's project
Noun phrases (NPs) as components of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)	I/ we/ Americans/ America/ people/ fellow American/the United States	the United States/ America
	Allies/NATO/EU	Americans/our people /American workers/ Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet
		the world/ the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) / partnerships and alliances/alliances/partners/ democracies/ alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea/ /Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states/ the European Union and the United Kingdom/ democratic partners/ China's neighbors and commercial partners/Taiwan/ We/us/
Noun phrases (NPs) as components outside the deictic	China/Chinese dominance/Chinese practices	China, competitor/ antagonistic authoritarian powers/ Beijing / China's leaders/Chinese government

center of the DS (ODCs)		
VPs of motion and directionality as movement of ODCs to IDCs	challenge/steal	have invested heavily
VPs of action as labels of the impact of ODCs on IDCs	make/grow/control/expand/shape	prevent/ undercut
NPs indicating abstract concepts as impacts of ODCs on IDCs	military linkages and arms sales	Threats
NPs indicating abstract concepts as effects of the impact of ODCs on IDCs	China's military modernization and economic expansion	challenge/ rivalry

#### 4.1.1 Noun Phrases (NPs) as Components of the Deictic Center of the DS (IDCs)

In Trump's *Report*, a large number of nouns and noun phrases are used as central entities to show his position. The marked central entity is I / WE / Americans / America / People / Fellow American / The United States / Allies / NATO / EU. Dividing Trump's "I", "We", "America" and "Americans" into the same camp has narrowed the distance with the masses and won the trust of the people. In addition, Trump also divided non-American forces, such as "Allies", "NATO" and "EU", into IDC(s) to expand the IDC(s) camp and show the importance of allies to the United States.

In Biden's *Report*, many nouns and noun phrases are used as central entities to show his position. The marked central entity is the United States / America. At the same time, Biden divided "Hong Kong", "Xinjiang", "Tibet" and "Taiwan", which belong to Chinese territory, into the same camp with the United States, openly clamoring for interference in China's internal affairs, and his ambition was obvious. At the same time, like Trump, Biden also classified "Allies", "NATO" and "America" as IDC(s), indicating the importance of alliances "NATO" to the United States. Different from Trump, he added China's neighboring countries or organizations "ASEAN" "Vietnam" to the central entity, maximizing the membership of the central entity, aiming to isolate and encircle China and interfere in China's geopolitics.

#### 4.1.2 Noun Phrases (NPs) as Components Outside the Deictic Center of the DS (ODCs)

"China", "Chinese Dominance" and "Chinese practices" are all recognized as ODC(s) in Trump's China-related discourse in the *Report*, which fully demonstrates Trump's hostile attitude towards China and the Chinese government, and guides the masses to have fear of China, thus realizing the legalization of China policy.

In Biden's China-related language, "China" and "competitor" are identified as ODC(s), indicating that Biden's administration regards China as its most important adversary. At the same time, the U.S. also regards the "Chinese government" and "China" as hostile forces and has a very negative attitude toward China.

#### 4.1.3 VPs of Motion and Directionality as Movement of ODCs to IDCs

Markers indicating the movement of ODCs to IDCs are mainly displacement verb phrases and pointing verb phrases.

In Trump's words, his nouns or phrases used to express this kind of influence mainly include: challenge and steal, etc.

*Example 1:* China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.

*Example 2:* Every year, competitors such as China steal U.S. intellectual property valued at children of billions of dollars.

In the above two examples, Trump summed up China's approach to the United States as "challenge" and "steal", which was intended to slander China's despicable behavior of provoking America's world status and stealing American intellectual property rights, proving that China's behavior is harming American interests, and measures should be taken to contain the Chinese threat.

The main nouns or phrases in Biden's text that indicate such effects are: have invested heavily.

*Example 3:* Both Beijing and Moscow **have invested heavily** in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and **prevent** us from defending our interests and allies around the world.

By "have invested heavily", Biden meant to illustrate that Chinese investments are jeopardizing the interests of the United States and its allies, and thus that China is moving closer to the United States in physical space, giving the public a sense of fear.

#### 4.1.4 VPs of Action as Labels of the Impact of ODCs on IDCs

Markers that indicate the movement of peripheral entities to central entities are mainly behavioral verb phrases. In Trump's text, the verbs that express this kind of influence mainly include: make, grow, control, expand, shape, etc.

*Example 4:* China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.

In the process of referring to the influence of China, a peripheral factor, on the United States, Trump used the shape to indicate that China is building a world that defies American values and interests, which illustrates the growing threat of China. Through these languages, the panic of the American people can be aroused, so as to legalize the American government's China policy.

*Example 5:* **undercut** our advanced and emerging technologies, and seek to erode our strategic advantage and national competitiveness.

In referring to the influence of the peripheral factor China on the United States, Biden uses prevent (as shown in *Example 3*) and undercut (in *Example 5*) to indicate that China is preventing and weakening the influence of the United States in the world, as well as to show that the rise of China is hindering the development of cutting-edge technology in the United States, reflecting the identity of China as a competitor of the United States.

#### 4.1.5 NPs Indicating Abstract Concepts as Impacts of ODCs on IDCs

It indicates the prediction of the influence of peripheral entities on central entities, mainly with nouns or noun phrases.

In Trump's text, the nouns or phrases used to express this kind of influence mainly include military linkages and arms sales, etc.

*Example 6:* both China and Russia support the doctrine in Venezuela and are seeking to expand military linkages and arms sales across the region.

In the above example, Trump announced that China was seeking cross-regional military ties. This is a prediction to the Chinese military, indicating that China has premeditated aggression, which will pose a threat to the U.S. government and the American people, and make Trump prepare for the upcoming military action.

The main nouns or phrases in Biden's text that indicate such influences are "threats", etc.

*Example 7:* ... creating new **threats**. China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive.

In *Example 7*, Biden mentions that China is deliberately creating a new threat, and afterward elaborates that China is turning into the most threatening country. This language succeeds in conveying to the audience that China's rise has threatened the survival of the United States, on the one hand, and in alerting the American public to the public's hostility toward China, on the other.

#### 4.1.6 NPs Indicating Abstract Concepts as Effects of the Impact of ODCs on IDCs

It indicates the result of the influence of peripheral entities on central entities, mainly with nouns or noun phrases.

*Example 8:* Part of **China's military modernization and economic expansion** is due to its access to the U.S. innovation economy, including America's world-class universities.

As shown in *Example 8*, Trump stigmatized China, slandering that China's military modernization and economic expansion were due to its participation in the economic innovation of the United States, which made the American people feel that the United States was a victim.

The main nouns in Biden's text that indicate such influence are challenge and rivalry.

*Example 9:* We face a world of rising nationalism, receding democracy, growing **rivalry** with China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, and a technological revolution that is reshaping every aspect of our lives.

In the above example, Biden directly articulated that China has become a threat to our interests and values, and decided to address the challenges and competition from China, indicating that China has already negatively impacted the United States.

#### 4.2 Temporal Proximization

**Table 2.** The Temporal Proximization in Trump's and Biden's *Reports*

Category	Trump's project	Biden's project
The use of indefinite deictic noun phrases	unfair trade	
The use of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense	has mounted	has rapidly become more assertive
The modal verb phrases to construct a lasting impact of ODCs	could	
The use of nominalized phrases to presuppose the influence caused by ODCs	a rapid military modernization campaign	
The use of contrasting sentences to construct the alienated world in the future	(1) Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. (2) We will offer American goods and services, both because it is profitable for us and because it serves as an alternative to China's often extractive economic footprint on the continent.	We face a world of rising nationalism, receding democracy, growing rivalry with China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, and a technological revolution that is reshaping every aspect of our lives.

##### 4.2.1 The Use of Indefinite Deictic Noun Phrases

*Example 10:* we will work with our partners to contest China's **unfair trade** and economic practices and restrict its acquisition of sensitive technologies.

In the above example in Trump's *Report*, the indefinite descriptive noun phrase "unfair trade" fully illustrates the unfair treatment suffered by the United States from China, and gives the audience the feeling that China is domineering.

##### 4.2.2 The Use of the Simple Past Tense and the Present Perfect Tense

*Example 11:* China, in particular, **has rapidly become more assertive**.

In the above example, Biden mainly uses the present perfect tense to illustrate the rapid growth and investment of China, which is intended to show that China's rapid rise poses a great threat to the United States and jeopardizes its own interests.

#### 4.2.3 The Modal Verb Phrases to Construct a Lasting Impact of ODCs

*Example 12:* China and Russia are developing advanced goods and capabilities that **could** threaten our critical infrastructure and our command and control architecture.

In the above example, Trump mainly uses modal verbs to indicate the present and future influence of China and Russia on central entities (the United States and the American people). Trump uses "could" to make assumptions to illustrate the great threats and challenges that China brings to the United States.

#### 4.2.4 The Use of Contrasting Sentences to Construct the Alienated World in the Future

*Example 13:* China has mounted a rapid military modernization campaign designed to limit U.S. access to the region and provide China a freer hand there.

In the above example, Trump used the present perfect tense to show that the influence of China's accumulated military power will continue in the future, which will have a negative impact on the interests of the United States.

#### 4.2.5 Use Contrastive Sentences to Construct Future Advantages

*Example 14:* In contrast to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others.

*Example 15:* We will offer American goods and services, both because it is profitable for us and because it serves as an alternative to China's oft extractive economic footprint on the mainland.

In the above example, Trump fully demonstrated that despite the increasing strength of China and Russia, he also had the confidence to successfully contain it, giving the American people hope, and showing a remarkable effect on the American people's trust in the government.

*Example 16:* We face a world of rising nationalism, receding democracy, growing rivalry with China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, and a technological revolution that is reshaping every aspect of our lives.

In the above example, Biden first briefly explains the trend of the world today, and then explains that China is a growing threat to the United States, which is intended to put pressure on the masses to make them panic. He then uses the general future tense to give the people a sense of conviction and to make them more likely to rely on and trust the government in a state of panic.

### 4.3 Axiological Proximization

**Table 3.** The Axiological Proximization in Trump's and Biden's Reports

Category	Trump's project	Biden's project
Noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as IDC positive values or value sets	security/freedom/peace/tolerance/openness/freedom/strong, sovereign, and independent nations	diversity/ enduring democratic values/cooperation/ economic prosperity, security, human rights, and dignity/energy future/ innovation edge/common interests/enduring advantages/ democracy/human rights/human dignity
Noun phrases (NPs) interpreted as ODC negative values or value sets	unfair trade/ continuous competition/ dictatorship	anti-democratic forces/ competitor

#### 4.3.1 Noun Phrases (NPs) Interpreted as IDC Positive Values or Value Sets

As indicated in Table 3, a noun phrase that is interpreted as values or ideology shows that Trump's administration is more inclined to improve IDC's positivity. In order to resonate with the American people, Trump used a lot of positive words to explain his legitimacy. Through positive words such as "freedom" and "peace", he created a positive image of the American government for the people and attempted to pave the way for his policy legalization by increasing the public's goodwill.

In Biden's *Report*, Biden used a lot of positive words such as "common interests" and "energy future" to illustrate the superiority of American ideology and to narrow the psychological distance with the American public, thus providing more possibilities for the legitimization of his policies.

#### 4.3.2 Noun Phrases (NPs) Interpreted as ODC Negative Values or Value Sets

Trump used words such as "unfair trade" when highlighting the negative values of China, and Chinese practices, which highlighted the great threat posed by the Chinese government to the United States and the American people. At the same time, it suggested that it was China that took the initiative to stir up trade disputes, providing an excuse for the subsequent US initiative to launch a trade war.

Biden's attitude toward China is as negative as ever. His description of China-related ideology as "anti-democratic forces" and "competitor" fully reflects his and the U.S. government's hostility toward China and its insistence that China and the Chinese government are "undemocratic. The U.S. government's hostility toward China and its insistence that China and the Chinese government are "undemocratic", especially on the issues of Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, excuses its interference in China's internal affairs.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study uses the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* issued by presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden during their terms of office as the data, and analyzes the change in U.S. attitudes toward China by applying the strategy of proximization. The study finds that in the discourse system constructed in the *Report*, the three presidents have changed their position on China from "partner" to "competitor". Obama's attitude toward China was relatively friendly, considering China as one of the allies of the United States in building the world framework. In Biden's and Trump's *Reports*, China is positioned as a negative external entity, and the threats posed by China are described in terms of space, time and axiology, creating fear in the audience and thus legitimizing their own policies.

However, there are still limitations to this study. For one thing, the research text of this paper is limited, and the frequency of related words is not counted, thus this study does not adopt the quantitative approach. For another, the three *Reports* can only show the change in the American government's attitude towards China in stages. More reports should be selected to obtain a more comprehensive American attitude towards China.

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