

The national security overflow trap: Analyzing the causes of “security overflow” in the U.S.-China strategic competition

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Abstract:

The U.S.-China relationship has undergone a profound transformation since the onset of the trade war in 2018. Once defined by mutual economic interdependence, bilateral cooperation has increasingly been supplanted by a pervasive logic of “national security.” This paper investigates the phenomenon of “security over-expansion” — the strategic inflation of national security discourse into economic and technological realms — as a central dynamic in contemporary U.S.-China strategic competition. Through a dual-theoretical lens of securitization theory and institutionalization theory, the paper analyzes how both nations reframe non-security issues such as technology, investment, and supply chains into matters of national security. The study reveals that this securitization trend structurally erodes international trust, fragments global governance regimes, and fosters a new form of institutionalized confrontation. It concludes with a call to re-establish normative boundaries for security claims to safeguard global institutional integrity.

Keywords: Securitization, national security, U.S.-China relations, institutionalization, global governance, technology politics, strategic competition

1. Introduction

China’s economic system is marked by a strong policy orientation. The central government not only provides strategic direction but also deeply intervenes through fiscal, financial, and technological instruments. Although the idea that the market plays a “decisive role” in resource allocation has gained prominence, state policy remains a dominant force in shaping enterprise strategies and access to resources.

Over the past three decades, the United States and China have emerged as the dual economic engines of globalization. Their bilateral trade, technological cooperation, and investment flows have defined the core of the international economic order. However, this era of mutual benefit encountered a pivotal rupture in 2018, when the Trump administration launched a trade war against China, invoking concerns of “national security.” Since then, both nations have engaged in reciprocal securitization of econom-

ic relations, transforming previously apolitical domains — such as semiconductor cooperation, intellectual property exchange, and cross-border investment — into arenas of strategic rivalry.

Traditionally, national security has been associated with threats of military aggression, territorial integrity, and regime stability. Yet, in the post-Cold War era, the concept of security has expanded beyond its conventional boundaries, encompassing technology, economics, ecology, and cultural identity. This phenomenon, termed “security over-expansion” or “securitization overload,” refers to the political reclassification of non-security issues into existential threats. This discursive transformation legitimizes extraordinary state intervention, bypasses normal political processes, and increasingly serves as a policy tool for geopolitical maneuvering.

In the context of U.S.-China relations, this over-expansion of security logic manifests in export controls, investment screening, and technology bans imposed by the U.S. under laws like the CHIPS and Science Act. In response, China has operationalized a broad “holistic national security concept,” integrating industrial policy, technological self-reliance, and data governance into its strategic planning documents such as the 14th Five-Year Plan. The mutual securitization of economic policy reflects a structural shift in global politics, wherein national security becomes both a justification and a mechanism for institutional realignment.

This paper seeks to address the following critical question: Why have the United States and China increasingly redefined economic behavior as a national security threat? What are the institutional and discursive mechanisms behind this trend, and what structural crises does it produce for global governance? By examining the securitization and institutionalization processes in both countries, this research aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of how security logic reshapes international order in the era of great-power rivalry.

2. Literature Review

The evolving discourse of national security in U.S.-China relations has received growing attention in international relations and political economy scholarship. Central to this discussion is the securitization theory developed by the Copenhagen School. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) argue that “security” is not an inherent quality of an issue but a social construct produced through speech acts by political elites. When an issue is framed as an existential threat, it becomes subject to emergency measures beyond normal political processes. This theory has been widely applied to non-traditional domains such as migra-

tion, climate change, and economic policy.

In the context of U.S.-China relations, scholars such as Farrell and Newman (2019) have introduced the concept of “weaponized interdependence,” where states use asymmetric control over economic networks as tools of coercion. Their framework emphasizes how global value chains and digital infrastructure can be retooled as instruments of national power. This insight is particularly relevant for analyzing the U.S. restrictions on Chinese access to advanced semiconductors, justified under security grounds.

On the Chinese side, the notion of “holistic national security” has become a guiding doctrine since its formal articulation in 2014. According to Liu and Wang (2021), this concept reflects the Chinese Communist Party’s effort to integrate economic resilience, cyber governance, technological autonomy, and ideological control into a single security logic. Recent studies (Zhou, 2022; Yan, 2023) suggest that this security framework functions as a political apparatus to legitimize state intervention in market activities and redefine the boundaries between development and security.

From a legal-institutional perspective, international law provides ambiguous standards on national security exceptions. Article XXI of the GATT allows states to take measures for “essential security interests,” yet its broad wording has opened the door for unilateral interpretations. The 2019 WTO ruling on Russia’s invocation of Article XXI in a trade dispute marked a rare attempt to constrain national security abuse, but with limited deterrent effect. Scholars such as Shaffer (2020) and Howse (2021) argue that absent shared norms on securitization boundaries, the multilateral trade system risks fragmentation.

Finally, institutionalization theory (March & Olsen, 2006) contributes a framework for understanding how governments embed security discourses into formal institutions. By codifying national security concerns in laws, budgets, and policy frameworks, states legitimize their expanded scope of action. In both the U.S. and China, this process has led to the constitutionalization of security rationales in economic governance.

3. Analysis

3.1 The United States: Securitization through Legal and Strategic Instruments

The United States has increasingly securitized its economic relationship with China through legal instruments such as the Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA, 2018), the Export Control Reform Act (ECRA, 2018), and the CHIPS and Science Act (2022). These

laws frame economic transactions — from semiconductor exports to university exchanges — as potential threats to national security. Political discourse under the Trump and Biden administrations further amplified the narrative of a “techno-authoritarian threat” posed by China, particularly in fields such as 5G, AI, and quantum computing.

The process of securitization follows the Copenhagen School model: political elites (e.g., the U.S. president, Congress, Department of Commerce) act as “securitizing actors,” while the public and media serve as “audiences” that accept the threat narrative. The legitimacy of emergency measures — such as blacklisting Huawei, banning TikTok, or blocking NVIDIA chip sales — rests on this discursive framing, not on objective evidence of immediate danger.

Institutionalization occurs when this discourse becomes embedded in bureaucratic routines. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) now wields expansive authority to review foreign tech investments, while the CHIPS Act allocates \$52 billion in subsidies to rebuild domestic semiconductor capacity — framed as a matter of national survival.

3.2 China: Security as Development Strategy

China’s securitization process is more centralized and ideologically integrated. The “Overall National Security Outlook” conceptualizes security as a comprehensive, multidimensional agenda covering political, economic, cultural, and cyber domains. Under this framework, technological self-reliance, digital sovereignty, and supply chain resilience have been reframed as security imperatives.

Policy documents such as the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) explicitly identify emerging industries — including semiconductors, biotechnology, and cloud computing — as security-sensitive sectors. The Chinese state has institutionalized this agenda through the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and strategic investment vehicles like the National Integrated Circuit Fund.

Rather than relying on threat perception, China’s securitization is driven by a proactive strategy to insulate itself from external dependence. For example, the dual circulation strategy emphasizes internal market development and domestic innovation as buffers against external shocks. These policies blend economic planning with security logic, blurring the line between development and defense.

3.3 Structural Crises and Global Implications

The mutual securitization by the U.S. and China produces a structural transformation of the global economic order.

First, it erodes the functional distinction between security and commerce. Economic transactions are no longer judged solely by efficiency or competitiveness but by their geopolitical consequences. Second, it undermines institutional trust: both countries have increasingly disengaged from multilateral rule-making processes and turned to bilateral or unilateral instruments.

Third, it generates a normative vacuum in international law. The elasticity of “national security” allows states to circumvent WTO obligations without formal exit. As the WTO’s Appellate Body remains paralyzed, there are few effective legal checks against securitization abuse. This not only harms trade governance but sets a precedent for other nations to emulate — risking a domino effect of defensive regionalism and techno-nationalism.

Finally, the securitization spiral increases the risk of policy misjudgment and escalation. The absence of mutually agreed red lines on what constitutes a security threat creates ambiguity, suspicion, and overreaction. In this sense, the real crisis is not a military one but a collapse of epistemic coordination — a world where anything can be labeled a security issue, and no shared rules remain.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the phenomenon of security over-expansion in the context of U.S.-China strategic competition, with a focus on how both nations have securitized economic issues and institutionalized these practices. Through the dual lenses of securitization theory and institutionalization theory, we have analyzed how discursive constructions and legal-institutional mechanisms have enabled national security logic to infiltrate domains traditionally governed by economic and developmental principles.

The United States, by invoking national security in technology and trade regulation, has transformed its economic governance tools into instruments of geopolitical competition. Meanwhile, China has embedded security discourse within its developmental strategy, using top-down policy planning to redefine self-reliance and digital sovereignty as matters of existential survival. This mutual securitization has transcended conventional security domains and produced a new paradigm in international politics — one in which states leverage the ambiguous boundaries of “security” to justify exceptional interventions and strategic decoupling.

This trend poses significant risks for global governance. As national security becomes a flexible and expansive category, it threatens the integrity of multilateral regimes such as the WTO and creates a permissive environment for unilateralism and policy protectionism. The resulting

institutional distrust and fragmentation undermine the prospects for cooperative rule-making in areas like data governance, supply chain security, and digital infrastructure development.

Ultimately, the crisis lies not in the existence of security threats, but in the political utility of the term “security” itself. When everything is securitized, nothing can be governed through consensus. The challenge ahead is to restore normative boundaries around the use of security discourse — to distinguish between legitimate protective actions and opportunistic justification for coercive power projection. This is not only a theoretical task but an urgent practical demand for the future of global economic order and institutional legitimacy.

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