

## CONCLUSION

U.S.-China technological decoupling is extraordinarily complex, yet American strategy and policy debates are too often simplistic and vague. This report has sought to clarify how decoupling in a host of different technology areas could affect the gamut of American interests. Even so, reality is orders of magnitude more intricate and dynamic than what can be presented here. Washington must account for the decisions of dozens of other countries involved in the global tech trade, and it must make sound policy choices while the U.S. political system continues to deteriorate—to name just two enormous challenges that deserve far more analysis.

Complexity and uncertainty are key reasons to pursue a centrist strategy that can hedge against multiple futures. By imposing focused, carefully designed technology restrictions, U.S. decisionmakers can conserve their most critical resources: time to assess the situation, and control over the decoupling process. This report has offered a concrete picture of what centrist decoupling might look like and how implementation could work at the agency level. It has also demonstrated several points that further bolster the case for a centrist approach to decoupling.

First, the most strategically significant technologies (like 5G telecommunications equipment and semiconductors) are few in number and already subject to strong U.S. government controls. A handful of technology areas

***Focused, carefully designed technology restrictions can help U.S. decisionmakers conserve their most critical resources: time to assess the situation, and control over the decoupling process.***

may need tighter China-oriented restrictions—for example, drone swarms, the U.S. bulk power system, and technologies sold to Xinjiang. Yet certain China-focused controls seem counterproductive in a number of other high-profile areas, such as geolocation data, social media platforms, and consumer devices like smartphones. While future circumstances may justify increased decoupling, U.S. technology controls should not be greatly expanded at this time.

Second, official U.S. policy goals remain dangerously vague and open-ended across the board. Washington must publicly clarify its vision for the global tech trade and set more achievable ambitions for countering techno-authoritarianism, maintaining a military edge over China, and preventing Chinese espionage, sabotage, and influence operations. These are all important U.S. interests, but none would currently justify broad-based technology controls. Even so, U.S. rhetoric and policy actions continue to suggest the possibility of a costly and quixotic expansion of China-oriented controls. Clearer, narrower public messaging by U.S. leaders would help to focus agencies on those problems they can realistically address with restrictive tools and reduce the motivation of China and others to seize control of the decoupling process.

Third, “offensive” (self-improvement) policies have the greatest long-term potential for strengthening American technology leadership, competitiveness, and resilience. Granted, many offensive policies face substantial hurdles to implementation. The United States has so far lacked the political will to accelerate transformation of its military forces, create national cybersecurity and data privacy standards, or begin to repair the domestic information ecosystem—just as the centrists fear. But failure to enact these and other needed reforms would mean wasting the extra time that “defensive” measures can provide, placing U.S. security and prosperity at risk. Perhaps the rise of a formidable state rival such as China can finally persuade American leaders to take on fundamental challenges at home.

Not everyone will endorse a centrist strategy for technological decoupling or the specific policies recommended here. Some may doubt whether a comprehensive strategy is possible or even useful. But all should agree that the United States needs sharper public debates on this critical set of challenges. If nothing else, U.S. officials and analysts should confront the hardest questions head-on. What kind of technological future does America hope to create? And how can the tools of government policy help to bring about such a world? U.S. national strength and well-being will depend, in large part, on how American leaders answer these questions in the years to come. They must act carefully. But first, they must think clearly.