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Chair in Asian Studies

U.S. KEY PLAYERS IN CHINA POLICY MAKING
FOUR CASE STUDIES

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Table of contents

I Acknowledgements

II Introduction

1 Republican Presidents

1.1 Ronald Wilson Reagan

1.1.1 Reagan's anti-China campaign and key players

1.1.2 The path toward the 1982 communiqué

1.1.3 Reagan's "honeymoon" with China

1.1.4 Reagan's about-face and Congress' minor role

1.1.5 Reagan's National Security Advisors and the NSC's role

1.2 George Herbert Walker Bush

1.2.1 Key players in making China policy

1.2.2 The Fang Lizhi incident and the Tiananmen massacre

1.2.3 "Take a look at the long haul"

1.2.4 Brent Scowcroft's secret trips

1.2.5 Bush vs. Congress: institutional warfare

1.2.6 The sale of the F-16 fighter aircraft

1.2.7 The National Security Council and Brent Scowcroft's role

2 Democratic Presidents

2.1 William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton

2.1.1 Key players in making China policy

2.1.2 The "Most Favored Nation" status issue

2.1.3 The Taiwan Strait crisis

2.1.4 A more cooperative dimension in Clinton's second term

2.1.5 The National Security Council: role and structure

2.2 Barack Hussein Obama

2.2.1 Key players in China policy making

2.2.2 Obama's "dovish" approach to China

2.2.3 The rebalancing to Asia

2.2.4 Regional responses to the rebalance

2.2.5 The academic debate on the rebalance: conflicting points

2.2.6 Obama's realism and his NSC

3 Final Considerations

3.1 Analogies and differences among the four case studies

3.2 The role of Congress

3.3 The role of the National Security Council

3.4 On the future of U.S.-China relations: Henry Kissinger vs. Aaron
Friedberg

III Conclusion

IV Appendix A

V Appendix B

VI Bibliography

U.S. KEY PLAYERS IN CHINA POLICY MAKING

FOUR CASE STUDIES

The bilateral relationship between the United States and China is perhaps the most important of our times. Through this work, we try to go deeper into this relationship, emphasizing the American point of view and the key players that shape China policy in Washington, D.C.

As said, this thesis will tend to have a U.S. perspective as it tries to explain an American phenomenon, which is the decision making process when it comes to shaping China policy.

Important facts in Chinese history will be taken into account as they serve the purpose of this work.

The questions that we are trying to answer are: who makes China policy in the U.S.? Are U.S. presidents guided by their Party lines? What are the differences, if any, between U.S. presidents? Is there any recurring pattern as for China policy making? What is the role of Congress? What is the one of the National Security Council?

In order to give a satisfactory and comprehensive answer to those questions, this work will focus on four U.S. presidencies (two republican and two democratic): the ones of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

The choice of these presidents has been dictated by the importance of Chinese and American facts that occurred under those four presidencies.

The Reagan period was crucial as it coincided with China's economic opening and military cooperation in Afghanistan. The Bush period was a delicate one

because of Tiananmen and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Clinton period was important because of the Most-Favored-Nation status, the Taiwan Strait Crisis and China's inclusion to the WTO. Finally, the Obama administration is worth considering because of its "rebalance" to China and also because of China's growing role in the world stage.

The Reagan administration promised to be very tough on China. Reagan had close friends in Taiwan and he never fully agreed with Nixon's and Carter's opening. With Alexander Haig as Secretary of State, Reagan adopted a "China first" policy during the first year of his administration. This policy of focusing just on China brought about the 1982 communiqué: an agreement between the U.S. and China on arms sales, promising future progressive cuts for Taiwan.

As the Secretary of State went beyond his competences on several occasions, Reagan decided to appoint a new one: George Shultz. With him controlling Foggy Bottom, the approach to China changed, with the "China first" policy turning into an "Asia first" strategy, i.e. one trying to improve relations with other key allies in the South East Asia region, not just China. This new American posture bore its fruit as U.S.-China cooperation grew stronger, in particular on the Afghan War. The Chinese economic opening helped to smooth relations between the two countries, but what really drove the process was the changed attitude in Washington, D.C.

President Reagan liked delegating power to his aides. He liked the idea of having a strong Secretary of State, because he did not appreciate the way in which previous National Security Advisors (NSA) had taken the lead in foreign policy (Kissinger and Brzezinski being the examples). For this reason he had appointed Haig and had relegated Richard Allen (the NSA), to a secondary role. When Shultz

came to power at Foggy Bottom, Reagan reshuffled his national security team several times, by changing NSA almost every year. He was looking for the perfect harmony inside the administration, with the NSA having the role of coordinating and mediating between the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. Apparently, he found the perfect team at the end of his second term, with Colin Powell as NSA.

Contrary to Reagan, George H.W. Bush was a “hands-on” president in foreign policy. He had a top-level career, having served as director of the CIA, chief of the liaison office in Beijing, ambassador to the UN and vice-president under Reagan. He wanted to control foreign policy and so he set up a team of friends, of people he could rely on. He did not share the same feeling of protection toward Taiwan that Reagan had. On the contrary, he had a “China first” approach. However, the 1989 massacre of Tiananmen hindered the path toward a steady relationship with Beijing. Congress became more assertive and asked for harsh sanctions against the Chinese. On one side, Bush wanted to keep the relationship going on, on the other he could not neglect the strong American feeling (represented by Congress) of punishing the Chinese. In this context, the secret diplomacy that he set up (with Scowcroft and Eagleburger) partially paid off.

The relationship with China got back on track after a couple of years, but Bush was not reelected for a second term (despite his last desperate attempt to play up to Texas with the F-16 fighter sale).

Bush had created a China policy in which the real decision makers were just a few. The collegiality of the Reagan administration was made even more restricted by the Bush administration, with basically only the President and Scowcroft (the NSA) shaping the policy. Bush’s authoritative decision making in foreign policy was

challenged by a new assertive Congress, which had not defied presidential decisions since the Carter administration.

Just like Reagan, when Clinton became President, he promised he would be tough with China, punishing it for its human rights violations. With Congress backing him, he attached conditions to the renewal of the most favored nation status for China. In other words, if China wanted to keep on having the same economic and commercial treatment of the other countries, it had to abide by the conditions (they were about human rights) set by Clinton's 1993 executive order within one year.

Clinton was not an expert in foreign policy, and he delegated power to his aides, who were human rights champions and had a very poor sense of realism: Warren Christopher (Secretary of State) and Winston Lord (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs). The NSA (Anthony Lake) was too passive to take action, he was no Kissinger or Brzezinski.

The MFN linkage turned out to be an own goal for the Clinton administration, as in 1994 it confessed that its approach had not paid off and that a change of strategy was necessary. This happened because the U.S. had underestimated China's economic growth and American dependence on the Chinese market. The American business community had pressed intensely the administration to end its suicidal approach toward China, as it costed more to the Americans than to the Chinese.

Moreover, there was also lack of coordination, as ambassador to China Stapleton Roy (a Republican appointee) had no guidance from Washington about how the administration wanted to deal with Beijing.

Following Clinton's aboutface on the MFN issue, the U.S. lost credibility to the eyes of the Chinese, and the result was the Taiwan Strait Crisis.

In his second term, Clinton changed his policy and became more realistic and pragmatic, appointing Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State and Sandy Berger as NSA. With Berger driving the decision-making process, the relationship with China improved a lot, with the last achievement being the inclusion of China into the WTO in 2001.

In his presidential campaign, Obama was clever enough not to promise to be tough on China. He quickly understood how much China was important for the United States and that Washington could no longer just dictate its will on Beijing, without giving something back. Obama had appreciated the way in which George H.W. Bush organized his team and structured the decision making process. President Obama wanted to recreate the harmonious environment inside the White House that President Bush had been able to set up, and so he appointed some of his most trusted aides to positions of influence inside the White House. Nevertheless, he tried to create a bi-partisan atmosphere in order to have the widest consensus possible.

As far as China policy is concerned, the real watershed in the Obama administration happened in 2011, when the President and the Secretary of State decided to engage China through a sturdy rebalancing that alienated the Chinese sympathies even further (if there were any).

Obama adopted a policy of "Asia first" from 2011 on, after he had experienced really poor results in terms of cooperation with the "China first" approach of the first year and a half of his mandate.

The rebalancing was particularly appreciated and welcomed by all those countries in the region that feared a Chinese hegemonism and that wanted to downsize its projections. The huge American presence in South East Asia, with the consequential strengthening of alliances, embittered the Chinese position and “forced” it to cope with America’s refurbished Asian posture.

This shift from a “dovish” strategy to a stronger one stirred up the interest of scholars and academics on how to deal with China. Two conflicting positions are dominant in the debate: the one of Henry Kissinger and the one of Aaron Friedberg.

Even if Obama enlarged the membership of the National Security Council, the real driver of the China policy kept on being the President along with some “low-profile” aides (such as McDonough and Donilon). Secretary of State Clinton played an important role but she never really got that professional proximity with the President that had characterized other administrations.

There are important differences among U.S. presidents for the way in which they have shaped China policy. However, one thing is common for all: they ended up being realist. Whether they started off as such or they became so throughout their mandates, all of them adopted a pragmatic and realist posture toward Beijing.

Reagan’s initial take on China was quite liberal, but he soon realized how important China was for international security in the Cold War era. He sold weapons to Beijing, he cooperated with the “so-called communists” against the Soviets in Afghanistan and he also visited China. This is something he could not even imagine during his presidential campaign.

Contrary to Reagan, Bush knew about the importance of China. He was aware that it was both useless and counterproductive to isolate such an important

country. Moreover, he had a special relationship with the Chinese, having served there as Chief of the Liaison Office. To this extent, he never really changed his attitude toward Beijing. He kept on being a realist even when Congress pushed hard for sanctions in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre. He did not want to ruin the relationship by having the Chinese over a barrel. Maybe, it is just for his reluctance to press Beijing hard that he did not succeed in winning the 1992 elections.

Clinton emerged out of the criticisms against Bush's China policy. He promised he would be tough on China, to set it straight with Beijing. In this sense, he was a liberal. He imagined a relationship that simply could not match reality. His 1994 MFN delinkage showed the failure of his initial approach. From then on (namely, since the second term), he embraced a more pragmatic posture and down-to-earth attitude toward Beijing. This bore fruit. Realism had paid off, idealism had not.

This lesson was wisely learned by the next Democratic administration, the one of Barack Obama. Having seen the mistakes of expecting too much from the Chinese, he started off expecting nothing. In this way, he could not but gain. His "rebalance" is the perfect mix of engagement and commitment, a realist strategy that does not underestimate China, nor does it risk the relationship with it.

So, eventually, all the presidents analyzed embraced the cause of realism in dealing with China. This may be driven by four causes: need for inclusion, need for international cooperation, political awareness of China's importance and commercial priority.

So, as explained through this thesis, despite all the differences that Democratic and Republican presidents have showed during their terms in office, it

seems that a strategy based on realism is the real hallmark of any administration, when it comes to shaping China policy. Some of the presidents came to office with this conviction, while others had to adapt to it once in the Oval Office.

This work also tries to shed light on the role of Congress and of the National Security Council. Let's see Congress first.

There is debate about the role of Congress: for some it is crucial, its assertiveness makes China policy, for others it is just not as important as it used to be. Apparently, it seems that the latter is closer to reality. There were some moments in U.S.-China history in which Congress defied the President, in which it actually pushed the White House toward the policy that Capitol Hill wanted to implement. Congressional activism affected the presidencies of Carter, Bush and Clinton in different ways.

Today, Congress cannot be said to be the China policy maker; it is a check to the strategy of the White House. It reasserts itself when the policy of the Oval Office is not in line with (or even contradicts) American values and public opinion. However, sometimes, Congress actually made China policy, but that's a rarity. It happened with the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 and with the MFN linkage under Clinton in 1993 (although that was the strategy that also the President had adopted).

As for the rest, Congress just delegated to the White House and the NSC. The latter, along with the President, is the real China policy maker. All the most important decisions are taken at the National Security Council. The role of the National Security Advisor today is fundamental: it is not just about coordination, it is usually about having an extremely significant influence on the President. The role of the NSC has evolved through the decades and the role of the NSA along with it. When thinking of China policy, people like Kissinger, Brzezinski, Scowcroft, Berger

are worth keeping in mind. They may have acted in the shadows but they shaped the relationship for sure.

As this thesis demonstrates, personalities make a huge difference in the American decision making process. They are really an important element if the objective is to try to understand how China policy is made and who does it.

Even if it is not about institutions, interpersonal relations between the President and his team are of the utmost significance in order to get how some mechanisms work inside the China policy making in Washington, D.C.

This work also sheds light on two possible strategies to cope with China. Both are suggested by prominent Republicans: Kissinger and Friedberg. Their ideas are not one hundred percent conflicting but there are some points of divergence. With the help of some scholars interviewed for this thesis, the reader will find it easier to square the circle, confront different ideas and choose between competing strategies.

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INTERVIEWS

- Cohen Warren I., interview on October 10, 2013. Warren I. Cohen is a retired Professor and Senior scholar on American-East Asian relations (PhD from the University of Washington). He taught at the University of Maryland.
- DeTrani Joseph, interview on December 6, 2013. Ambassador DeTrani served as the Senior Advisor to the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), the Director of the National Counter Proliferation Center (NCPC), and the National Intelligence Manager for Counterproliferation (CP). Before this, he served at the Department of State as the Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks with North Korea and at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as Director for East Asia, Director for Europe, Director of Technical Services, Director of Public Affairs, Director of the Crime and Narcotics Center, and Executive Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence.

Roy Stapleton, interview on September 19, 2013. Ambassador Stapleton Roy is a senior U.S. diplomat specializing in Asian affairs. He graduated from Princeton University and became ambassador to Singapore (1984-1986), to the People's Republic of China (1991-1995) and to Indonesia (1996-1999). Roy is currently Vice Chairman of Kissinger Associates, Inc. In August 2008, Ambassador Roy was named Director of the Kissinger Institute for Chinese-US studies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Sutter Robert, interview on October 9, 2013. Professor Robert Sutter has a PhD from Harvard University, he has taught at Georgetown, George Washington, Johns Hopkins Universities and at the University of Virginia. Sutter's government career (1968-2001) involved work on Asian and Pacific affairs for the CIA, the Department of State and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Today he teaches "Practice of International Affairs" at the Elliott School of International Affairs.