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# THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CHINA: INVALIDITY OF CONVERGENCE AND INTEGRATION IN FACING AN XXI CENTURY CHINA

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**Abstract:** *The US faces many dilemmas in facing an XXI century China. The recent crisis that has occurred in the South China Sea and issues related to the trade war between the two global powers have significantly divided the positions of both states in world affairs. The US policy of engagement and coercion, forcing China into the US liberal order has shown slow progress. Therefore, it is critical to re-evaluate the US foreign policy strategy in facing an XXI century China, which shows discontent towards the values that are promoted by the US. This paper critically analyzes the US foreign policy approach to China, provides key elements of its success, and concludes the major issues faced throughout the process of interacting with the modern global superpower known as China.*

**Keywords:** *US Foreign Policy; Liberal International Order; China; Bilateral Relations; US-China Relations*

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, the US policy toward China has centered on engagement as a means to achieve key objectives. Throughout its implementation, we have seen that the relations have eventually reached its low point in the XXI century, marked with retaliatory measures amid the trade wars, and distinct positions in handling several major world crises. Many have questioned thus, whether the US engagement policy to China has failed, as it has failed to change China in ways the US had intended or hoped was built on wrong assumptions and unrealistic expectations. Throughout the years, the US seemed to fail to produce increased political and economic openness in China or buying China sufficiently to the liberal international order. By the end of the Obama administration, it was clear that the old policy of engagement wasn't working anymore, and that the US needed a different strategy towards China than the one that the US had pursued for the last 30 years.

The old policy of engagement was undergirded by the belief that China would gradually become more liberal more open, more integrated, and would broadly accept the existing international system. This paper though does not argue that the US foreign policy to China was a total or utter failure, nor does it argue that nothing good came from the engagement. This paper focuses on the US foreign policy's efficacy in the past decade, which has shown contrary to the hopes and expectations of the American people.

The surfacing of Chinese liberalism authoritarianism and revisionism that are relatively new and that run directly counter to US interests have occurred in a vast amount of dimensions of International politics. As we fast forward to the past decade, we need to answer how the policy of engagement fare during this period. During the Obama administration, we saw China as a partner, and furthermore, the US has sought to stabilize the relationship on several fronts. While there were some gains attained on transnational issues, the mode of engagement was not working in most critical aspects. Xi Jinping in the South China Sea has continued his efforts in militarizing the region, further advanced his land reclamations (Ba 2011, 270). China's years of support to North Korea has made it unable to apply the pressure needed to surpass the negotiation deadlock (Nanto and Manyin 2011, 96). As the US continues its pivot to Asia, China has continued to systematically undermine US alliances throughout the region, despite US efforts to engage China on security issues (Ji 2001, 390).

On political issues and human rights issues, Xi Jinping's record has been abysmal. Incredible human rights violations are occurring in Xinjiang now in Western China, leading to real moral atrocities (Baker2002, 51). All of the US past engagement to China has done only little to curb any of the mentioned behaviors, and has instead, created a permissive environment of Chinese assertiveness.

What makes the issue critical is that the US has no answer to what the United States should do if China steps outside of the expectations of the global order. Ultimately, the policy of engagement was a theory about how to prevent the China challenge, but it had no response when a China challenge arose, which is where we are today.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERPRETATING / DEBUNKING CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Several academics have argued not to worry with China's recent rise in global power status. The idea is simple, in which China's expanding power would most likely demand what the majority of states demand, and will not have a particularly liberal sense to their foreign policy. Furthermore, Beijing doesn't have designs on regional dominance or a sphere of influence or regional hegemony (Bijian 2005, 22). Academics that does not fear China's rise also state how.

Regardless of China's aspirations, there are huge barriers to their ability to expand their power and internal contradictions that may destroy China's differing interest in global order (Glaser and Medeiros 2007, 82). Internal contradictions within China that will slow its rise combined with external restraints including other major powers who don't want to live under a China-dominated region will lead China's strict ability to shape the region in the world even if it wanted to (Buzan 2010, 10).

Besides existing literature that argues not to fear China's rise, many academics have focused their arguments focusing on getting used to the current rise of China's global superpower. It is viewed that Chinese power in the XXI century as natural and legitimate (Glaser 2011, 82). A major argument of this is the Thucydides trap crowd, which argues that it's just too risky that war avoidance should be the principal aim of US-china policy, and that therefore, that should lead to a policy of accommodation given China's demonstrated ability to manipulate risk (Xuetong 2006, 33). It is thus ideal that we should just accept China's liberal sphere of influence and growing power because it's too dangerous to do otherwise (Xuetong 2010, 34).

The author believes that there are huge risks in an illiberal sphere of influence. Furthermore, it is obscure to believe that it wouldn't be such a big deal for the United States as we are already seeing the roots of this kind of a China-led sphere of influence taking order in parts of Asia and parts of the developing world (Shambaugh2014, 329). The result of that for the United States is weaker alliances, fewer security partners in a military force to operate at greater distances, US firms without access to markets, leading technologies disadvantaged by new standards investment rules and trading, regional institutions that are largely unable to resist Chinese coercion, and a steady decline in democracy and individual freedoms around the world.

The net result of all this if it is allowed to continue, the US will be a less secure and less prosperous nation. The United States would be less able to exert power in the world, so the stakes in the author's view are extremely high if we don't develop a more sophisticated strategy. The article argues that internal or external factors will not retard China's ability to dominate the region, especially in the absence of a stronger US strategy (Ikenberry 2008, 30).

We should assume that China's economy is going to slow down, and of course, we know it's growing several percentage points lower than what the government says it is. China furthermore is bound to face external resistance, but the reality is that its power is still expanding. The United States, with its allies and partners standing by its values, can prevent China from establishing an illiberal order, and the US can do so without provoking armed conflict. The policy of engagement predicated on convergence and integration is no longer valid in theory or practice. The China challenge of today is not the China challenge for which the policy of engagement was designed. Therefore the US will need a new approach.

### *The Partial Success of US Engagement Policy to China*

The parameter of success cannot be based on whether a foreign policy has successfully altered domestic developments in foreign countries. Such power is not within the power of diplomacy to conduct. Therefore, it would not be ideal to base failure on such prognostications. In regards to the issue of China, suggesting that engagement with China has failed to beg the question of what the alternatives are to engagement. If the engagement has failed, what then should the US policy be? Containment? Confrontation? These would be worst-case outcomes that would make conflict more likely magnify contradictions between the United States and the interests of the US allies, in particular, East Asia. It would further make it more difficult to seek a balance in East Asia that can accommodate the interests of both China and the United States.

The impact of US absence in the engagement of a state actor can be seen in the case of China during the period from 1949 to 1969 (Garver 2015, 23). What occurred during this period were sporadic and unproductive, which caused the Nixon administration to lose precious months trying to figure out how to communicate securely with Beijing. Despite the different channels that were engaged by Kissinger, none of which were secure because the US hadn't been engaged with China. What needs to be understood based on the past engagements is that the case of direct conflict between China and the United States is too dangerous for either country. Engagement thus provides a certain level of success for the US and China bilateral relations. Through engagement, the US swung China to the side of the US in the Cold War and gained access to the world's largest market.

The US consumers benefited from a flood of lower-cost higher quality goods, which helped keep inflation low (Xia 2006, 29). The US exposed vast numbers of China's current and future leaders to how modern systems of governance function, which in the process, this future and some of the current leaders became more conscious of the deficiencies of China's pre-modern form of governance, which is based on the outmoded concept that communist parties have the divine right to keep all power in their own hands without a legitimization process based on the consent of the governed.

The United States faces a fundamental policy choice regarding the strategy in dealing with China. Should the goal of the US policy be to preserve the traditional air and sea dominance in the western Pacific, or should the goal be the encouragement of responsible behavior by a more powerful and influential China? In this case, the US may find itself competing with China. A country that has shown consistency in its GDP growth, and has recently been much favored by the global South.

China is willing and eager to step into the global leadership role that the United States is moving away from. In the words of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese people have turned away from being passive to be inactive by mid-century. He projects that China will become a country whose comprehensive national power and international influence will be in the forefront. The Chinese People's Army will rank among the top militaries in the world and in his words, the Chinese nation then will stand tall among the nations of the world with an even more high-spirited attitude. That's the challenge.

It's far more than military Chinese outspending the US in every non-military sphere of comprehensive national power. The United States has poorly utilized the possibilities provided by the dominant position in the post-cold war world. The 2008 financial crisis and the exorbitant costs of the disruptive US military interventions in the Middle East have strained US budgetary resources and polarized the US society.

Despite such difficulties, the United States still has the world's more powerful and battle-tested military forces, an innovative and productive economy, superb tertiary education, and an ability to rise to challenges when all other possibilities have been exhausted. Then, the US-China relations should be in the center of the US foreign policy concerns and handled with realism and creativity. The current US national security strategy has designated China and Russia as revisionist powers, bent on replacing the current so-called liberal international order with one more to their liking. This is a flawed conception. China recognizes that the current order enabled its economy to grow at breathtaking speed in his speeches, President Xi Jinping has made clear, he's not out to upset the international order, but rather to adapt it and supplement it better to reflect the interests of China and other rising countries. It is critical to understand that international orders aren't static. If new countries rise, international orders have to adjust.

### *The US Failure in Engaging an XXI Century China*

The policy of engagement towards China over the last 30 years that included military balancing to prevent overt Chinese aggression, combined with economic diplomatic and commercial interactions under the assumption that those would lead to a convergence of the US and Chinese interests, would narrow differences and would enhance cooperation. Furthermore, it would do precisely the thing that Ambassador Roy identified as the goal of making China's behavior more responsible (Sutter 2017, 39).

The research though concludes that hasn't happened. The policy did not work in the South China Sea. In 2015, amid the PCA arbitration ruling, it was evident that the US could not figure out the puzzle of how to properly engage with China (Mincai 2013, 9). The question that was left unanswered was how to pressure China because simply pleading with them to abide by the ruling is not going to be enough or wagging your finger and telling them why abiding by international law is actually in their interest, in the long run, is not going to work. As the US faced the same dilemma in each crisis that surfaced in the South China Sea, the US policy decided that they were going to push them in the corner, and give them the political space they need to overtime accept that ruling.

What China did in response to the PCA arbitration is that they would not abide with the ruling, and would further continue their path they have been on. This is not a new issue, as the global community has seen this phenomenon take place from the Clinton Administration, Bush Administration, on to the Obama Administration. China not only continued its path, but the US further suffered by engaging in more dialogue with hopes of narrowing differences. That, of course, never took place.

The US needs to be looking for a new approach. The question of what are the alternatives is a good one, and that is the intellectual challenge of our era, and we should not fall back on old concepts and say well we don't like those strategies of old and therefore we can't abandon this strategy that isn't working. From a military perspective, the United States is not seeking dominance in East Asia. It's precisely seeking what ambassador Roy described as an environment in which there's some equilibrium in which no country can dominate the entire region and what we see now is a slide away from that the US policy of engagement was not producing that result.

The accommodation of the United States and the permissive environment that has created Chinese revisionism and assertiveness in the East China Sea in the South China Sea throughout parts of Asia is radically increasing. If the United States stood up for itself five years ago in the South China Sea and drawn a red line from some of this revisionist behavior, most of the cases we hear on the South China Sea would most probably be altered. But talking about the alternatives, it is critical to remark the idea that any engagement with China will always fail if the aim is to change China's internal behavior.

This aim has always failed, as the US couldn't do it in Haiti, and failed in Cuba. The US couldn't even prevent the refugees from raiding the US. Therefore, the US had to send troops to the border. It is critical to understand that when countries are scared, they behave badly in handling their domestic affairs. China is scared about some of its domestic problems, and it behaves badly. The United States can't straighten those types of questions out through engagement or non-engagement policies, so that's one aspect. The other aspect we need to address is the question of whether China is behaving differently than other rising powers, and the answer is, unfortunately, no, it's not. We have examples of Germany in Japan. Rising countries have certain patterns of behavior, and China is showing those patterns of behavior. So the trial challenge is how you deal with countries because when you get stronger and richer, you become more self-confident and you become more eager to have other people defer to your interests, and China is showing all of those characteristics.

Can the US deal with it, the answer is yes. Not every country falls into a Thucydides trap the United States more or less rose peacefully partly because we were off in the Western Hemisphere and the US weren't challenging their neighbors as the US were already in the hegemonic power not because of conquest, but because the colonial empires had vanished and the remaining countries were simply weaker than we were in some cases. Chile had a better Navy until the end of the 19th century which deterred the US from going to war with Chile.

The Westphalian system of nation-states is based on the concept that you deal with other countries in terms of their external behavior, and you do not interfere in their internal affairs. We have created other concepts such as humanitarian intervention which justify interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This is not a basis for an international principle because you can only have humanitarian interventions when the strong impose it on the weak and any system of international law and rules has to be based on equal treatment for all countries.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of US-China policy should be enhancing American competitiveness to prevent an illiberal Chinese sphere of influence in Asia. The discourse of the concept of preventing a sphere of influence sounds somewhat like containment. But this is different, as it is much. The less aggressive and confrontational approach towards China, rather than trying to integrate them into a liberal order which would violate so many of China's core interests. Therefore, an American-led, American dominated order, with China conforming to America's liberal institutions domestically and internationally. What the US foreign policy needs to focus on in regards to the issue of US-China foreign policy is to internally enhance American competitiveness to prevent this outcome of an illiberal Chinese sphere of influence.

The word containment is not useful because for one thing, and there were so many different versions of containment during the Cold War that people will associate the one that they think best or worst supports the argument.

The Cold War saw the United States going to the moon. The Cold War saw the greatest progression in US civil rights in the modern era. The Cold War saw national unity and purpose. The Cold War saw more bipartisanship. There were a lot of negative things about the Cold War, but the author believes that the conception of the Cold War is somehow this horrible period of American foreign policy is something we need to rethink. What is the period of American foreign policy that we look back on as such a great period of American leadership in the world if not the Cold War?

What we can discover in international affairs is that for international agreements to work, they have to serve the interests of each side. When a duly agreed and ratified agreement ends up serving the interests of only one side, usually you cannot get compliance by the other side. In other words, agreements amount to formalizing a common concept of behavior which each side sees are serving some national interest of its own.

The United States should set an example for the rest of the world of how the US was running the domestic affairs, and frankly, throughout US history, it was very effective. If the US seeks to have a responsible China behaving properly in East Asia, that's the way the United States needs to behave in East Asia, and that will influence Chinese behavior. But if we want to have the right to intervene wherever we choose without consulting or taking into account the interests of other countries, then China will use that as a model for its behavior, and it will. In conclusion, the US needs to compete without being confrontational. The actual bilateral confrontation between the United States and China is the least interesting and important part of the US-China competition and it's going to be taking place in other domains. 

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