

Changes in International Power—The Three Evolutions of U.S. Foreign Policy towards China

Ruolin Hu¹, Zhenyang Jin²

¹College of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, Qingdao, 266237, China

²College of Public Security Management, People's Public Security University of China, Beijing, 100000, China

Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of U.S. policy toward China since the founding of the People's Republic, analyzing how successive U.S. administrations have prioritized national interests in economic, security, and ideological dimensions. Initially hostile, U.S. policy shifted in the 1970s toward cautious engagement, seeking to leverage China as a strategic counterbalance to the Soviet Union. After normalization in 1979, U.S.-China relations evolved through economic cooperation, with the U.S. benefiting from growing trade and investment. However, China's rapid development eventually challenged U.S. dominance, leading to trade conflicts and heightened competition. Recent administrations have adopted a containment approach to curb China's influence across economic, military, and ideological spheres. While this strategy intends to secure U.S. interests, it has created financial and geopolitical tensions, highlighting uncertainties about the sustainability of containment in China's ongoing rise.

Keywords: U.S.-China Relations, National Interest, Strategic Competition, Containment Policy

1. Introduction

In the 2024 U.S. election, China became one of the few topics repeatedly mentioned in the presidential election debates. Realist theory holds that national interests are the starting and ending points of a nation's foreign policy. The specific content of national interests may vary over time, yet power remains the constant focal point of national struggles, serving as the core element in the realization of those interests. The United States, as the dominant country in the current international political and economic order, is extremely sensitive to any changes in the global political and economic order caused by changes in international power. The U.S. sees China's development and strength as a challenge to its dominant international political and economic order. Given the importance of the U.S.-China relationship, the relevant research literature is voluminous. Nevertheless, the majority of existing literature originates from an economic, trade, geostrategic, ideological, institutional, cultural, or similar perspective. These perspectives may have explanatory solid power when interpreting the historical slices. However, they need help to grasp the logic of the evolution of U.S. policy toward China at the macro level. This paper studies the historical evolution of U.S. foreign policy toward New China, analysing the internal law and trend of U.S. policy towards China through the perspective of international power change to grasp the future changes and development of China-U.S. relations.

After the founding of New China, successive U.S. administrations advocated different strategies toward China, but overall, U.S. policy toward China has evolved, resulting in crucial developments.

2. Enemy or partner

The founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, shattered the United States of America's dream of establishing a "strong China [1]" in line with its aspirations, and the United States of America's efforts to dominate China's destiny for many years came to an end.

The U.S. State Department convened a three-day conference of experts on the Far East in the same month, at which the overwhelming majority of opinions favored recognition of the new China [2]. The hardliners, on the other hand, supported the anti-communist and pro-U.S. Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek and opposed Communist China. Furthermore, a minority of participants advocated for a flexible response to the China issue within the context of the U.S.-Soviet standoff. This approach contrasts with

the tendency to perceive China as an adversary and instead emphasizes a wait-and-see approach, allowing the situation to evolve organically.

Proponents in the U.S. for recognizing and engaging with the new China argued that the latter was dependent on U.S. assistance. They noted that newborn China was deficient in capital, raw materials, industrial equipment, technology, and a modern administrative system for domestic development. Furthermore, they believed that the U.S. had the capacity to address these deficiencies and could impose conditions on its support. Based on the above considerations, in May 1949, Acheson announced three conditions for the recognition of the new China: de facto control of the territory and administration of the country, the ability and willingness to assume international obligations, and general acceptance by the people. The second of these conditions has aroused strong opposition from the new China, the United States implying that the new Chinese government would inherit the existing Chinese and foreign treaty obligations, contrary to the new China's diplomatic strategy of cleaning houses before inviting guests.

The outbreak of the Korean conflict made it necessary for the United States to give up the option of contact with Communist China. The United States believed that China's campaign against the United States and North Korea was at the behest of Stalin. In August, the United States issued a White Paper on Sino-U.S. Relations, which denied the victory of the new China and questioned the legitimacy of it, tried to isolate the People's Republic of China in the international community and persuaded the Western Allies and Asian countries to join the United States in forming an unrecognizable China. Western allies and Asian countries to join the U.S. in forming a "united front" of non-recognition of the new China. Relations between China and the U.S. deteriorated rapidly, and an all-out confrontation began that lasted more than 20 years.

The Truman administration's choices were partly in the interests of the U.S. post-war policy of global expansion. A 1948 report from the United States National Security Council clarified, "In the light of the chaotic situation in China, the first practical objective in the short term is to avoid complete Communist control of China." "The basic long-term objective of the United States in China is to promote a stable representative government to lead an independent, united China that maintains goodwill with the United States and is capable of deterring possible Soviet aggression in the Far East." [3] The U.S. supported Chiang Kai-shek's government to safeguard its post-World Conflict II Asian interests against communism. However, China's rapid reversal from the Soviet Union and its emergence as a major player in the socialist camp greatly weakened U.S. influence in Asia and had far-reaching consequences for the U.S.-Soviet standoff pattern. Measures such as rearming Japan and securing the defense line in Korea make up for the strategic losses brought about by the failure of its policy towards China. Meanwhile, in the Indo-China region, the U.S. was forced to intervene directly in the confrontation with communist forces, especially in Vietnam.

The hostile policy of the United States towards New China also failed to achieve the desired effect. The outbreak of the Korean conflict was a critical turning point in the failure of the United States to contain the new China, and the failure of the United States exposed the limitations of its means of containment. In the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of the wave of decolonization, more and more Third World countries resonated with China's position, and the U.S. diplomatic isolation then collapsed Soviet support for New China, further weakening U.S. efforts to contain Chinese influence. At the same time, America's depletion in Vietnam put it on the defensive in the global struggle for supremacy, weakening the resources and flexibility of its China policy and leading to a rigid and ineffective containment policy. Ultimately, the emotional burden of "losing China" and the fear of communist expansion in Asia intensified in the U.S. political class and public, further limiting the room for adjustment of U.S. policy toward China.

3. From confrontation to normalization

Nixon was inaugurated at the White House in early 1969 when the U.S. was less favorable than it had been at the beginning of its post-World Conflict II victory, both domestically and in the broader context of U.S.-Soviet rivalry. The Vietnam conflict had plunged the United States into a bottomless quagmire and inspired unprecedented social unrest within the country. The large-scale post-war foreign aid and significant military obligations overseas brought a heavy economic burden to the United States, resulting in a massive outflow of dollars and a steady decline in gold reserves.

At the same time, Western Europe and Japan re-emerged, posing a threat to the United States's position. In Europe, the de Gaulle government of France pursued détente without the US's consent, alienated France from the Western alliance, and dealt a severe blow to the US leadership of the Western

alliance. From 1971 onwards, the United States began to run a deficit in its foreign trade, which had historically been in surplus. Thus, the financial situation of the United States became even more complex and deepened the dollar crisis. In the summer of 1971, Nixon's announcement of the New Economic Policy provided some relief to the severe economic situation facing the United States. However, it signaled the beginning of the disintegration of the Bretton Woods system, which was centered on the U.S. dollar.

When Nixon came to power, he began to downplay the ideological criterion and return to Roosevelt's criterion of strength. On July 6, 1971, Nixon acknowledged in a speech in Kansas City that there had been a "very great change" in the world, with the emergence of "five centers of power" [4] - the United States, Western Europe, Japan, the Soviet Union, and China. The United States was no longer "in a position of great prominence or total dominance." Under these circumstances, "the United States Government must first take steps to end the isolation of Chinese mainland." The Nixon administration saw the U.S. strategic interest in containing the Soviet Union and extricating itself from Vietnam as requiring more help from China.

In 1969, under the direction of the Nixon administration, the U.S. National Security Council embarked on a systematic assessment of China's policies. In specific discussions, many national security advisors, led by Henry Kissinger, advocated caution in relations with China, arguing that China's military expansion and communist ideology posed a threat to the United States and its allies.[5] They were concerned that a relaxed policy could weaken U.S. influence in Asia. Kissinger insisted on avoiding recognizing the Beijing regime to prevent it from affecting peripheral stability and security. Many officials supported Kissinger's "cautious containment" approach, especially those who wanted to maintain a tough stance toward China.

Prominent China expert John Stuart has suggested that "containment but not isolation" would be more realistic. This would mean maintaining some pressure on China without cutting off diplomatic channels of communication altogether and even opening up the possibility of bilateral contacts without formally recognizing the regime in Beijing.

The NSC report noted that "maintaining the status quo may not effectively respond to our long-term problems with Communist China [6]." On several occasions, Kissinger proposed "cautious openness" and informal engagement with China without compromising invested interests, which laid the policy foundation for the "ping-pong diplomacy" that followed. Eventually, the NSC gradually shifted to easing tensions under the assessment of the Senior Review Group but remained conservative on other issues.

Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in July 1971 ushered in an era of engagement with China. The U.S. hoped to bring China out of its isolation through trade and investment and to integrate China into the global economy. In February 1972, President Nixon's visit to China marked a break in the mutual isolation between China and the U.S. that had existed since the founding of the new China. The U.S. and China issued a joint communiqué in Shanghai on February 28. After China and the US opened their doors to each other, high-level contacts and policy communications continued to advance, and U.S. dignitaries frequently came to China. Though not diplomatic representations, the liaison offices set up by the two sides in each other's capitals gradually became an essential channel for communication and handling of affairs between the two sides.

The rapprochement not only reduced the risk of direct military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union and accelerated the end of the Vietnam conflict but also led to coordination on several major international issues. In 1971, U.S.-China coordination at the United Nations resulted in the restoration of the People's Republic of China to a permanent seat on the Security Council, and U.S.-China cooperation on the issue of nonproliferation against the Soviet Union. Improved U.S.-China relations increased U.S. flexibility in global affairs and enabled it to gain some initiative in conflicts in Third World regions. At the same time, the U.S. economy recovered from stagnation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a process in which U.S.-Chinese trade also contributed to U.S. economic growth. Under the combined effect of Sino-American cooperation and economic improvement, the United States gradually reversed its disadvantage in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry and secured a valuable strategic buffer period. Improving Sino-U.S. relations during this period helped the U.S. adjust its global strategic layout. It enhanced its international status to a certain extent, laying the foundation for the final victory of the U.S.-Soviet Standoff.

4. Engagement or containment

On the cusp of the U.S.-Soviet standoff's conclusion, U.S.-China relations experienced a significant transformation, initiated by President Nixon's 1972 visit to China, which facilitated the normalization of bilateral relations and a gradual enhancement of economic, trade, and diplomatic connections. This culminated in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1979, fostering a degree of strategic alignment between the two nations in their collective effort to counter the Soviet Union, leading to a phase of U.S.-China cooperation aimed at containing Soviet influence. As the U.S.-Soviet standoff drew to a close, between the late 1980s and 1991, U.S.-China relations expanded further in nonproliferation and regional security, providing the U.S. with strategic support to counterbalance the Soviet Union in the Asia-Pacific region.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States became the sole superpower and not only established its global dominance in the political, economic, and technological spheres but also gained the opportunity to re-examine its policy toward China. Entering the 1990s, the United States experienced rapid economic growth, rapid development of Internet technology, and scientific and technological innovation, and consolidated its global hegemony with these advantages. In the new situation after the end of the U.S.-Soviet standoff, the U.S. policy toward China gradually showed a duality. On the one hand, it continued to promote China-U.S. economic and trade relations, and on the other hand, it began to promote the policies of containment and "transformation" under the framework of "human rights" and "universal values" reform policy. The United States has gradually regarded China as a potential adversary that needs to be guided and restricted, and the focus of its China policy has begun to shift to restricting China's strategic development.

Before the end of the U.S.-Soviet standoff, some scholars had already raised the issue of the need to reposition Sino-American relations. After the June 4 Incident, China's image in the United States plummeted, with opinion polls showing that the American public's favorable opinion of China had dropped dramatically. In 1991, after the end of the U.S.-Soviet standoff, renowned political scientist Samuel Huntington viewed China's rise as a potential threat, analogizing the rise of Germany and Japan and suggesting that China could challenge America's global position [7]. The subsequent book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, viewed China as one of the rivals of "Western civilization", a view that has provided theoretical support for the China policy of some of the mainstream U.S. elites. The book published by the U.S. National Security Council, is about the rise of China as a potential threat to the United States.

Nonetheless, the U.S. post-Cold Conflict policy towards China did not move towards full-scale confrontation but instead chose a strategy based on "engagement". After Clinton came to power in 1993, he initially attempted to pressure China by linking China's Most Favored Nation status to human rights issues through the "528" executive order. After Clinton came to power in 1993, he initially tried to link China's MFN status with human rights issues through the "528" executive order to exert pressure on China. However, due to practical interests, this policy based on containment failed, and the U.S. has gradually adjusted its policy towards China. Under the dual influence of China's rise and the development of globalization, the Clinton administration formulated a policy of "engagement", hoping to lead China to carry out internal reforms through economic and cultural exchanges and to push it closer to Western values in order to achieve the so-called "peaceful evolution". On the surface, this policy was a gesture of friendship towards China, but in essence, the United States looked forward to the gradual transformation of China's internal politics through engagement.

The United States has always viewed engagement as a tool for realizing its strategic interests, attempting to "shape" China through trade and cultural exchanges with China, and promoting internal changes in China in line with Western interests through the introduction of a market economy, economic liberalization, and civil society exchanges. This policy not only serves the domestic economic needs of the United States, such as opening up markets for American products and creating jobs but also aims to change the domestic political environment in China in order to weaken its potential threat to the United States.

After the Clinton administration, the Bush administration adopted a more aggressive policy towards China. However, after the outbreak of the September 11 attacks, for the sake of counter-terrorism, the Bush administration's policy towards China was still based on cooperation. The easing of Sino-U.S. relations during the Bush administration has brought the United States many benefits. Firstly, in counter-terrorism, China and the U.S. have enhanced coordination in information sharing and financial tracking through cooperation, which has helped the U.S. combat terrorism more effectively and mitigate global security threats. Second, in the economic field, improving China-U.S. relations has brought market

opportunities for U.S. companies, boosting the rapid growth of China-U.S. trade, especially the rapid growth of U.S. investment in China, which has become a booster of U.S. economic growth. At the same time, the deepening of China-U.S. economic and trade relations has helped the U.S. ease domestic inflationary pressures to a certain extent. Again, the two sides have also cooperated on regional security and the North Korean nuclear issue. China has played a vital role in the Six-Party Talks, which have supported U.S. diplomatic strategy in Northeast Asia and helped the U.S. maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S.-China détente has provided the United States with tangible benefits in counter-terrorism, economics, and security and laid the groundwork for the United States to reach broader multilateral cooperation in promoting the international order.

5. Summary

Since entering the 21st century, the U.S. policy towards China has undergone many adjustments. After taking office in 2009, the Obama administration, faced with the regional and global challenges posed by China's rapid rise, put forward a "rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific" strategy. The core objective of this strategy is to balance China's growing influence by strengthening its diplomatic, economic, and military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, the Obama administration has actively promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership to build a U.S.-led economic and trade framework for the Asia-Pacific region that excludes China, thereby consolidating U.S. economic dominance in the region. At the same time, the U.S. has strengthened military cooperation with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and other Asia-Pacific allies to enhance the regional security architecture and counterbalance China.

Although the "rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific" strategy has enhanced the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific to a certain extent, this policy has not fully realized the expected results. Firstly, domestic political constraints have limited the Obama administration's investment of resources in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the lack of economic support, making it difficult to implement the "return to the Asia-Pacific" fully. Second, the 2016 U.S. National Security Report pointed out that China's development poses a potential challenge to the U.S. global position [8], which also reflects the essential attitude of the U.S. towards China policy after the U.S.-Soviet standoff has gradually changed. Although the Obama administration did not take a full-scale confrontation with China, vigilance over China's rise has gradually risen, paving the way for a more assertive policy shift under Trump.

After Trump's election in 2016, there was a significant shift in policies towards China. He put forward the "America First" policy, openly supported the "China Threat Perception" and believed that China's economic rise seriously infringed on U.S. interests, and repeatedly accused China of "stealing" U.S. employment opportunities. The Trump administration has adopted a series of sanctions against China to weaken China's influence in the global supply chain and promote the return of the U.S. manufacturing industry. In December 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy Report defined China for the first time as a "revisionist country" and a "strategic competitor" and explicitly defined China as a "strategic competitor". In May 2020, the Trump administration released the U.S. Strategic Orientation towards China, further establishing the new confrontation policy framework. In May 2020, the Trump administration released the U.S. Strategic Orientation toward China, further establishing a new confrontation policy framework toward China.

This shift puts the U.S. formally on the path of comprehensive containment of China. The Trump administration's normalization of sanctions, large-scale trade conflicts, and crackdowns targeting the technology industry have sought to break China's economic rise and thus preserve U.S. strategic advantage. However, such policies have not only failed to improve U.S. trade with China significantly but have led to internal conflict and the alienation of U.S. allies in some areas. Although the Trump administration's China policy has increased the intensity of U.S.-China rivalry, it has not fundamentally realized the U.S. goal of comprehensive containment of China. However, to a certain extent, it has exposed the deep-seated disagreements within the U.S. about how to respond to China's rise.

Successive U.S. administrations have always centered their China policy on national interests, gradually shifting from economic cooperation and limited engagement to full-scale containment. Economically, the United States benefited from bilateral trade and investment in China after establishing diplomatic relations between China and the United States. However, with China's economic rise and industrial upgrading, the United States felt its global competitive advantage had been impacted. It ultimately initiated a trade conflict under Trump to weaken China's economic clout and safeguard its interests. In terms of security, from the U.S.-Soviet standoff to the present, the United States has always

regarded China as a potential threat and constructed a military alliance system in Asia. After the U.S.-Soviet standoff, it strengthened its military deployment in the Asia-Pacific and exerted frequent pressure on sensitive issues to consolidate its strategic dominance. Ideologically, the U.S. considers itself superior in its political system and values and is often biased against China's socialist system, attempting to influence China through support for opposing forces, cultural infiltration, and other means.

6. Prospect

The current U.S. policy of total containment of China has always been highly inherited, even though it varies in specific tactics due to partisan differences. The intensification of U.S.-China competition has not only put significant pressure on both sides' economic, scientific, and technological development but also negatively impacted the global supply chain, the trading system, and geo-stability. It is worth pondering that the containment measures taken by the United States, while intended to curb China's development, have also brought about a series of consequences, such as rising inflationary pressures, damage to corporate interests, and tensions among allies. In China's comprehensive national strength, which continues to rise, whether this containment strategy can achieve its goals is still being determined. Can the United States genuinely maintain its global dominance by containing China?

It should be noted that if China and the United States cooperate, both countries and the world will benefit; if China and the United States confront each other, both countries and the world will suffer [9]. Promoting the healthy and stable development of China-United States relations is the common expectation of the two peoples and the international community. In the strategic competition between China and the United States, China has always been a "reluctant opponent" [10]. China opposes the U.S. one-sided definition of Sino-U.S. relations in terms of competition and has no interest in hegemonic rivalry. In April 2021, China stated at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021 that "no matter what level of development China reaches, it will never claim hegemony, expand, or seek spheres of influence, nor engage in an arms race. China will continue to be a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of international order." [11] In the future, if China and the United States can put into practice the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation, focus on cooperation, and manage their differences, they will surely be able to overcome the challenges currently encountered in China-United States relations. This will push China-United States relations in a healthy and stable direction, and usher in a brighter outlook for China-United States relations

References

- [1] James F. Byrnes. *Policies for Peace and Security Speech delivered in New York, November 27, 1945.*
- [2] Zi Zhongyun. *The Origins and Development of US Policy Towards China 1945-1950.* Chongqing Publishing House, 1987 edition, p. 265.
- [3] United States National Security Council. *NSC 34: Position of the United States with Respect to Communist Threat in China, 1948.*
- [4] Richard Milhous Nixon. *Kansas City Speech.* National Archives, July 6, 1971.
- [5] Kissinger Henry. *Diplomacy.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- [6] United States National Security Council. *NSC-68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950.*
- [7] Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations.* *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1993, pp. 22-49.
- [8] National Security Strategy. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.* US Government, February 2015.
- [9] People's Daily Online. *Foreign Ministry on China-U.S. Prime Minister's call: China-U.S. cooperation will benefit both countries and the world, September 10, 2021.*
- [10] Wang Dong. *Reluctant Rival: Beijing's Approach to US-China Competition.* *Global Asia*, Vol.16 No.4, 2021.
- [11] Xinhua Press. *China will never claim hegemony, expand or seek spheres of influence, April 20, 2021.*