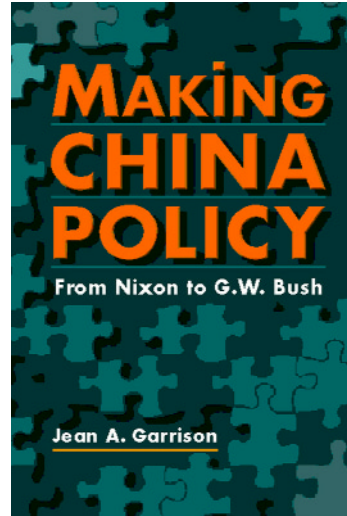


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Making China Policy:
From Nixon to G. W. Bush

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Introduction: The China Policy Conundrum

China represents the most important future bilateral relationship for the United States, but no country seems less understood and no policy has generated more consistent controversy for presidents. The Sino-American relationship balances diverse policy interests such as security in East Asia, including the Taiwan question, trade and commercial relations, arms proliferation, and human rights. Policy formulation is fought over by various groups, including executive-branch actors such as the National Security Council (NSC), State Department, Treasury Department, Commerce Department, the White House, and the National Economic Council (NEC) on the one hand and domestic political actors such as the U.S. Congress and powerful lobbying groups on the other, each having a stake in the policymaking game. The breadth of the bureaucratic and policy interests involved provides a daunting background for effective policymaking and modern diplomacy.

More than other state-to-state interactions, U.S.-China relations have been a love-hate relationship represented in recent years by highs such as solidarity in the war on terror after the bombings of September 11, 2001, to the lows produced by the U.S. bombing of China's Belgrade embassy in 1999. Misperceptions of China abound, with overly optimistic assessments of their friendship (and what this means) on one side and inflated assessments of their hostility or threat to U.S. interests on the other. This debate is not unique to either Democrats or Republicans but instead represents a chronic problem deeply embedded in the domestic policy debate on China.

This debate gains momentum with each new presidential election cycle. During the 2004 presidential campaign, Democrats and Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry argued that President George W. Bush's policies had led to historic trade imbalances that hurt U.S. business as well as the outsourcing of tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs. In 2000 and 1996, respectively, the Republicans accused Democrats and President Bill Clinton of poor stewardship and appeasing a likely aggressor (China) while selling out a U.S. friend (Taiwan). In 1992, after Tiananmen Square, George H.W. Bush was accused by Democrats of coddling the "butchers of Beijing" for the purposes of a larger strategic alliance. What these examples show is a recurring pattern of hostility toward China—and those who advocate for engagement with China—in the domestic political context from both sides of the political spectrum. Especially since Tiananmen Square, where many U.S. illusions were shattered, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which ended the strategic imperative for the anti-Soviet alliance, critics from multiple perspectives have aggressively attacked the U.S. engagement policy.

Explaining the Volatility in the U.S.-China Relationship

Explanations of U.S. foreign policy behavior in general, and toward China specifically, can be categorized based on the level of analysis (i.e., the system, nation-state, or individual) from which different studies begin.¹ Focusing on the system level, people assess China's future role in the world as a force for stability or instability based on different operating assumptions held by pessimists and optimists about the nature of international politics. The pessimists discuss power politics and assume states act in their self-interest to increase their power relative to others. This is a zero-sum, self-help world that requires constant vigilance to survive. In the optimistic, neoliberal world, states operate in a web of interdependence where rules and norms of behavior constrain the actions of states. Economic interdependence creates an environment in which states can seek peaceful resolution to problems for mutual gain. Thus categorizations of China as alternately enemy or friend represent very different assessments of strategic realities, each with different implications for the opportunities for cooperation or conflict in East Asia. Some call for assertive containment of the Chinese "threat," while others argue for continued engagement to promote mutual interests.²

These characterizations reflect two ends of a policy-choice spectrum, with most mainstream analyses somewhere in between.

Second, at the domestic or state level, regardless of which political party is in the White House, the struggle for the China agenda is usually one between members of Congress who represent competing interests (and corresponding lobbying groups) and the administration, which focuses on the general health of the bilateral relationship. As the number of interest groups has blossomed, the debate has reflected the narrow political agendas of competing groups. Early on, the pro-Taiwan lobby (the original China lobby) was the only major lobbying group represented, and historically it was the most successful in shaping the policy agenda. This group pushed forward a military alliance with Taiwan in the 1950s and shaped the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979 that has kept a *de facto* military alliance in place despite normalized relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Through the 1970s, this group had numerous anti-Communist friends in Congress and, since the early 1990s, prodemocracy conservatives unwilling to abandon a long-term friend to threats from an authoritarian state. Other influential groups representing interests from human rights and religious freedom to nonproliferation have flourished since Tiananmen Square and placed pressure on presidents to elevate their particular issues to a more prominent place in the bilateral dialogue. On the other side of the debate, however, as the U.S.-China business relationship has flourished, a strong pro-China business lobby has developed to offset China's critics.³

Third, at the individual level, executive-branch policymakers come to the table with particular preferences based on their view of how to balance their own needs with strategic and domestic imperatives.⁴ In complex foreign policy problems such as U.S. policy toward the PRC, which involve uncertainty, political controversy, and conflicting values, members of decision groups like the president's inner circle struggle to define the nature of the problem and build consensus for particular policy choices. Focusing on foreign policy advisers as strategic actors within a group context provides understanding about what influences discrete policy decisions. From this perspective, we assume that multiple actors have potential influence in a group but also that there are formal and informal opportunities and constraints on their influence.

This study begins by focusing on one piece of the diverse policy picture discussed above—the study of advisory groups and decision-making—to understand the inputs into presidential decisions on China. What follows is a look at how framing policy options at this level bal-

ances internal, domestic, and international imperatives in efforts to build consensus for such options.⁵

Characteristics of the Presidential Advisory Process

The classic works in the study of advisory systems by Richard Tanner Johnson and Alexander George describe an advisory structure and process based on the formal structure and patterns of interaction among advisers. They differentiate among formalistic (or hierarchical) systems, competitive systems, and collegial systems. In the hierarchical or closed advisory system, national security or other central advisers can exclude rivals from important decisions. In contrast, the more open competitive system, which pits advisers against one another, and the collegial system allow many individuals to participate and influence policy debates in a system with multiple advocates.⁶

The focus on group dynamics provides insight into potential interaction patterns in presidential advisory systems. Irving Janis's work on conformity-seeking behavior in his groupthink analysis and Graham Allison's work on infighting among advisers in the bureaucratic politics tradition present two distinct modes of thinking about how group interaction can determine policy outcomes.⁷ Although Janis and Allison explain different interaction patterns in the decision context, they do share an emphasis on multiple actors contributing to the decision process and triggering different policy outcomes. Thus group interaction patterns ranging from patterns of conformity (for example, groupthink) to extreme conflict (naysaying or stalemate), with hybrids in between, shape what ideas emerge and how they are discussed.⁸

Third, presidential predispositions and preferences shape the advisory structures and interaction patterns that develop. For example, highly cognitive, complex leaders seem to prefer more-open advisory systems and are more tolerant of multiple perspectives on issues than those with lower levels of cognitive complexity.⁹ While cognitively complex individuals are less likely to resort to simplified, black-and-white thinking, they are more prone to indecisiveness and deliberative decision-making styles. Less complex leaders are less inclined to examine multiple policy options. They foster advisory systems that downplay active involvement by advisers who present divergent policy options.¹⁰ Additionally, some presidents are more knowledgeable, interested, and motivated than others to participate in the decisionmaking process.

When stakes are high or their interest is piqued, however, presidents and central advisers are more likely to be involved in specific decision processes.

The presidential administrations of Richard Nixon through George W. Bush offer important points of comparison based upon the factors delineated above (i.e., the degree of centralization of each advisory system, the nature of group dynamics, and the degree of presidential involvement).¹¹ Nixon had the greatest degree of centralization with his hierarchical and closed advisory system. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's right-hand man, handled policymaking through a series of back-channel contacts that circumvented the State Department and held policy initiatives tightly within the White House. Although George H.W. Bush's system was less formal than Nixon's, it also was centralized to the White House and a few key advisers the president trusted. Similarly, George W. Bush's system has been concentrated in the White House, with great authority given to Vice President Dick Cheney. President Jimmy Carter, by contrast, organized an open system similar to Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, each of whom developed decentralized systems with multiple advisers involved in the decision process. Bill Clinton went even further than previous presidents in broadening the advisory circle to form a National Economic Council whose jurisdiction overlapped the NSC on many general and China policy issues.

The level of conflict in the inner circle has varied across each administration. Both Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush seemed to organize and maintain collegial systems that fostered consensus policies rather than conflict. In general, Secretary of State James Baker was Bush's chief action officer and major source of foreign policy advice, while the national security adviser managed the NSC and served as an honest broker presenting views objectively to the president.¹² On the surface, Nixon's hierarchical advisory organization and use of the back channel seemed to circumvent opposition and avoid confrontation. Although deep divisions developed many times, they had little effect on how the policy process proceeded because they occurred well outside the inner circle. On the other hand, Presidents Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush were plagued by infighting. These fights reflected deep ideological divides that had the potential to escalate over time. Carter's system, which placed him in the center of a spokes-in-the-wheel advisory structure, for example, fostered competition rather than collegial relations because of the different interpretations of the Soviet threat between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and

National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.¹³ Reagan's loose, cabinet-style system gave advisers flexibility in day-to-day policymaking but created a situation that led to high levels of infighting and turmoil among central advisers (such as Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, and the White House staff), which created a contentious foreign policy environment.¹⁴ Clinton's administration was open to more diverse perspectives because it welcomed new players to the inner circle, while George W. Bush's administration was served by rival factions with little inclination toward reconciliation.

The degree of presidential involvement (motivated by level of interest and expertise) has also varied across these administrations.¹⁵ Both Nixon and George H.W. Bush had considerable experience in foreign policy and a direct interest in Sino-American relations. Nixon was heavily committed as the architect of rapprochement, and George H.W. Bush, as head of the U.S. liaison office in China under President Ford, became committed through his direct involvement in implementing the policy. Both also had compiled impressive foreign policy resumes before entering office.¹⁶ In contrast, other presidents were much less involved or attentive for various reasons. While President Carter was very attentive and detail oriented, he had no direct interest in China and was concerned that normalization could interfere with his arms control agenda. Reagan and George W. Bush were hands-off administrators who were disengaged from daily operations of the policy process and initially were reluctant to embrace China as an important priority. For Clinton, foreign policy and consequently China were of peripheral interest; he was a novice in traditional foreign policy issues while international economic policy and domestic policy were his strengths.¹⁷

Taken together, these six administrations—Nixon/Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush—offer an opportunity to study diverse advisory systems and how the resulting decisionmaking processes shaped presidential policy choices on China.

The China Policy Puzzle

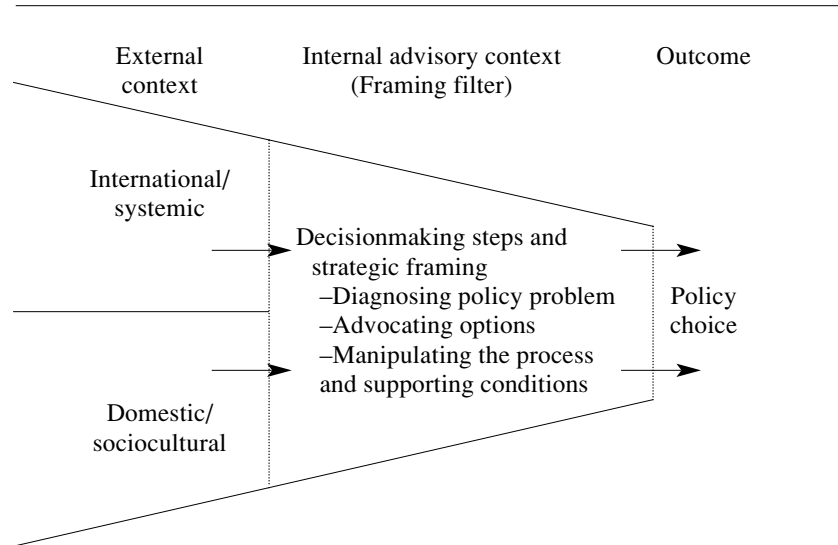
The challenge for this study is to see how the decisionmaking focus illustrated above can explain when, why, how, and to what degree China has been an “us,” a “them,” or something in between in U.S. policy. The answer to these questions changes depending on who made the deci-

sion, their perceptions of China, and the context within which they operated. On the surface, there seems to be general continuity in engagement with China since Nixon, but persistent political fights and repeated controversies reveal the struggle to maintain a stable relationship.¹⁸ I will explore the following questions to help explain how engagement policy evolved in each administration.

1. What are the patterns of continuity and change in U.S. policy toward China from Richard Nixon to the present? How have dramatic events such as the end of the Cold War and the Tiananmen Square massacre, as well as domestic political circumstances, affected policy continuity and change?
2. How do internal decisionmaking processes affect the making of China policy and the question of policy continuity and change? How and why have foreign policy decisionmakers defined the China problem and structured their policy frames to build support for their policy choices? What is the president's role in the strategic framing process?
3. To what degree can a decisionmaking perspective explain the making of U.S. policy toward China relative to other domestic political and systemic explanations?

Figure 1.1 presents a way to conceptualize the interaction between various levels of analysis that provide the context for decisions and possible policy choices available to leaders. In this model, policy decisions are shown to result from international and domestic factors filtered by a particular decisionmaking context and process that shapes how policy options are defined and presented to the president. The framing process, outlined in greater detail in Chapter 2, serves as the filtering variable to understand the interaction between those who make decisions and the context within which decisions are made. This study posits that policy decisions result from decisionmakers balancing personal, political, and policy interests against the symbolic constraints and opportunities within the domestic political context and international system.

The first step is to explore how policy problems are defined, options are framed, and choices are made. In Chapter 2, these steps are explored in more detail to provide a framework for analyzing each administration's China policy. Chapters 3–5 focus on the building of the general engagement frame through Presidents Nixon/Ford, Carter, and Reagan. Chapters 6–9 study continuity and change in that frame after the Cold War and in the post–Tiananmen Square environment with

Figure 1.1 The Context for Strategic Framing

Presidents George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. Case studies from these six administrations provide an opportunity to explore important patterns in U.S. policy toward China.

Notes

1. The most influential framework in foreign policy is the levels-of-analysis approach that emerged from Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War*, which distinguished between three different images of war in international politics: the individual, nation-state, and the system. Later work by James Rosenau, such as his "Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy," separated the national level into separate societal and governmental levels, while others, such as Irving Janis in *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* and this work, suggest a small group level as a starting point for analyzing foreign policy behavior. For a recent discussion of new research trends in foreign policy analysis, see Jean A. Garrison (ed.), "Foreign Policy Analysis in 20/20: A Symposium."

2. In the mid-1990s, various articles in *Foreign Affairs* and elsewhere articulated policy choices in these black-and-white terms. For example, see Richard Bernstein and Russ Munro, "China I: The Coming Conflict with America," and Robert Ross, "China II: Beijing as a Conservative Power."

3. For a general discussion of how domestic political factors shape for-

eign policy, see Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick (eds.), *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*. For a discussion of domestic determinants of China policy, see Robert Sutter, *The China Quandary: Domestic Determinants of U.S. China Policy, 1972–1982*.

4. In international relations most researchers are familiar with Robert Putnam's characterization of the two-level game, where decisionmakers must balance domestic considerations with international imperatives when making policy choices. From a foreign policy analysis perspective, however, this is "old wine in a new bottle." This present study works from the perspective of central decisionmakers who must account for personal and bureaucratic factors in addition to domestic and strategic environments.

5. See Jean Garrison, *Games Advisors Play: Foreign Policy in the Nixon and Carter Administrations*, for an explanation of advisers as independent actors and the manipulation tactics at their disposal.

6. See Alexander George, *Presidential Decision Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*; Richard Tanner Johnson, *Managing the White House*; Cecil V. Crabb Jr. and Kevin Mulcahy, *Presidents and Foreign Policy Making: From FDR to Reagan*.

7. Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*; Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed.; Janis, *Groupthink*. In explaining policy fiascoes such as John F. Kennedy's Bay of Pigs decision, Janis concludes that group decisions can limit options and lead to suboptimal policy choices. In Janis's case studies, policymakers fail to achieve their goals because group-think symptoms pressure members of a group into consensus-seeking behavior to the point that tolerance for dissenting viewpoints is reduced. On the other hand, the "pulling and hauling" illustrated in Graham Allison's analysis allows individuals' diverse parochial goals, beliefs, and motives to compete for influence as they work to overcome their opposition.

8. Eric K. Stern and Bengt Sundelius, "Understanding Small Group Decisions in Foreign Policy: Process Diagnosis." For a recent review of the study of small groups in foreign policy analysis, see Jean Garrison, "Foreign Policy Decisionmaking and Group Dynamics: Where We've Been and Where We're Going."

9. People who are high in cognitive complexity are more likely to be multidimensional in their thinking and more flexible in their responses to problems. They are able to analyze (i.e., differentiate) a situation into many constituent elements and then explore connections and potential relationships among various factors. Complexity theory assumes that the more an event can be differentiated and its parts considered in novel relationships, the more flexible the person can be and the more refined the response and successful the solution. For an explanation of the power of the cognitive approach see Jerel Rosati, "The Power of Human Cognition in the Study of World Politics."

10. For a comprehensive explanation of the linkage between the characteristics of the president and his advisory system, see Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in*

Foreign Affairs, and Margaret Hermann and Thomas Preston, “Presidents, Leadership Style, and the Advisory Process.”

11. See John Burke and Fred Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam in 1954 and 1965*.

12. George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 17–19; James A. Baker III, with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989–1992*, 42; Kevin Mulcahy, “The Bush Administration and National Security Policy-making: A Preliminary Assessment.”

13. Garrison, *Games Advisors Play*, 11–15; Jerel Rosati, *The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior*.

14. Betty Glad, “Black and White Thinking: Ronald Reagan’s Approach to Foreign Policy”; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*.

15. When discussing presidential leadership styles, Thomas Preston in *The President and His Inner Circle* describes prior experience/expertise as one factor that influences presidential leadership style, along with a president’s need for power and his cognitive complexity. Focusing on a president’s expertise and level of interest seems one way to explain the level of effective involvement he will have in the decisionmaking process. My study does not pretend to systematically evaluate a president’s need for power or cognitive complexity. Instead, this is a process-focused study that acknowledges the importance of understanding presidential characteristics to the extent that the president is an important actor within a group decision process. The literature on individual differences and leadership styles is used to compare/contrast presidents in the framing process.

16. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 17–19; Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 42; Mulcahy, “The Bush Administration and National Security Policy-making.”

17. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “The Clinton Years: The Problem of Coherence”; Donald Zagoria, “Clinton’s Asia Policy.”

18. Successful engagement with China has required a consistent presidential effort. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. explains in *The Imperial Presidency*, circumstances changed drastically following the Vietnam War. After that, presidential policy agendas became more vulnerable to the blocking capabilities of other actors such as members of Congress, interest groups, and public opinion. See also Aaron Wildavsky, “The Two Presidencies Thesis.”