

Debate on How to Deal with the United States<sup>1</sup>

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The evidence of recent Chinese leadership debate on how to deal with the United States is thin. It focuses on differing Chinese assessments on how to deal with the dualism broadly seen among Chinese officials to characterize US post Cold War policy toward China. The end of the Cold War was a major turning point in US policy toward China as it destroyed the anti-Soviet rationale that under girded pragmatic Sino-US cooperation since the late 1960s. It also coincided with the Tiananmen crackdown and concurrent rise of democracy in Taiwan, which added major ideological and other differences between the United States and China.

According to the view of Chinese officials, the United States in the post Cold War period on the one hand is seen to be following a policy of ever closer engagement with China that has great benefits for China as China deepens ever growing economic interdependence with the United States and adheres more closely to international norms and institutions supported by the United States. On the other hand, however, the United States is seen to be following policies in international and Asian affairs and toward China specifically that are designed to “contain” China’s rise, keep China divided, thwart Chinese leadership in Asia, and endeavor to subvert China’s authoritarian political system.

At various times since the Tiananmen crackdown and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, evidence in official Chinese statements and pronouncements has shown that some Chinese leaders and groups emphasize the benefits of the US engagement, while others tend to emphasize perceived disadvantages for China posed by alleged US containment efforts. In general, Chinese leaders have sought to deepen engagement with

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the United States, consistent with their view that a cooperative relationship with the United States is vitally important for the broad goals of peace and development thought to be essential for the CCP to maintain its rule in China. However, during times of crisis such as the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1995-1996 and the Belgrade embassy bombing incident of 1999, the debate has sharpened, with Chinese officials and media critics of close engagement with the United States rising to the fore.

In 2001, Chinese leaders took a new and more moderate public tack toward the United States. They decided to moderate their heretofore strident public criticism of US “hegemonism” in Asian and world affairs and alleged US containment and pressure against China. In this context, the reflections of Chinese leadership differences over policy toward the United States have been seen when some Chinese leaders and groups stake out positions emphasizing the benefits of close engagement with the United States, while others stake out positions emphasizing the dangers of US containment. The leadership and media commentary associated with these efforts tends to be carefully considered and moderate, making it hard to decide whether these are signs of significant leadership differences or matters of emphasis reflecting other concerns.

### **Chinese leadership debate over the United States—background and evolution**

The decision making process in the Chinese Communist Party leadership as it deals with most policy issues, including relations with the United States, is closed. This makes it hard to discern significant leadership differences regarding China’s approach to the United States. Moreover, Communist Party discipline and the Communist principle of democratic centralism mean that whatever differences may be present among leaders are muted in the interest of party unity and effective Chinese Communist Party rule. Meanwhile, foreign policy, including relations with the United States, historically has been the preserve of the top Chinese leader with a small circle of advisors. Most other party leaders, including high officials, have remained unfamiliar with many of the implications of China’s relations with the United States. As a result, if some leaders were to choose to challenge the policies of the day, they would be more likely to avoid their

uncertain footing on policy toward the United States and focus on domestic concerns more familiar to them.

However, experience also has shown that differences in ambitions, interests, and policies among Chinese leaders repeatedly have led to the formation of factions or interest groups within the party decision making hierarchy. These informal but often powerful groups have at times pursued contending or opposing domestic and foreign policies. In general, their concerns have focused more on Chinese domestic power and policies, but at times they have involved foreign policy, including relations with the United States. On some occasions, debate among Chinese leaders over foreign policy, including policy toward the United States, was based on the pros and cons of the particular policy. More often, the debate over foreign policy, including relations with the United States, was linked to broader and more important debates over the distribution of power and domestic Chinese priorities.

As preeminent Chinese leaders with strong control of the Chinese national security apparatus, Mao Zedong (d. 1976) and Deng Xiaoping (d. 1997) dominated Chinese decision making dealing with the twists and turns in China's relations with the United States. Mao persuaded his skeptical colleagues of the need for Chinese forces to attack the Americans in Korea in 1950; he launched assertive campaigns against the United States over Taiwan in 1954 and 1958, switching to a temporary moderate tack in official talks with the United States in 1955. Mao pushed for China's break with Moscow and a strong anti-US posture in the 1960s, and endorsed the opening to the Nixon administration ten years later.

After consolidating power following Mao's death, Deng pursued an unprecedented Chinese economic opening to the United States and the West, and at times was prepared to align with the United States against the Soviet Union, though at other times he switched to a more even-handed approach toward both superpowers. Deng favored continued efforts to develop cooperative ties with the United States after the Tiananmen incident and the end of the Cold War.

These often dramatic shifts in policy sometimes elicited leadership debate. More common was the tendency of struggling factions to use trumped up charges on sensitive foreign policy issues, more often relations with the USSR than the United States, to support their interests. Thus, Mao removed Gao Gang in 1954 and Peng Dehuai in 1959 based in part on their alleged overly positive ties with the USSR. He tarred Lin Biao with the anti-Soviet brush in 1971, while Liu Shaoqi was attacked earlier in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for his alleged softness toward the United States and the West.

The most clear cut evidence of Chinese leadership debate over policy toward the United States occurred as China shifted from confrontation to alignment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coincident with the struggle for power as Mao's health declined. Important factions led respectively by Defense Minister Lin Biao and Gang of Four leader Jiang Qing took aim at the growing Chinese rapprochement with the United States led first by Zhou Enlai and later by Deng Xiaoping. Lin and his group argued against the reconciliation mainly on strategic grounds, emphasizing that the United States could not be trusted and would ultimately seek to collaborate with the Soviet Union to suppress China. Jiang Qing and the radicals argued that the compromises China was making regarding Taiwan and other issues in seeking reconciliation with the United States were undermining the ideological rigor and nationalistic foundations of Chinese Communist party rule.

After Deng consolidated his power in the late 1970s, he nonetheless was compelled to adjust his US policy to changed circumstances at home and abroad, including pressure from Chinese leaders and groups skeptical of Deng's initial close alignment with the United States. By the early 1980s, these groups added to factors prompting the Chinese leader to shift China's approach to a more "independent" foreign policy, aligning neither with the United States nor the USSR. After the Tiananmen crackdown, Deng faced considerable resistance from leaders skeptical of US ties, but he persevered with an open policy that endeavored to maintain a working relationship with the United States.

As Deng's health failed and Jiang Zemin moved to consolidate his leading position at the 15<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in 1997, his rivals, notably Qiao Shi, endeavored to capitalize on Jiang's failure to block the Lee Teng-hui visit to the United States. Jiang weathered that storm but debate over policy toward the United States reached rhetorical heights after the Belgrade bombing incident in 1999. Authoritative Chinese commentary called into question the prevailing Chinese leadership view that "peace and development" were the "main trend"—a view that supported continued Chinese cooperative engagement with the United States. It affirmed that opposition to "hegemonism" should be the main priority—stressing that resistance to US containment and power politics should be the main driver of Chinese foreign policy. Underlining this point, authoritative articles in *People's Daily* said that the US government was following policies similar to those of Nazi Germany and that President Bill Clinton was similar to Adolf Hitler. Thus, at this time, the lines in the Chinese strategic debate over how to handle the United States in the post Cold War environment were starkly drawn. One approach pushed to change policy in order to give priority to resisting US efforts to contain and pressure China in the US pursuit of international hegemonism. The other argued that prevailing circumstances were still within the framework of international peace and development, emphasizing that China's interests rested primarily on sustaining a cooperative relationship with the United States.

The issue was resolved in favor of the latter point of view. In fact, by 2001, before September 11, Chinese commentary significantly moderated past invective against US hegemonism as China endeavored to preserve and develop a close working relationship with the George W. Bush administration despite the latter's hard line on Taiwan and other issues sensitive to Chinese leaders. Chinese officials privately explained the shift as pragmatic. China still opposed hegemonism and recognized that the Bush administration was more "hegemonic" than any previous US government. Chinese officials also recognized that despite China's dream of a multipolar world, few powers were willing to work closely with China in opposition to the United States, and China did not want to face US power alone, unless absolutely necessary. Thus, Chinese officials

toned down opposition to egregious and internationally controversial uses of US power in Iraq, and sought to cooperate with the United States to ease tensions in Korea.

### **China's rise and reflections of competing Chinese leadership approaches toward the United States**

The prevailing Chinese leadership effort to cooperatively engage with the United States reached a benchmark in 2003 when top Chinese officials in the newly installed Hu Jintao administration told US and other audiences that China sought to use its rapidly growing economic and international power to rise peacefully. As explained by Chinese officials, this meant that China wanted to be sure that the United States did not see China's rise as a challenge to US power and influence. China sought to work cooperatively with the United States, seeking "win-win" arrangements on contentious issues. Chinese officials emphasized that they were prepared to put aside most concerns about US power politics and hegemonism in world affairs, with the exception of those related to Taiwan. Their optimal goal was to reach a partnership with the United States in dealing with world affairs. Short of that, they sought arrangements whereby the United States would not obstruct China's rise. They were explicitly aware of past precedents of such rising powers as imperial Germany and imperial Japan, both ending in the rising powers being destroyed by other powers. Chinese officials said their peaceful rise approach was designed to avoid that outcome.

Only a few months after the initial Chinese leadership statements of "peaceful rise," Chinese officials pulled back. They said they could no longer use the term "rise," preferring the more neutral term "development." And they also maintained that given the situation in the Taiwan Strait, China could not affirm a uniformly "peaceful" approach. Jiang Zemin and other leaders were said to have opposed the new formula. The shift away from explicit mention of peaceful rise did not appear to change policy. Indeed, the term eventually revived in some official Chinese media and by 2005 was used more often by Chinese officials, though not at a senior level.

In one sense, the advocates of peaceful rise can be seen as at one side of the current spectrum in Chinese leadership opinion on how to deal with the United States. This group seems to emphasize the utility of close and cooperative Chinese engagement with the United States. However, Chinese leaders still appear to believe in the two-handed nature of US policy toward China—the hand of cooperative engagement and the hand of containment. Chinese officials who focus on the latter include those in the PLA who write the bi-annual Defense White Papers published by the Chinese government. These reports make clear that China is determined to emphasize military power in confronting the nefarious schemes of the United States, its ally Japan, and Taiwan in particular.

Whether these two distinct emphases—peaceful rise and emphasis on military power—represent actual differences among senior Chinese leaders is hard to determine with any degree of confidence. The fact that Premier Wen Jiabao and other senior officials in the Hu Jintao administration at first touted “peaceful rise,” and then fell silent suggests some leadership differences were in play, but how serious these differences were and are remains unclear, especially since the overall effect on Chinese policy toward the United States has been negligible.

Comparing the recent episode of leadership jockeying over policy toward the United States with past episodes of clear leadership differences suggest that leadership differences over policy toward the United States at present remain small. But the example of the Belgrade bombing incident, which took place less than ten years ago, also demonstrates that a crisis situation or other circumstances could bring stark differences on how to approach the United States to the fore. At bottom, the Chinese leadership view of the United States seems likely to remain volatile so long as Chinese leaders continue to see strong dualism in US policy toward China—cooperative engagement on the one hand and containment and pressure on the other.