The Song Remains the Same: Converging views on a Rising China

Introduction

A key problem that has been identified as being central to the deliberations of this book is that of “excessive bipartisanship” in foreign policy-making in modern, and largely western, liberal democracies. Why is it that the so-called “marketplace of ideas” inherent in mature democracies provides for a seemingly limited set of foreign policy options? Why do incumbent governments and their oppositions often disagree so intensely on domestic issues, but agree frequently on international ones. We have been asked in this context to explore and discuss the ‘management’ of a supposedly ‘rising power’, the People’s Republic of China. In constructing our response and organising our thoughts on these issues, it has struck us that the focus on China is pertinent, as well as, symptomatic of a broader, global dynamic. There are, of course, many reasons for foreign policy bipartisanship. Domestic politics, the sheer complexity and unpredictability of foreign policy issues, the inherent fear of its privatisation, as well as the specific instrumental processes of western liberal decision-making itself, all contribute greatly to this collegiality. Rather than rehearse these significant—but otherwise discussed elsewhere—issues, what concerns us here is that this global dynamic also reveals a convergence between—what are taken as the poles of this debate—realist and liberal approaches to the “management” of foreign affairs inherent in the containment and engagement approaches, respectively.

We argue that this convergence is underlined by the demand for an answer to the question of the identification of enemies (and their subsequent pre-emptive containment) in realist approaches, and liberal approaches to the same question that
inter alia demand identification and then the transformation of these enemies into the liberal image through political as well as economic engagement—what we call here deep engagement. There are enemies and so we must “manage” them—either by physically confronting them or physically transforming them. For the want of a stable liberal order, China must remake its political (and other) culture in the image of the liberal democratic West. Calls for China to become a “responsible stakeholder”, then, betray initiatives to “normalise” or discipline that rising state.

This, at first sight, may seem a problematic proposition. However, commonly held liberal approaches provide us with some confidence. A well known quote from the influential US Senator Daniel Moynihan, for example, points to the transforming power of the liberal polity. He wrote that “[t]he central liberal truth is that politics [and we might add economics] can change culture and save it from itself” (he goes on to say that the central conservative truth “is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society”). Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*, while now more or less discredited, still points to a general acceptance by Western scholars that the normative ends of social development are primarily liberal ones. Finally, Democratic Peace Theory suggests democracies do not go to war with other democracies. While this may or may not be true, in a perverse way, it identifies a tendency for liberal democratic states to enter into conflicts with “backward” states in attempts to draw them into a liberal democratic modernity—regime change in Iraq may be a good example. This, we feel, leads to a tendency for modern warfare to be fought over issues of political progress—particularly those concerning political culture—rather than territory. Consequently, the essential truth of Western liberalism—in our view—is not so much tolerance or pluralism, but rather the
transformation of “different” states in “progressive” ways. At its core, liberalism, like realism is about discipline, just demanding it be achieved in subtler ways. Consequently, it is no wonder a rising power like China is suspicious of any form of deep engagement when these forms of engagement do not proceed from an assumption of state equality—and China will demand equality.  

Consequently, we argue that there is in fact no substantive debate regarding foreign policy toward China in states such as the United States and Australia. The core concerns of policy formulation regarding China works from the assumption that China must be managed. China must either conform to the West's image of a “responsible stakeholder” or be contained. This approach will be presented in two sections. The first section of the paper, based upon a discussion of the parameters of the existing ‘debate’ regarding the rise of China in the United States and Australia and the broad contours of both governments' foreign policy making toward China, argues that we in fact have no substantive debate. Through this discussion we suggest that much of the debate regarding China’s ‘rise’ is, perhaps inevitably enough, focused not so much on what China is but what we (the West) perceive it to be. As such the debate is very much focused on what China currently is and what ultimately it should develop into (based on the West’s judgements). Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting avenues of inquiry that may offer the opportunity to break-out of the constraints imposed by the ‘excessive bipartisanship’ of foreign policy discourse in liberal democracies. In particular, it is suggested that a starting point in the process may involve a conscious effort to engage with Chinese conceptions of world order and history. In this regard our purpose is not to suggest that the Chinese view is more correct or superior to the contemporary liberal
discourse, but rather to highlight that China’s own conceptions of history and of itself may provide some insights into how it may perceive its own ‘rise’ in contemporary international affairs: a rise that can be seen as a relatively rational, consistent and peaceful one.

The ‘Containment’-v-‘Engagement’ Debate 1991-2008: Different Means, Same End

Even those with but a cursory interest in foreign policy studies with a focus on China or the Asia-Pacific in the last two decades would be familiar with the dominant views within the scholarly literature about how to ‘manage’ China. Simply put this ‘debate’ has been structured around two catch-all terms that supply us not only with a set of policy prescriptions but also a value-judgement about China. As such, most would be familiar with the terms ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ that have been bandied around with abandon, particularly in the US (but also other liberal democracies), by scholars, policy elites and, to a lesser degree, publics. Significantly, these two labels encapsulate the simplistic thinking that passes for ‘debate’ on the issue of China’s ‘rise’ in international affairs. Both ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ suggest that China’s trajectory (as judged by external observers at any given moment) in fact contains China’s historical outcome or end-point. That is to say, if one subscribes to the ‘containment’ option, China ultimately emerges as a adversary and even enemy of the US (and other liberal democracies), while if one subscribes to the ‘engagement’ line of argument China becomes perhaps not a friend, but at the least a ‘domesticated’ or ‘socialised’ participant in the existing international security and economic architecture. The pursuit of each one’s policy prescriptions will provide justification for the original decision to undertake it – if we perceive that China is an enemy, we implement a strategy to neutralise that enmity while if we perceive China
to be a friend, we implement a strategy to consolidate that amity. We suggest that these strains of thought about China, while on the surface apparently distinct and proffering different visions of China and how to best deal with it, are in fact guided by the same underlying imperative – to actively change or transform China through the conduct of US foreign policy. The notion of a foreign policy ‘debate’ regarding China in both the US and Australia is essentially narrow and based upon an underlying set of shared assumptions regarding the nature of politics and History. For example, as we explore below, the much touted distinctions between advocates of ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ strategies toward China that were prominent in the US during the mid-1990s and which re-emerged with the advent of the Bush Administration in 2000 conceal their ultimately shared goal or driving imperative to change China and transform it in the West’s image.

Key to the emergence of the ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ debate in relation to China was the decline and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent waning of the strategic importance of China for the US. This dynamic was also buttressed by the major events of 1989-1991, most particularly the Tiananmen Massacre of June 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union in 1990-91 and the first Gulf War. While Jurgen Habermas has highlighted 1945 as the pivotal moment in history whereby the subjugation of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and militarist Japan signified the defeat, “of all forms of political legitimation that did not - at least verbally, at least in words – subscribe to the universalist spirit of political enlightenment”, Fukuyama and others it would seem, declared that the events of 1989-1991 were the final culmination or victory of the ‘universalist spirit of political enlightenment’. This triumphalist tone was also echoed in much US foreign policy
and international relations discourse from 1991 onward with the celebration, for example, of the US ‘unipolar moment’ by such commentators as Charles Krauthammer and Samuel Huntington.\(^9\) For many, China as a one-party, Marxist-Leninist state, thus stood out as a historical anachronism in an era of burgeoning ‘free markets’ and ‘free societies’. In this climate even more sober-minded and experienced observers of China also identified the issue of how China would fit into this ‘new world order’ as one of the key problems of the post-Cold War world.\(^10\) China’s apparent ‘swimming against the tide’ of history – i.e. failing to adopt ‘democracy and free markets’ – was (and is) a key impetus behind the emergence of the ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ debate.

Yet this normative or ideological view was also paralleled by the West’s perception of China’s growing economic and military capabilities.\(^11\) Thus, the ‘debate’ on the ‘rise of China’ intertwines debates concerning China’s *intentions*, which are derived from analyses of China’s ideology, values and history, and debates regarding China’s *capabilities*, which are derived from analyses of China’s economic growth and military advances and procurements. As we shall discuss below, which theoretical perspective one adopts often determines the privileging of either China’s intentions or capabilities as the key explanatory variable in the ‘China threat’ debate. As Herbert Yee and Ian Storey have noted, this debate has also largely been framed by three theoretical approaches in contemporary international relations, the historical, realist and cultural approaches.\(^12\) While some of the literature that will be surveyed below clearly falls within one of these approaches alone, there are also clear elements of overlap in others.
The Containment Pole

Regarding the issues of ideology or values, the ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ debate is, from our perspective something of a damp squib. That is to say, despite the gnashing of teeth in some policy circles – e.g. Washington – over the correct strategy to approach the issue of a ‘rising China’, there is in fact no substantial difference between both extremes of the ‘debate’ in the context of the role of US values (or more broadly neo-liberal values) can or should play. For the extreme containment advocates, such as Charles Krauthammer for example, the very nature of contemporary China combined with its post-1978 economic growth means that ipso facto it must be regarded by the US (and the West) as a threat. While Krauthammer’s prescription for containment was crudely geopolitical - demanding the development or reinvigoration of alliances with the major states that surround China (such as India, Russia, and Japan) – his corollary to underpin this strategic design was revealing and symptomatic of the neo-liberal agenda to transform the Other. As he stated in his 1995 piece in Time Magazine, ‘Why We Must Contain China’, ‘…containing China is not enough. Even more important is…undermining its aggressively dictatorial regime’. Such undermining, whilst necessarily entailing US Cold War-esque subversion of China’s political system, could also be furthered according to Krauthammer through such actions as denying Beijing international legitimacy by blocking China’s accession to the WTO or open support of Chinese dissidents. The message that this would send Beijing was clear according to Krauthammer, ‘liberalize or be ostracized’. Krauthammer’s argument was clear – ‘containment aims to prevent war. But a change in regime to a tolerant, democratic China is the better guarantee of peace’.

Such containment advocates thus combine concerns regarding China’s intentions as an authoritarian, ‘communist’ state and suspicions regarding perceived improvements in China’s economic and military capabilities. The logic of the argument is simple: China is a one party, communist state with consequent interests that are antithetical to those of the West; therefore it cannot be trusted with its growing economic and military capabilities. This theme has essentially been rehearsed ad nauseam for the last fifteen years with slight variations by other prominent containment advocates such as Robert Kagan, Paul Wolfowitz, William Kritsol and others, and indeed President George W. Bush himself early in his presidency. As such one could suggest that this strain of argumentation combines elements of the ‘democratic peace’ thesis in post-Cold War IR scholarship and certain tenets of classical and structural realism. Moreover, this strain of thought remains prominent. For example, the foreign policy journal Orbis, could publish an issue in Spring 2004 devoted to the subject of ‘Democratization and Greater China’. Indeed, an article by Arthur Waldron rehearsed similar themes as those elucidated by such figures as Krauthammer, Wolfowitz and Kagan in the early and mid-1990s that have been noted above. As such Waldron asserted that the advent of democracy in China ‘would almost certainly change Chinese foreign policy’. His argument in this respect deserves to be quoted at length as it demonstrates the tenacity of the democratic peace thesis for some analysts/commentators:

How would a democratic Chinese parliament assess Chinese national interests? First, it would be interested in improving the living standards of the country’s hundreds of millions of impoverished people. The only way to free resources for this would be to change the foreign policy that demands, for example, such vast military expenditures. This would entail shifting friendships away from the few countries that seek to counter US dominance in the world and reorienting toward countries that provide the most to China economically... Under conditions of freedom and democracy, China would move to non-belligerence toward the West, cooperation, and increasing openness.
This excerpt encompasses a number of the problems that plague the contemporary ‘debate’ regarding the ‘rise of China’. For example, it implies that the regime, due to the fact that it is not a democracy is not capable of providing for the economic well-being of its citizens: this despite the fact that the CCP has arguably staked a major part of its legitimacy since 1978 on its ability to deliver economic growth and development. This of course contradicts the view, also expressed by Waldron, that China has increased its economic capabilities over the last two decades. Additionally, without citing any data, Waldron simply asserts that China is currently undertaking ‘vast military expenditures’ and that this ‘fact’ suggests Beijing’s less than benign intentions. Moreover, Waldron asserts that if China becomes a democracy it would necessarily become friendly to those states ‘that provide the most to China economically’ and ultimately result in a policy of ‘non-belligerence toward the West’. These latter claims are quite obviously contestable even through a cursory glance at China’s relations with many of the South East Asian states and even Australia since the late 1990s. Waldron asserts, however, citing examples of Beijing’s relations with India, North Korea and the US that China’s contemporary foreign policy ‘cannot be explained by rational calculations of Chinese national interest’.

Thus, ‘regime type is the explanation’ for China’s long-standing tensions with India (territorial disputes, China’s relations with Pakistan etc), its role on the Korean Peninsula and its various disagreements with Washington across broad strategic and economic issues.

More ‘academic’ or perhaps ‘scholarly’ elucidations of a pro-containment stance, rather than exaggerating the perils posed by China’s regime type itself, focus more
broadly on historical precedents and assessments of material capabilities. Indeed, an early entry into the ‘debate’ highlighted such concern for what the enhancement of China’s material capabilities would mean for international politics:

China’s is the fastest growing economy in the world, with what may be the fastest growing military budget. It has nuclear weapons, border disputes with most of its neighbors, and a rapidly improving army that may – within a decade or so – be able to resolve old quarrels in its own favor. The United States has possessed the world’s largest economy for more than a century, but at present trajectories China may displace it in the first half of the next century and become the number one economy in the world.22

As such, one can suggest that this variety of containment advocates utilise broadly classical and structural realists theoretical approaches to not so much explain current Chinese foreign policy but predict what it will look like in the not-to-distant future. A pertinent example of this approach is the commentary of John Mearsheimer on what the ‘rise of China’ means for international relations and indeed for the US, most recently outlined in his elucidation of a theory of ‘offensive realism’ in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.23 Mearsheimer begins by asserting that great powers ‘maximize their relative power’, an assertion that places him close to classical realist Hans Morgenthau who famously claimed that IR was defined by a never-ending struggle for power amongst sovereign states. In contrast to Morgenthau, however, who maintained that this flowed from a natural human urge to dominate, Mearsheimer suggests that the eternal struggle for power in the international system is in fact driven by a constant search for security in an anarchical environment.24 While this assumption of a security motivation and structural causation suggests a Waltzian neo-realism (or ‘defensive realism’ as Mearsheimer would have it), Mearsheimer distinguishes his offensive realism by asserting that the search for both power and security is insatiable. Therefore, for Mearsheimer, there are no ‘status quo’ powers:
Offensive realists...believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state’s ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system.25

Given such a prognosis of the nature of international politics, Mearsheimer asserts that a rising China will inevitably challenge US hegemony. Indeed, he argues that if China continues its ‘impressive’ economic growth, ‘the US and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war’.26 This will be the case he argues as, ‘China – whether it remains authoritarian or becomes democratic – is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the US dominates the Western hemisphere’ through maximising the power gap between itself and its neighbours in order to ensure that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it.27 In effect China will seek, in the words of Morgenthau, to obtain, increase and demonstrate its power.28 However, he suggests that the history of the twentieth century demonstrates that, ‘the United States does not tolerate peer competitors’ and that ultimately, ‘the United States is likely to behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union’.29 He therefore notes with approval successive US administrations elucidation since 1991 of the maintenance of US primacy as a pre-eminent goal of US national security strategy. Unsurprisingly, Mearsheimer argues that for the US to avoid this scenario only one policy option (and interestingly the only substantial one offered in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics) is available - containment.30 In contrast to advocates of ‘engagement’, Mearsheimer argues that containment is in fact not only in US interests but also would be a practicable
strategy due to the fear that China’s ‘rise’ has stimulated amongst the states of the Asia-Pacific:

China’s neighbours are certain to fear its rise as well, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. Indeed, there is already substantial evidence that countries such as India, Japan and Russia as well as smaller powers such as Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam are worried about China’s ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. In the end, they will join an American-led balancing coalition to check China’s rise…

Interestingly, Robert Kagan in a 2005 piece in the *Washington Post*, travelled much the same territory as that of Mearsheimer, even including the latter’s appeal to the historical precedents of rising powers disrupting the existing order. Moreover, Kagan ultimately questioned the very idea of ‘managing’ China’s ‘rise’ and proscribed ‘containment’ as the only ‘prudent’ course available for the US. In his critique of the idea of ‘managing’ China he points to the implicit assumption underpinning such a course of action, that is that China wishes to be ‘integrated’ into the current order:

The security structures of East Asia, the Western liberal values that so dominate our thinking, the ‘liberal world order’ we favour – this is the ‘international system’ into which we would ‘integrate’ China. But isn’t it possible that China does not want to be integrated into a political and security system that it had no part in shaping and that conforms neither to its ambitions nor its own autocratic and hierarchical principles of rule?

As with other containment protagonists, whether driven by democratic peace or offensive realist motivations/perspective, Kagan wonders aloud about China’s *intentions* with its new-found power and capabilities suggesting, ‘Might not China, like all rising powers of the past, including the United States, want to reshape the international system to suit its own purposes?’ The only real difference between Kagan and Mearsheimer’s stories is that the former sees the practicality of ‘containment’ as more difficult, although he also asserts that for such a strategy to
work the US must treat China, ‘as at least a prospective enemy, not just twenty
years from now, but now’. Finally, while Kagan makes a valid point by suggesting
that, ‘the nature of China’s rise will largely be determined by the Chinese, not by us’, he nonetheless fails to consider the wider significance of that observation and the
deeper question that it implies. In this respect, if the Chinese will ultimately
determine the nature of their own ‘rise’ what might this entail for the international
system itself? Kagan’s response appears to be simply that China will seek to mould
the system to suit its interest, yet this would seem to be self-evident. Perhaps the
bigger question to ask given the emphasis on the ‘Western’ and ‘liberal’ nature of the
current order, which presumably reflects the interests of the US (and its Western
allies), is: Is there a Chinese world order? The answer to this question we would
suggest may hold some insight into what the international system may look like once
China has finally ‘risen’. We will, however, return to this question in the final section
of the paper.

The Engagement Pole

For the pro-engagement advocates, who were perhaps most prominent during the
Clinton administrations, the goal was ultimately the same as such containment god-
heads as Krauthammer – to transform China. The only distinction was the methods
by which that goal was to be achieved. In contrast to the simplistic geopolitical
containment and aggressive promotion of western conceptions of democracy, human
democracy and political economy of the pro-containment approach, the pro-
engagement school emphasised the enmeshment of Beijing in the existing
international economic, security and political architecture through dialogue,
persuasion and limited coercion. This logic was amply highlighted by Presidential
candidate Bill Clinton in October 1992 when he outlined what a Clinton administration’s goals regarding China would be:

We do not want China to fall apart, to descend into chaos or go back into isolation. But rather, we want to use our relationship and influence to work with the Chinese for a peaceful transition to democracy and the spread of free markets.36

Such a Clintonian approach toward China was amply demonstrated in the first years of his presidency through his administration’s attempt to link various elements of Sino-US relations to ‘improvements’ in China’s protection of ‘international’ human rights standards. Most famously this resulted in yearly debates between 1993 and 1995 in US domestic politics regarding the attachment of such conditions to Congressional renewal of China’s most-favoured nation (MFN) trading status.37 Clinton attempted to utilise the allure of MFN status for China to promote the US human rights agenda by making the renewal of MFN status for China conditional upon improvements in key human rights areas such as US concerns regarding freedom of religion and minority rights, exemplified by the high profile Tibet issue. Thus, when President Clinton signed an executive order renewing China’s MFN status for one year, on March 28, 1993, it was made conditional on the president determining that China had made ‘overall significant progress’ with respect to human rights, including the improvement of the situation in Tibet.38 Clinton, however, subsequently de-linked improvement in human rights from MFN renewal in 1994, in favour of a strategy of what his administration termed ‘comprehensive engagement’ of China, the essence of which was expressed by President Clinton when he announced de-linkage:

I believe the question, therefore, is not whether we continue to support human rights in China, but how we can best support human rights in China and advance our other very significant issues and interests. I believe we can do it by engaging the Chinese...We will have more contacts. We will have more trade. We will have more international
cooperation. We will have more intense and constant dialogue on human rights issues.\textsuperscript{39}

While such ‘de-linkage’ may have had as much to do with pressure on the Whitehouse from business lobbyists, it is nonetheless important to address the rhetoric and justification of ‘comprehensive engagement’ by members of the Clinton administration as it highlights that despite the apparent divergence between ‘engagement’ and ‘containment’ advocates both ultimately had the same goal. For example, Secretary of Defense William Perry, speaking in October 1995, explicitly argued that the administration’s strategy of ‘comprehensive engagement’ would accelerate the liberalization of China and increasing cooperation with the US, while ‘containment’ would lead to Chinese back-sliding:

Americans must realize that this is a case where history and time are \textit{on our side}. In the long run, change is coming to China. For example, while Beijing still abuses human rights activists, market reforms are leading to the rapid development of laws that place increasing constraints on government and ultimately will empower citizens to defend basic civil rights…The direction of these changes suggest \textit{it is more likely than not} that long-term change in China will favour \textit{our interest}. Seeking to contain and confront China can only slow down the pace of change.\textsuperscript{40}

Such logic was also embedded in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 1995 with the identification of ‘engagement’ and ‘enlargement’ as guiding principles of US foreign policy. ‘Enlargement’, in the words of the 1995 NSS, entailed ‘protecting, consolidating and enlarging the community of free market democracies’.\textsuperscript{41}

Even despite, or perhaps because of, Beijing’s sabre-rattling over Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui’s pro-independence remarks during a visit to the US in 1996, the Clinton administration appeared to intensify its rhetoric and policy of
‘comprehensive engagement’. Undoubtedly this had much to do with assuaging domestic critics of Clinton’s China policy, but it is nonetheless suggestive that even as China had demonstrated its fundamental dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in the Taiwan Straits (and the US action of sending in the 7th Fleet to patrol the area) the Clinton administration emphasised the socialising nature of US policy. For example, the then Ambassador to China James Sasser, stressed once again what appeared to be an article of faith for many in the administration – that China’s increasing integration in the international economy would transform China and make it more like ‘us’:

On this trip back from the United States, I saw how readily US products are accepted: Chinese citizens flying on Boeing aircraft, with Motorola cell phones in their jackets, IBM computers on their laps, watching Hollywood videos and drinking Budweiser beer and Coca Cola. A few even enjoyed some Tennessee sippin’ whiskey.42

What is most pertinent here is the ambassador’s assumption that Chinese acceptance of western and American consumer goods somehow equates to signifying China’s acceptance of the existing international order. Subsequently, President Clinton hosted President Jiang Zemin for a Sino-US summit in Washington in November 1997 in which Clinton attempted to demonstrate the efficacy of ‘comprehensive engagement’ through raising once more thorny issues with Jiang such as human rights and Taiwan.43 Once again his exchanges with Jiang on the significance of Tiananmen and other human rights abuses was illustrative of the largely bipartisan belief in the US that not only was, ‘China is on the wrong side of history’, as President Clinton put it, but that it was also a US responsibility to ‘help’ China in its transition to the ‘right’ side of history.44
From 1997 onward Clinton’s ‘comprehensive engagement’ approach, however, was hindered both in practice and rhetoric by a number of developments in the relationship such as tensions over the conditions for China’s accession to the WTO, a growing trade imbalance between China and the US, allegations of Chinese espionage in 1998, disagreement over NATO intervention in Kosovo and the acrimonious fall-out from the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. This led to a wave of criticism for Clinton’s approach and the elucidation of alternative policies that mixed ‘carrots and sticks’ for China, a process that could be seen in the proliferation of neologisms to encompass them such as ‘constrainment’, ‘limited engagement’ and ‘congagement’.

According to Zalmay Khalizad, for example, ‘congagement’ would combine elements of both containment and engagement poles of the ‘debate’:

Since neither prevention-containment nor engagement serves U.S. interests, a different strategy is appropriate. The best strategic option must accomplish three things: preserve the hope inherent in engagement policy while deterring China from becoming hostile and hedging against the possibility that a strong China might challenge U.S. interests. Such a strategy could be called "congagement." It would continue to try to bring China into the current international system while giving equal attention to deterrence and preparing for a possible Chinese challenge to this system while seeking to convince the Chinese leadership that a challenge would be difficult to prepare and extremely risky to pursue.

Others, such as former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, argued that while, ‘China is neither America’s adversary nor its strategic partner’ it could, ‘become an antagonist…if either China so chooses or America so prompts’. Yet, even Khalizad and Brzezinski, appeared to hold onto the core goals and assumptions of Clinton’s policy of ‘engagement’ – that US policy should be about making China more ‘democratic’ and hence more accommodating of US interests.
Meanwhile, President Clinton ended his presidency ‘keeping the faith’ so to speak with the thrust of this argument, stating:

Our long term strategy must be to encourage the right kind of development in China – to help China grow at home into a strong, prosperous and open society, coming together, not falling apart; to integrate China into the institutions that promote global norms on proliferation, trade, the environment and human rights.48

As we know this debate continued into the 2000 presidential election with candidate George W. Bush suggesting that China was more a ‘strategic competitor’ rather than a ‘strategic partner’ of the United States. Indeed, while there has been much debate as to whether US foreign policy has radically changed direction under the Bush administration, particularly after the events of 9/11, one could suggest that in the context of US strategy toward China US policy has essentially revisited the well established themes that I’ve noted above. Thus, after the initial testing year of Sino-US relations under President George W. Bush, including the tense stand-off over the spy plane incident over Hainan Island, his administration began to temper its position somewhat from the rhetoric of ‘strategic competitor’ to ‘constructive engagement’. The events of 9/11, according to some observers provided further impetus to this tendency with Beijing quickly pledging its support for the US-led ‘War on Terror’.49

More broadly 9/11 resulted in the elucidation of a clearer foreign policy by the administration than prior to Al Qaeda’s attacks. Although President George W. Bush affirmed his administration’s commitment to maintaining US primacy prior to 9/11 stating in an address to West Point that, “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenges – thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other
eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace". However, the advent of international terrorism on the scale of 9/11 according to the Bush administration presented great powers such as the US and China with the opportunity to find greater common ground. Thus, in his June 2002 address to West Point, the President maintained that:

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\text{We have the best chance since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century to build a world where the great powers compete in peace instead of prepare for war...America stands for more than the absence of war. We have a great opportunity to extend a just peace, by replacing poverty, repression, and resentment around the world with hope for a better day...America has a greater objective than controlling threats and containing resentment. We will work for a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.}\]

This tenor was echoed in the 2002 National Security Strategy which asserted that, ‘The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the fusion of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better’. Of course the way in which to make the world ‘better’ is through the spread of ‘democracy’ and ‘free markets’ (or as the preceding Clinton administration put it, by ‘enlarging the community of free market democracies’). Indeed, the 2002 NSS was singularly blunt in this assertion, stating that, ‘there is a single model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise’. The desire of the administration to utilise the apparently omnipotent nature of US power to spread these virtues has been clearly expressed since 2002 with, for example, President asserting before the Iraq War in February 2003 that, ‘We meet here during a crucial period in the history of our nation and the civilised world. Part of that history was written by others; \textit{the rest will be written by us}’.
While it may be suggested that much of this rhetoric was undoubtedly directly related to the ‘War on Terror’ and the Middle East, it has had implications for US strategy toward China. Indeed, as the preceding discussion has highlighted President George W. Bush’s administrations have not diverged greatly from those of its predecessors in the context of China policy. Indeed, the two driving themes structuring US ‘debate’ regarding the ‘rise’ of China since 1991 – the maintenance of US primacy or hegemony and the ‘integration’ of China into the contemporary international system through the promotion of ‘markets and democracy’ - are also evident in the Bush administrations conduct of Sino-US relations. Indeed, Under-Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky asserted in 2003 that:

> Overall the promotion of democracy is a key foreign policy goal of the Bush administration. This sentiment is reflected in all of our international endeavors and is animated by a mixture of idealistic and pragmatic impulses. We seek to foster a global society of nations, in which freedom and democracy reign...²⁵

In the context of China policy, the promotion of democracy serves both idealistic and pragmatic impulses – i.e. US primacy is secured to a greater or lesser degree if US policy can convince Beijing to accept the status quo.

However, it is important to note that implicit in much of the Bush administration’s post-9/11 rhetoric on China is that for this situation to occur (i.e. for Beijing to accept the international status quo) a transformation must take place in China. President Bush in his second inaugural address in January 2005 reaffirmed US commitment to ‘enlarge’ the community of democratic states asserting, ‘It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world’.²⁶ Moreover, this agenda was to be achieved through what Secretary of State
Condoleezza Rice a year later defined as ‘transformational diplomacy’. What, then, constitutes ‘transformational diplomacy’? Rice suggested that:

I would define the objective of transformational diplomacy this way: to work with our many partners around the world, to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and \textit{conduct themselves responsibly in the international system}. Let me be clear, transformational diplomacy is rooted in partnership; not in paternalism. In doing things with people, not for them; we seek to use America’s diplomatic power to help foreign citizens better their own lives and to build their own nations and to transform their own futures.

Furthermore, in direct reference to China, other administration officials emphasised, not dissimilarly to their Clinton administration predecessors, that the goal of US policy toward China was upon making it just such a ‘responsible’ member of the international community. Indeed, in September 2005 then Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, in a lengthy statement on the Bush administration’s approach to China, called on Beijing to clarify its intentions in order to prevent stirring up what he referred to as a ‘cauldron of anxiety’ in the US and the region about China’s rise. In particular, he urged China to ‘openly explain its defense spending, intentions, doctrine and military exercises to ease concerns about its rapid military buildup’, move away from ‘mercantilism’ in its economic policy, end its tolerance of ‘rampant theft of intellectual property and counterfeiting’, adjust its foreign policy to focus less on national interest and more on ‘sustaining peaceful prosperity’, and not attempt to, ‘maneuver toward a predominance of power’ in Asia through developing separate alliances throughout the region. Moreover, Zoellick also highlighted US discomfort with and disapproval of Beijing’s relations with states such as Sudan and Burma which, according to Zoellick, exhibited either, ‘a blindness to consequences’ or ‘at worst something more ominous’. In effect, US policy, despite over fifteen
years of ‘debate’ about how best to respond and deal with the rise of China, remains focused as much as ever on Beijing’s swimming ‘against the tide’.

This we think provides an insight into the dynamic behind the lack of substance and lack of real policy alternatives/options in contemporary US policy toward China that was illustrated in the first section’s overview of the extent of ‘debate’ on the rise of China. It is evident from an examination of this ‘debate’ and its impact on government policy that the two supposed poles of argument are in fact seeking the same outcome – to transform China, either through coercion (containment) or persuasion (engagement). We would conclude by suggesting that this is a manifestation of the inherent tendency of liberalism, in particular in its contemporary neo-liberal form, to seek the eradication of difference and plurality in the name of various, ‘universal’ norms/values which are themselves intensely particular and historically contingent.

**Revisiting the ‘Chinese’ World Order?**

If the parameters of the current ‘debate’ are as predetermined as we have suggested in the preceding discussion, then how may we ‘break out’ of this impasse? We posed a question earlier in the paper which we will briefly suggest may provide just such an avenue or opportunity. That is to say, it is important to once again pose the question first explored by John K. Fairbank (and other Sinologists) in his 1968 work, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*: Is there a Chinese world order? Is there a Chinese vision of how international relations should be structured and maintained? Of course to speak of a ‘Chinese world order’ in the singular carries with it another series of problematic questions, which we will leave aside for the moment and perhaps deal with them
during the discussion. While there have been a number of scholars who have delved into what might be termed a ‘cultural’ approach to the issue of China’s foreign policy, perhaps most notably Alastair Iain Johnston, it has often focused on the expansionary phases of ‘Chinese’ history and particular strands of Chinese thought. For example, Johnston in his 1995 work, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, concluded that the nature of China’s strategic culture was expansionist:

The Chinese case suggests that the extent parabellum is cross-cultural and learned we should begin to treat realpolitik behavior as a ‘cultural realist’ norm – a historically and temporally bounded, though impressively powerful, ideational source of state behaviour.64

Thus, if Johnston’s analysis is correct we should expect China to act in a similar and broadly recognisable manner to that of previous (largely western) great powers. So are we seeing a China that seeks to, paraphrase Morgenthau, not only to gain and maintain power but also to *demonstrate* that power? We think that a cursory glance at China’s foreign policy particularly since the late 1980s, would suggest that this is indeed the case. Yet, the real questions that are at the centre of the existing ‘debate’ on the rise of China are how and to what purpose is China exercising its growing power? Indeed, this is a question that Robert Kagan, for example, raised in a piece of 2005 which we noted earlier. Essentially, will China simply act as just another great power, and therefore the broad contours of its policy and purpose, will be easily predictable. John Mearsheimer it would seem would answer in the affirmative here. Yet, are Beijing’s contemporary foreign policy but also the manner of its expression (i.e. the form of its foreign policy) simply determined by the security motivation and structural constraints imposed by the anarchical environment of international relations?
Here we would like to conclude by noting what we see as the benefits of beginning
to re-think the idea of a Chinese world order and return to the work of scholars such
as Fairbank as a starting point. Most here, I’m sure, are familiar with Fairbank’s
notion/argument that traditional China’s foreign relations were framed through a
complex of practices that he referred to collectively as the ‘tribute system’. According
to this model, imperial China structured its foreign relations with non-Chinese
through a hierarchical ordering of culturally superior to inferior, focused on a Sinic
cultural and geographic centre. Yet, there is an important aspect, particularly in the
actual practice of this vision of world order that has perhaps been over-looked.

Through analysis of the practice of relations between the Qing and various non-
Chinese peoples of Inner Asia during the 17th and 18th century, scholars such as
Joseph Fletcher in the past and James Millward in the present, have demonstrated
that the Fairbank model of a hierarchical relationship between the imperial centre –
personified in the ‘Son of Heaven’ – and the ‘tributary’ state was more often fiction
rather than fact. As they have suggested the Fairbank model was often modified to
serve practical material interests in inter-state relations. Moreover, as a number of
scholars of traditional China have noted, with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy
depending on which era of Chinese history one refers to, the Chinese did not
attempt to make the conceit of hierarchical relationships embodied in the theory or
ideal state of the tribute system fact through the conversion of the barbarian to
Chinese ways. Rather, what lay at the core of the Chinese world order, was that
datong—i.e. ‘great harmony’ or ‘universal commonwealth’ that theoretically all
emperors sought to facilitate – would be achieved by the cultural attraction and
example of the Sinic centre. Thus, very briefly one could suggest that while the ideal vision of the Chinese world order was hierarchical, in practice the conceit of Chinese civilisational superiority, and the Confucian emphasis on moral example, which lay at its core permitted the toleration of difference and plurality in the realm of inter-state inter-course.

One can still find vestiges of datong in the contemporary Chinese foreign policy framework of “peaceful coexistence”. It is essentially a framework borrowed from Khrushchev that suggested communist nations could live side by side with capitalist nations in relative harmony and strongly emphasised mutual respect for sovereignty and non-intervention. The basis of the framework is the five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for each nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits, and peaceful coexistence. The appropriate application of the Five Principles is summarised, possibly for effect, on the homepage of the P.R.C. Embassy in Washington:

A country’s affairs should be handled by its own people and international issues should be resolved through negotiations, … [T]he United Nations, the organization that has the largest number of member nations and that is most representative, should play a dominant role in international affairs and that this is common sense in the international community. The common wish is for the establishment of a just and reasonable new political and economic order in the world … one that must first help create a long-term peaceful environment for the development of all countries in the world. It must also represent the common interests of all people and embody the development and progress needs of the time…

Significantly, this framework has remained at the heart of Chinese thinking about foreign policy since it was first enunciated by Zhou Enlai in 1954. Especially since
1980, few foreign policy trajectories have remained as consistent, as rational and as predictable; including those of the prominent liberal democracies. One should note that China has only recently—and begrudgingly for that matter—been drawn into such positive interventions as peace-keeping activities for the United Nations: precisely because of the centrality of this framework.68

Now one might suggest that “peaceful coexistence” is simply a strategic manoeuvre to allow China freedom to pursue whatever policies it wants inside its own borders, and this is quite probable. This, of course, might include controversial and worrying threats to human security. Furthermore, it does allow China to focus on the government’s major concern of ensuring continued development—a concern that will see domestic issues dominate international ones for the short to medium term. As well, one might argue that it is also a strategic manoeuvre by the Chinese to ‘outflank’ the West in more general foreign policy debates. While this, of course is again quite probable, it should not lead us to be completely dismissive of the potential for such tactics and rhetoric to emerge as the basis of a ‘new’ vision of Chinese world order – one that stands, perhaps only implicitly at present, in contrast to that of the US and the West. While space prevents any in-depth discussion of the debates surrounding “peaceful coexistence” it suffices here to say that we believe that it operates within Chinese foreign policy formulations at levels of significance beyond mere rhetoric. This sentiment, we think can be seen, in China’s foreign relations with specific regions of the world today – Central Asia and Africa come to mind – whereby it has made a great virtue in recent times of emphasising common interests and reserving differences as a distinct counter-point to the neo-liberal agenda of the West.
We are not naïve enough to suggest that the future, even one not determined in significant ways by a ‘rising China’, will be necessarily a peaceful one. Predicting the future has always been synonymous with folly. Our aim here is a little more humble. Our concern is the current debates concerning the management of a rising China, which we argue are, and have been, hamstrung by the limited nature of the debate. There is, and has been, a real convergence between the two major approaches in that both were unaccepting of difference and concerned primarily with confronting that difference, albeit in contrasting ways. Containment pushes the west and its allies down the road of physical confrontation. Deep engagement, on the other hand, seeks to transform China into an image of the west. The Chinese are cognizant of the implications of this form of engagement, but at the same time reliant on a ‘light engagement’ for their own domestic development. Therefore the inevitability of China becoming a real threat is just as much a product of others’ perceptions of that rise as aspects inherent in China’s own trajectory. China should be allowed to develop ‘in difference’ as an equal member of international society. Changes to China’s international personae will come, but the issue is who should implement them and who should judge them. The question though remains: Is a light engagement possible, because it will be necessary?

NOTES

1 From our perspective the complex of terms encapsulated in the topic – ‘bipartisanship’, ‘management’ ‘engagement’ and ‘rising’ - all carry a number of assumptions that need to be brought out into the open as they enable us to identify the core concerns of the paper. To begin, the identification of the area/topic of inquiry with the ‘management’ of a ‘rising China’ presents a number of dilemmas and assumptions. First, this assumes that there is indeed a problem with the concept of a ‘rising China’. Second, that we can in fact ‘manage’ this process – that is we not only have the will or desire but also the capacity to do so. Third, and implicit in the use of the term ‘management’, is the assumption that we can push/pull China in a certain developmental or historical direction – a point highlighted by the fact that the word derives from the Italian maneggio: ‘to handle, or to direct’.
Fourth, the description of China as ‘rising’ implies that this is a historically unique process, a claim that is quite clearly historically spurious. Through a discussion and survey of the broad contours of the contemporary foreign policy ‘debate’ concerning China in the US, the paper demonstrates that all of these dilemmas and assumptions are inherent to, and ultimately unresolved, by the ‘debate’.

2 As opposed to “light engagement” that assumes an equality in engagement.


4 Mahmood Mamdani makes this point in his excellent *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

5 It is not our aim here to make value judgements on the liberal tendency to discipline. Whether it is a positive tendency is a moot point, however our aim here is to outline one way of understanding the limited scope of debate surrounding China’s rise.

6 Even as recently as 2007 ‘engagement’ and ‘containment’ still determine much of the debate. See ,


14 Ibid. Emphasis added.

15 Ibid.


18 Ibid, pp. 252-253.


21 Ibid.


29 Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise”, p. 162.


31 Mearsheimer, “China’s Rise Will Not be Peaceful”.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
39 Quoted in Lampton, “America’s China Policy in the Age of the Finance Minister”, p. 603.
44 Ibid.
46 Khalizad, “Congage China”.
48 “Engaging China to Promote and Protect American Interests”, Address by President Bill Clinton to the US Institute for Peace, April 7, 1999. My emphasis.
50 Pres Bush, “Address to West Point”,
51 Pres Bush, “Address to West Point”, June 2002
53 Ibid. My emphasis.
54 George W. Bush to the American Enterprise Institute, February 27 2003. Our emphasis.
58 Ibid. My emphasis.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
65 Fairbank, The Chinese World Order.
67 These were set down in discussions with India over Tibet. See