

# China and the Legacy of US Presidents

## China has left its mark on every president since Johnson

By David M. Lampton



Former AmCham Chairman John Holden with President Bill Clinton

**A**s we head toward the 2008 election, the last several presidential transitions give us clues for how a change in American executive leadership is likely to affect China policy. They allow us to track which aspects are most likely to be impacted by a new president. The United States has had six transitions between seven presidents since Richard Nixon's reversal of China policy after succeeding Lyndon Johnson in 1969. These transitions and presidencies are the best material we have from which to extract lessons that can help us understand what to expect from the next administration.

### WORKING WITH CONGRESS

Congress factors significantly into the equation, particularly if the president has a desire to change China policy. Presidents have enormous capabilities to resist congressional initiatives they dislike, but they need cooperation with the Hill if they want to push an agenda of change. President Carter, for example, had to agree to the Taiwan Relations Act to institutionalize his goal of "normalization." Presidents have the most (but not absolute) independence from the Hill in security areas, but have considerably less on trade. If the election of 2008 produces a president and both houses of Congress of the same party, larger changes in China policy will become

more possible, though hardly inevitable.

### CANDIDATES ARE NOT PRESIDENTS

Of the last seven presidents, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush called for significant China policy changes during their campaigns, in one form or another. Notably, of the five who called for substantial change as candidates, three ended up abandoning their rhetoric once elected (Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush), settling on policies more consistent with those of their predecessors. Strategic imperatives, limited resources, China's diplomacy and economic interests are among the reasons for the divergence between initial proclamations and actual policy. Conversely, Nixon, Ford and George H.W. Bush implemented policies logically consistent with their campaigns and previous writings.

In short, there is a tendency for candidates to want to change aspects of America's China policy, only to discover upon taking office that the equilibrium struck by their predecessor had more wisdom, or pragmatism, than initially thought.

### PREDICTING PRESIDENTIAL EFFECTIVENESS

There are three facets of a president that are predictive of success in China-related policy. If any of these domains is highly deficient, a president's agenda can get derailed.

#### 1 PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

As previously noted, five of the last seven presidents came into office with personal commitments to change significant aspects of China policy, but three soon backed off in deference to practical limitations. Even the three who eventually backed off experienced rough patches with China and faced substantial struggles within their administrations.

Reagan came into office believing that Taiwan had received a "raw deal" from Carter. He was determined to rectify that, went through a year of struggle with China, chewed up one secretary of state (Alexander Haig) and ended up signing a communiqué with Beijing in 1982 that he did not like. Bill Clinton expressed commitment to human rights in China during his first

campaign for president, fought during his first year in office to link human rights to Beijing's tariff treatment and ended up executing a humiliating U-turn.

History shows it often takes a heavy dose of reality to get new presidents committed to a new path to change course. Prior to 9-11, George W. Bush seemed committed to a more strategically competitive view of China than Clinton. Like Reagan, he seemed more sympathetic to Taiwan, only to realize after 9-11 that America had seen the enemy and it was not China.

## ② LEVEL OF INTEREST AND ENGAGEMENT

Some presidents have come into office determined to be highly engaged in China policy, while others initially sought less involvement. Regardless of intentions, without exception China comes to play a major role in modern American presidencies.

There are four factors that typically have forced presidents to become highly engaged with China: (1) The president wishes to bring about major changes in the relationship (Nixon, Carter, Reagan and Clinton); (2) An administration wants to resist a congressional or popular onslaught on China policy (Carter, George H.W. Bush and Clinton); (3) An administration itself is highly divided about China policy and the president must become the referee (Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush); and, of course (4) A crisis with China



President George H.W. Bush speaking to AmCham members in 1998

occurs (Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton and George W. Bush). You can anticipate that a president will encounter one or more of these circumstances, perhaps frequently, in their term(s) of office. When they do, China inevitably becomes a major policy issue.

## ③ POLICY TEAM STRUCTURE

The single most important personnel decision a president must make in this domain is whether or not to have a high-level person designated clearly as the president's voice and lead on China policy. The clearest cases of this have been Presidents Nixon, Carter and George H.W. Bush, who respectively had Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and General Brent Scowcroft in charge of China policy—at the National Security Council (NSC). When there were less visibly empowered personnel (e.g., during the first terms of Clinton and George W. Bush) more problems tended to arise.

China policy tends to work best when someone is in charge, the president is engaged, the Chinese know with whom to talk and the administration is disciplined. The combination of a disengaged president, strong cabinet officers with divergent views and a relatively weak NSC produces policy confusion in Beijing, on the Hill and among domestic and foreign interest groups who then exploit the divisions.

At the cabinet level, while there always will be differences, it is important to have basic cohesion on China policy among at least the secretary of state, the secretary of defense and the secretary of the treasury. For example, George W. Bush would have had a much more productive China policy initially had he paired Colin Powell (at State) with Robert Gates (at Defense), rather than Powell with Donald Rumsfeld, who often did not see eye-to-eye. In contrast, it is quite clear that Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson's interest in, and experience with, China has been a great asset for George W. Bush over the last few years.

In terms of the structure of the policy process, the last two administrations can serve as lessons. The first is that, under the George W. Bush Administration, there have been two National Security Council equivalents, namely the Office of the Vice President (with his

## Presidents Matter in China policy

Six of the most recent seven presidents made decisions that significantly changed the existing trajectory of US-China relations:

**Richard Nixon** broke with Cold War orthodoxy, visiting China in 1972.

**Jimmy Carter** normalized formal diplomatic relations with Beijing despite the opposition of many in Congress who worried about how the move would impact Taiwan.

**Ronald Reagan** signed a communiqué with China in 1982 aimed (unsuccessfully as it turned out) at removing Taiwan as a bone of contention in US-China relations.

**George H. W. Bush** resisted Congressional and popular demands to "punish" Beijing after Tiananmen Square in 1989.

**Bill Clinton** pushed to get China into the World Trade Organization.

**George W. Bush** articulated a more competitive definition of US-China relations in his campaign and early in his administration (only to reverse course after 9-11).

own large national security staff) and the NSC itself. Whatever the merits of the particular views held in each, these competing camps create confusion and inability to enforce policy. An activist vice president, with an independent and large staff in the national security area, is a formula for problems.

The second lesson comes from the National Economic Council, with Robert Rubin as its head, in the Clinton Administration. This was essentially a positive experience, though it also had


some problems. Given the increasing importance of economic and trade issues to US-China ties throughout the 1990s to today, it is essential to inject economic concerns into China policy-making at the highest levels. The use of Rubin did just that, with overall positive results.

Cutting across all of these bureaucratic and personnel issues is a larger question: how do the candidate (then president) and those around him look at the world in terms of power and big power relations? If they view the world in largely zero sum terms, look at hard (military power) as the preferred instrument of policy and believe that rising powers are destined to conflict with currently dominant powers, we probably will be headed for trouble with China.



Brian Buck

George W. Bush in Beijing, August 2008

If, on the other hand, they appreciate the need for hard power, but also believe in the possibility of cooperation and economic and soft power instruments, then the possibility for cooperative relations with China will be much enhanced. In the end, what a president and the people around him think, and how they choose to go about implementing this vision, are key to a successful relationship with China. 

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Obama for America



McCain-Palin 2008

# Absentee Voting Information

## Make sure your vote counts!

By *China Brief*

**T**he conventions are over, the vice presidential choices have been made and all that's left is for people to cast their ballots. Many AmCham-China members are US citizens who live in Beijing and other cities around the country, and they want to make sure that their votes count even though they are living far from home.

The US Embassy has a number of guidelines for making sure your vote counts, even if you cannot cast your ballot in person.

Vote absentee from overseas in the 2008 general election in four easy steps:

**1** Complete the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), obtainable from the American Citizen Services department of any US Embassy or Consulate, or online at the Federal Voting Assistance Program's website: [www.fvap.gov/pubs/fvca.html](http://www.fvap.gov/pubs/fvca.html)

**2** Mail the FPCA to your local election official in the state where you last resided immediately prior to depart-

ing the United States. Addresses for local officials can be found at the FVAP's website: [www.fvap.gov/pubs/vag.html#ch3](http://www.fvap.gov/pubs/vag.html#ch3)

**3** Upon determining your eligibility to vote, the local election official will mail the absentee ballot to you. It is imperative that the election officials be informed well in advance of the election date of any address changes.

**4** Complete the absentee ballot and mail it to the local election official. Please note that the deadlines for receiving absentee ballots vary from state to state, so be sure to mail your ballot in with enough time to comply with local rules.

For more information, look on the FVAP website:

[www.fvap.gov/pubs/fvca.html](http://www.fvap.gov/pubs/fvca.html), or e-mail [votebeijiing@state.gov](mailto:votebeijiing@state.gov)

*Special thanks to the US Embassy for this information.* 