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Should United States Foreign Policy Attempt to Contain or Appease China?

China has always been a major policy concern for the United States, but since 1949 that concern has taken on a particularly interesting character. It was in that year that China became a communist country and thus a threat to everything American. In response, United States policy made itself an enemy to China through imposed exclusion, containment, and harsh sanctions. The question is if such a containment policy is the best way to curb threats to world peace or if another policy might offer a better solution. The answer depends on your outlook on world politics. There are two main philosophies of world politics, realism and liberalism. Realists see states as the key actors in a world characterized by zero-sum gains with respect to security and autonomy. Liberals focus more on individuals and the common pursuit of freedom, security and better living conditions. Therefore, realists generally agree on more containment-oriented policy, while liberals push for appeasement.

Between World War II and 1950, the United States was China's major trading partner. However, as the communist party gained power in 1949 through the Chinese civil war, the United States, a traditional pursuer of realist goals in regards to world politics, began to place restrictions on trade with the newly communist country. Then, with the start of the Korean War in 1950, the United States placed a complete embargo on the People's Republic of China and Korea. The United States recognized the Republic of China in Taiwan as the official government of China and refused to let the People's Republic into the United Nations until 1971. During that time, the United

Nations placed trade controls on China and Korea that were even greater than those already in place on the USSR. All of these restrictions were based on a realist fear of the rise of communism.

These restrictions were not very effective at containing communism, however. China was able to get many embargoed items from the USSR, and this reliance pushed the People's Republic of China into the arms of the deeply communist Soviet Union. Also, as the realist adage states, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and thus China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union became united in their hatred of the United States. In fact, the unilateral demands that the United States made upon China even caused dissention with the United States in Europe. Most European nations disagreed with this harsh policy and as a result the United Nations embargo was overturned. Nonetheless, the United States still remained firm until 1958. In that year, President Eisenhower loosened trade sanctions with China. US-China relations began to improve, but there was still far to go. The real change in policy came when Nixon traveled to China in 1969, signifying increasing tendencies toward liberal politics. That year the embargo on all non-strategic exports to China was lifted and relations began to improve. Still, most other western countries had been working more closely with China for years and this procrastination on the part of the United States left the country economically disadvantaged. It was not until 1979 that United States and PRC officials finally came together and formed a general trade agreement to foster close economic relations.

Today there is no question as to whether the PRC is a major world power. It is the country with the largest population in the world, is the fastest growing consumer of US goods, and has an economy that is growing at a rate more than three times that of the United States. From a liberal point of view, this is very good. The people of China

obviously benefit from living in such an economy, and the people of the United States and other states also benefit from increased trade and opportunities. However, from a realist point of view this is not so good, because in a zero-sum view of the world, the United States is losing comparative clout. Interest groups within the United States thus raise concerns about lower wages in China and the resulting loss of jobs in America as industries move to Asia. The growth of the PRC thus threatens the United States.

With its enormous population and amazing rate of growth, China could easily surpass the United States in economic power and world influence with time. This could be one of the main reasons for many barriers to trade between the two world powers, but there are other reasons as well. The United States is reluctant to give Most Favored Nation status to China mostly because of rampant violations of intellectual property rights. China has only recently had a policy to protect such property with copyrights and patents, so violations are frequent and hurt US exports greatly. Many policy makers and advocate groups also point to China's history of human rights abuses and say that this is cause for US action.

There are two opinions of how the United States should deal with these infringements. Some policy makers believe we should limit trade with the PRC until such rights are respected. This punitive measure would theoretically force China into reforming its non-democratic political system, one which makes some level of human rights infringement unavoidable. Liberals, however, suggest that such policy will only make China look more inward and it will subsequently become more authoritarian and further oppress its lower class. Economically, this policy only hurts the United States. It limits profits by blocking the sale of US intellectual goods in China and encourages intellectual piracy by raising the costs of copyrighted material in the PRC. In addition,

consumers in the US want open borders to create overseas markets for US goods and also to allow access to goods that can be produced more efficiently overseas. Open trade between the United States and China should promote long term economic development domestically as well.

On purely political grounds, however, with economics put aside, realists suggest that force is the only way to impose international order on China. David M. Lampton claims that “A continued, significant American forward military presence in East Asia will be an indispensable element if stability is to be maintained.” This implies, though, that in order for the United States to impose international order on China, it has to accept the role of leader of the free, civilized world, and the moral and military responsibility that goes along with that. If the United States is to force China into becoming a “good” world neighbor, it must take a very strong stance. A display of demonstration force and loud words only serve to make enemies for the US. However, the United States is not ready to take on the role of the world’s police force or the associated responsibilities due to domestic constraints. Therefore the United States is unable to enforce democracy and free trade in the PRC.

Liberals suggest that the best way to encourage correction of human rights violations in China is to invite China to be an equal in the community of international trade. There is enough evidence to support the opinion that appeasement would do more to improve relations than the current policy of containment. In Metzger’s words, PRC policy “at worst is ambiguous, at best, inclined toward participation in the world system.” The current leadership in China seems to have a strong desire to be respected as an exemplary society. For example, since the United States has made an effort to form better relations with China, China has responded by siding with the United States on

many issues. China sided with the United States in Desert Storm, signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, joined the Technology Control regime as well as the Berne Convention on intellectual property rights, and is active in anti-drug campaigns. These things all make China seem like a more cooperative nation in the eyes of powerful countries in today's world. All of these are things that the realists' trade barriers and containment policy could not bring about.

Another one of the major reasons that realist policy has failed to bring China into the international community is because it fails to take into consideration who the Chinese are as a people. The Chinese people and their leaders have been convinced that it is the destiny of China to become the greatest of all nations. Therefore, pride will prevent the Chinese from joining the international community when it is led by a self-righteous United States intent on keeping China down. In fact, there is much to be gained in terms of soft power if the United States is to promote friendly relations with China. The political power of the US market could be a major influence on Chinese policy if trade barriers come down. By giving the Chinese full access to American goods and by becoming a major importer of Chinese goods, a close economic relationship could lead to closer political ties. Also, a Chinese population dependant on US goods and cultural imports would be an incentive for the government to maintain close relations with the Western world.

The obvious answer to the problems with China has begun to find its way into United States politics now. Current policy is to encourage commerce and to take advantage of China's desire to be accepted and acclaimed. By appeasing China, the United States works itself into a place of trust with the PRC government. China seems to be much more responsive to this policy of diffuse reciprocity than it does to sanctions.

This trust will lead to openness between the two world powers and will give the United States and United Nations a better view of exactly how well China is adhering to world standards in human rights and intellectual property rights. President Clinton stresses the need for clear information and claims that the solution to current disputes is through open relationships. He says, "We must build on opportunities for cooperation with China where we agree, even as we strongly defend our interests and values where we disagree." He turns the issue of human rights over to the United Nations. From there, observation shows that China is likely to change its policy if it is seen by the international community as less civilized than western cultures. With public censure coming from the international community instead of the traditionally antagonistic United States, it will take on more weight. Therefore, such censure of Chinese rights violations from a friendly nation or a respectable community is more likely to bring about change than trade sanctions and hostile relations.

For decades the United States has taken a predominantly realist view towards international relations, particularly with respect to the People's Republic of China. However, time has shown the fallacy of this policy. The liberal appeasement stance taken by most European countries has proven to be much more effective at promoting a good relationship with the world power and encouraging it to become more open and less threatening. Now, US policy makers are realizing their mistake and through the implementation of liberal policy hope to integrate China into a cooperative world order with all of the other major world powers.

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