

## Building Coalitions and Making US Policy toward China

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**Abstract** One of the most frequently asked questions in the era of US-China rivalry is which country South Korea should side with. Although the Republic of Korea has been a staunch military ally with the United States ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, it is also hard to ignore the fact that China is a rising economic powerhouse as well as a neighboring superpower. In this paper, I argue that we could wait until after the United States, at least, would decide. As America is still struggling with the question of how to handle China, South Korea doesn't have to jump to a conclusion. I claim that when leaders in America try to manage the rise of China, they have hard time forming consensus. China strategies have differed from one administration to another, not to mention the positions of the Capitol Hill. Domestic preferences and pressures are equally critical for explaining the inconsistency and contradictions in Washington's policy toward Beijing. Divisions within Republican and Democratic ranks over the benefits and costs of China's economic rise have made it even more difficult than before for presidents to find common ground within their own parties, let alone to find consensus across party lines.

**Keywords** US China policy. Political Parties. Cross-cutting issue. partisan polarization

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## Introduction

Over the course of American political history, Democratic Presidents' foreign policy achievements have often met with Republican Congress's domestic political abandonments. There are numerous examples, from Wilson's Versailles Treaty in 1919 to Clinton's CTBT in 1999. The context of institutional politics in US that has been paid attention mostly for domestic policy reasons, not necessarily for foreign policy outcomes. In the era of Trump presidency, all things seem to have changed. A Republican president is leading the charge of anti-China trade war, with both Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill being nervous. The farm state GOP members are loyal to Trump and yet worried about the consequence of China's retaliation. Democratic members of the Congress, on the other hand, are supportive of China-bashing policy and yet concerned about the president who could possibly take the long-standing protectionism agenda away from the Democratic Party. The US-China relationship is being further complex by the changing context of the executive-legislative conflicts, along with party competitions, in America's domestic politics.

One of the most frequently asked questions in the era of US-China rivalry is which country South Korea should side with. Although the Republic of Korea has been a staunch military ally with the United States ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, it is also hard to ignore the fact that China is a rising economic powerhouse as well as a neighboring superpower. Some argue that we should rely on the American troops for security concerns whereas it is economically smart to strengthen the ties with China. Others claim that we have to choose the United States at the expense of China or vice versa in the end. The age of G-2 appears to present such a tough decision South Korea should make in the upcoming years.

In this paper, I argue that we could wait until after the United States, at least, would decide. When America is still struggling with the question of how to handle China, why would the South Korean government and the public have to jump to a conclusion? I claim that when leaders in America try to manage the rise of China, they have hard time forming consensus. China strategies have differed from one administration to another, not to mention the positions of the Capitol Hill. US strategic imperatives stress somewhat dilemma situation facing China as a big market as well as a huge threat (Tellis, 2014). On top of that, unlike the former Soviet Union, China has entered the various life style of American people ever since the normalization in 1979. Americans eat Chinese foods and they wear Chinese sneakers. Thus, my main argument is that domestic preferences and pressures are equally critical for explaining the inconsistency and contradictions in Washington's policy toward Beijing. Divisions within Republican and Democratic ranks over the benefits and costs of China's economic rise have made it even more difficult than before for presidents to find common ground within their own parties, let alone to find consensus across party lines.

Then, it is necessary to depart from the accounts of US strategy toward China that treat it as a choice between "engagement" and "containment." While this is a convenient shorthand description, it obscures the deeper structure of the debate and misleads characterizations about the pressures driving U.S. policy toward China. As I show, the China debate is more usefully modeled along the line of coalition-building politics in America. Modeling the debate this way leads to four different "ideal type" of partisan politics concerning China: "bipartisanship," "partisanship," "wedge politics" and "cross-cutting politics."

This analysis reveals three things. First, I show that there are strong parallels between the scholarly debate over China's rise and the public debate in Washington. In both cases, the debate is more complex and multidimensional than conventional wisdom holds. Second, the public debate over China is less polarized along partisan lines than other foreign policy issues. While Republicans are more supportive of efforts to integrate China into the international economy than Democrats, both parties are internally divided over how actively to balance against China militarily. In essence, where lawmakers stand on China depends more on whom they represent than what party they belong to. Finally, my analysis helps explain why presidents have eschewed a strategy of pure engagement or containment. Given the divisions over how to deal with Beijing, presidents do not want to leave themselves open to charges that they are either weak or reckless when it comes to China.

The paper is organized into four sections. I begin by sketching out the main dimensions of partisan debate over China's rise and use them to identify the main competing approaches or strategies toward Beijing. The next section operationalizes these dimensions and approaches using congressional roll call votes. I use these measures to highlight the geopolitical and domestic political trade-offs structuring the China debate and test several hypotheses to explain variations in congressional support for integration and balancing. In the concluding section, I consider the implications of the analysis for the debate over China and the future of US strategy toward the region. The analysis helps explain why no single strategy for dealing with China has taken root domestically.

## **Structure of Party Politics over the China Debate**

During the Cold War period, the so-called "Cold War Consensus" prevented partisan politics in America's domestic politics from fully prevailing. As the American citizens were tremendously obsessed with the cause of anti-communism, both Republican and Democratic Party could not cross the line of anti-Stalin sentiment. The Sputnik Crisis of 1957 followed by the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 cemented the panic and fear among the public concerning the Soviet Union. As a consequence, politics had stop at the water's edge, as recommended by the Michigan Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg for his efforts to cooperate with the Truman administration in the early Cold War era.

After the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, domestic politics in America has come back to the normalcy. Presidents appear to care more about domestic agendas such as the health insurance, education, and tax cuts rather than foreign policy tasks like the reconfiguration of American grand strategy. For sure, the presidencies of Clinton, Bush, and Obama could not completely escape from international challenges. The Clinton administration pressed Congress to allow for China's status of permanent normal trade relations. The 9/11 terror attacks and the Iraq War haunted the entire Bush presidency. President Obama had to meet with Xi Jinping to strike a deal for climate change. Overall, however, the American public has wanted the peace dividend and expected their presidents to focus on the economy and welfare, not the war and defense.

The so-called "Obama-Trump voters" in the Midwest region demonstrate the significance of electoral forces so critical in the era of post-Cold War and political polarization. A group of voters who elected Obama back to back in 2008 and 2012 changed their partisan minds to

select Trump for president in 2016. What they felt was a sense of betrayal against the first black president in American history who once called for the “nation-building at home.” The same angry electorate embraced the relationship with the candidate who was not only “politically incorrect” but also “emotionally connected.” Facing the external threat of “America in decline” as well as the internal trouble of being potentially replaced by minorities, white and low-education conservatives hastily rallied behind Trump calling for nationalism and nativism.

For instance, free trade in the name of globalization simply aggravated the life of white working class with their factories and jobs gone to China and Mexico. The mainstream Republican Party, ridiculed as the “country club Republicans” by social conservatives, has been close to the Wall Street, not the Main Street. The Democratic Party, on the contrary, seems to have shifted their focus away from “every-day-kitchen-table issues” to climate change and gender movement. Either the socialists or the environmentalists are taking over the Democratic Party, which used to be the party of America’s labor and working class. The voters displaced and disillusioned appear to rally behind the Trump presidency and American politics is heading into the climax of political and economic polarization.

How does party politics play out in the context of the post-Cold War, the post-Iraq War, the post-financial crisis, and the post-Obama presidency? In theory, two-party system since the period of Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists poses four different outcomes of party competition and cooperation. Figure 1 shows the categorization of party politics along the line of issue division. First, bipartisanship is a possibility. Both parties are supportive of the issue or opposed altogether to the issue. Second, partisanship is when one party is for the issue, whereas the rival party is against the idea. Third, wedge issue politics is the case when the issue is unifying one party and dividing the other party. Fourth, cross-cutting politics is to have both parties internally split over the issue. American party politics ever since the creation of the republic has shaped and reshaped its competition and cooperation structure along the line of these four situations.

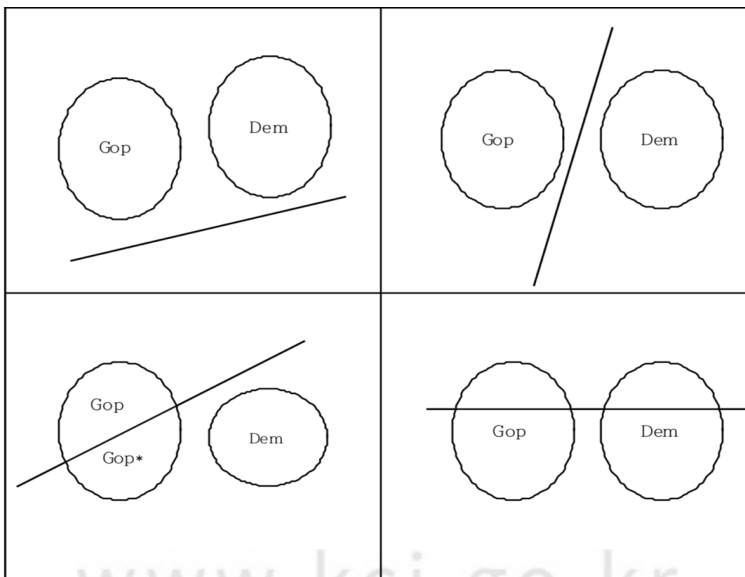


Fig. 1 Categorization of Party Politics by Issue Division

The China question over the course American politics can be categorized into one of these four scenarios. The non-action against president's waiver of the Jackson-Vanik amendment from the normalization in 1979 through the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 is an example of bipartisan response to China. As the Jackson-Vanik amendment prohibited the United States from economically engaging with non-market communist countries, both President Carter and Reagan had to employ the waive of the provision unless Congress would pass the disapproving resolution. Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill agreed to envision free and democratic China through economic and social development. Obviously, the so-called China fantasy completely failed when the American public watched on TV a protester who stood up to block a tank by himself during the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Partisanship is the new buzz word in the era of political polarization in America and yet it is not at all easy to find an example of partisan politics surrounding the China issue. For instance, Democratic Senator Cardin (D-MD) proposed a bill to empower the US Trade Representative and investigate China for currency manipulation. Concerned about China's retaliation and their president's foreign policy stance, the Republican Party vowed to defeat the measure. Democratic Party, having lost the presidential election in 2004, had to show their unity so that almost all of Democrats voted yea to the bill. What is surprising, though, is that the question of China, from military to economic agendas, has not always signified partisan differences in American domestic politics. Both parties often tend to stand together for symbolic support or opposition related to China issues. Otherwise, parties frequently had to deal with their internal disagreements over the China question.

Wedge issue politics is one of the two cases involving intra-party divides. In the aftermath of the Great Compromise of 1876, the Democratic Party successfully came back to national politics despite the Civil War defeat. In the midterm election year of 1882, the Republican Party was divided over how to handle Chinese laborer. California was such a critical swing state in the 1880s where white laborers were increasingly hostile against Chinese workers for wage competition and no assimilation. Eastern Republicans wanted to stick to the party of Lincoln tradition. Western GOP members wanted to exclude Chinese workers for their election survival. Divided Republicans and united Democrats ultimately agreed to prohibit Chinese workers from entering the American soil for ten years. Given the characteristics of the two-party competition in the United States, wedge issue politics exposing one party's split would not last long. Either party leadership or party rank-and-file members work hard to solve intra-party discords.

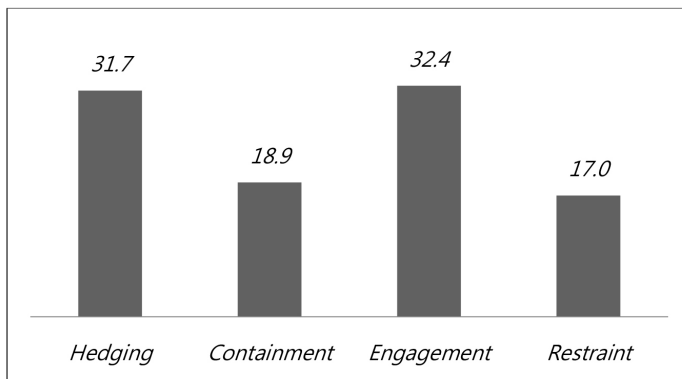
What if both parties are internally divided over a specific policy agenda? The cross-cutting party politics has to do with the situation where both GOP and the Democratic party fail to unite their members when it comes to a China question. In 2005, right after George W. Bush was reelected, the European Union tried to lift their previous sanctions against China for her brutal massacre in 1989. America was not ready to endorse the EU's position change and political parties sought to tight the hands of their European allies. Rep. Hyde (R-IL), the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, proposed a tough bill against the EU and yet both Republicans and Democrats were split.

A group of GOP members voted nay as they were concerned about the bill to weaken their president's foreign policy power. Social conservatives, on the other hand, agreed with the Chairman on the needs to put pressure on the EU. Some Democrats tried to pass the bill, which would deal a heavy blow to China's human right violation. Others within the same Democratic

Party were opposed as they worried about giving too much credit to the Republicans over the question of China-bashing. For sure, cross-cutting party politics is relatively rare in the era of polarization. At the same time, it is to symbolize where party politic stands over the question of China, which currently constitutes a huge dilemma as security challenge and economic necessity.

## Partisan Politics and Domestic Determinants of China Strategies

My contention is that the political debate in Washington is structured along partisan competition lines – that the policy prescriptions foreign policy analysts advance are to be mirrored on Capitol Hill. Moreover, Republican and Democratic lawmakers cluster in different categories in Figures 1. It is of course not difficult to identify elected officials whose views about China's rise and the appropriate response fall into one of these quadrants. Demonstrating this systematically, however, is more challenging than expected. This is because appropriate data is scarce. Opinion surveys do not generally ask elected leaders (or other elites for that matter) to judge alternative strategic responses to China.<sup>1</sup> Congressional roll call votes can provide greater insight since they often require elected officials to reveal their preferences with respect to one policy or another. Even here there are limits. Many of the votes that lawmakers take are “position-taking” votes – votes that reveal little about their real policy preferences (Nokken, 2003).



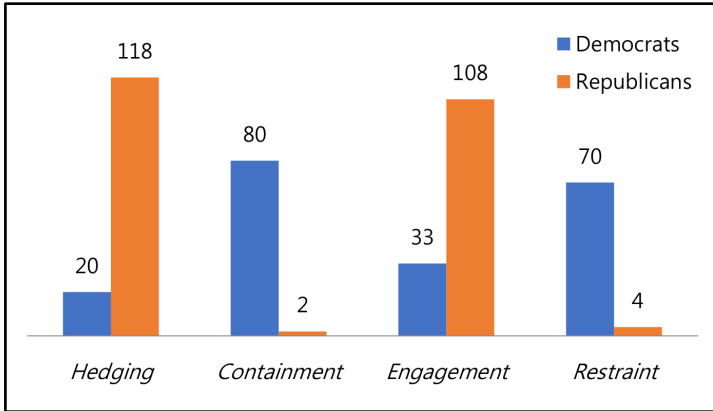
Source: CQ Almanac, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress

**Fig. 2** Congressional support for US strategies toward China (2005-06), percentage

For present purposes I constructed two indicators from congressional roll call votes – one measuring support for economic integration, the other support for strategic balancing in the 109<sup>th</sup> (2005-06) Congress, for instance. The preliminary results are summarized in Figures 2 and 3. Two things are immediately apparent. First, there is no single preferred strategy that has

<sup>1</sup> Two exceptions include Tao Xie and Benjamin I. Page, “Americans and the Rise of China as a World Power,” *Journal of Contemporary China* Vol. 19, No. 65, (2010), pp. 479–501 and Peter Hays Gries and H. Michael Crowson, “Political Orientation, Party Affiliation, and American Attitudes Towards China,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* Vol. 15, (2010), pp. 219-44.

come out of Capitol Hill. While more lawmakers subscribe to the strategies of engagement and hedging than containment and restraint in Figure 3, the distribution of support in Congress is more varied and uneven than some accounts of US policy-making toward China's rise suggest (Xie, 2006). There is also little evidence to suggest, as some have, that hedging (conengagement) is the proverbial "sweet spot" in the debate over how to deal with China (Sutter et al, 2013; Gresser & Twining, 2013).



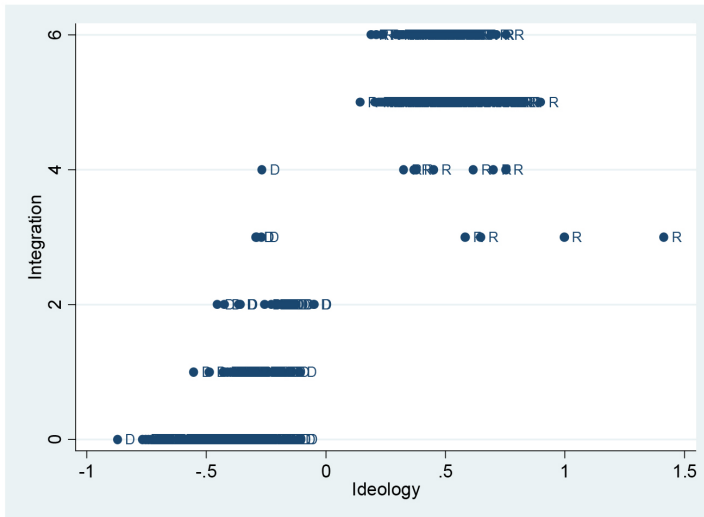
Source: CQ Almanac, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress

**Fig. 3** Congressional support for US strategies toward China, by party affiliation (2005-2006)

Secondly, it is evident that the distribution of support for the four strategies toward China is not highly correlated with party affiliation. Republican lawmakers in Figure 4 largely favor policies that seek to integrate China into the international economy; Democrats overwhelmingly support "get tough" economic policies toward Beijing. However, Republicans and Democrats do not divide as neatly on the question of strategic balancing. Members of both parties favor strategic restraint as well as strategic balancing.<sup>2</sup> Thus, ideology is still an imperfect guide to lawmakers' preferences. As Figure 4 reveals, many conservatives and liberals find themselves somewhere in between: wanting closer ties with China, but willing to punish Beijing for its trade practices. As a result, the voting alignments are neither strictly bipartisan nor partisan; they are cross-partisan.

To better understand congressional variation in responses to China's rise, I ran ordered logistic regression analyses for the 109<sup>th</sup> House. These are summarized in Table 1. The dependent variable refers to the level of support for economic integration and for strategic balancing. The main independent variables include party affiliation (Republican), ideological orientation (Ideology), and reliance on labor's support (Labor). Previous work has demonstrated that each affects congressional support for foreign trade or national security (Baldwin & Magee, 2000; Grossman & Helpman, 2002; Fordham, 2008; Trubowitz & Seo, 2002). I also included several

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, Democrats make up a large proportion of the lawmakers who support containment – a strategy that puts a premium on the kind of policy instruments (e.g., military spending, forward deployments) that political analysts associated with the Republican Party. This may partly reflect the small number of roll call votes used to construct the measure of support for balancing against China.



Source: CQ Almanac, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress

**Fig. 4** Ideology and Congressional support for integration strategy toward China (2005-06)

variables that might conceivably influence lawmakers' policy preferences regarding China: membership in a moderate caucus (Centrist), size of Asian constituency (Asian), geographic location of district (Rural), years in Congress (Seniority), religiosity of members (Religion), educational level of constituents (Education), and membership on either the Foreign Relations or Armed Services committees.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis indicates several things. First, the impact of party affiliation on congressional behavior is mixed. Party does help explain where lawmakers stand on integration (Republicans are more likely to support closer economic ties with China than are Democrats), but it has no significant effect on lawmakers' support for (opposition to) strategic balancing. Republicans can be counted on to support integrationist policies such as free and open trade; Democrats on Capitol Hill can be expected to oppose them. But efforts to actively balance against Chinese power are more likely cut across party lines, resulting in bipartisan or at least, what political analysts call cross-partisanship.<sup>4</sup> Given the high levels of partisan polarization in Congress on

<sup>3</sup> *CQ's Politics in America* (2006) is the source of the following variables: *Republican*, *Rural*, *Asian*, *Seniority*, *Religion* and *Education*. For *Ideology*, I use the measure of foreign policy conservatism offered by the *National Journal*, a nonpartisan publication covering American politics. Ranging from 0 to 100, higher scores denote more support for military spending, free trade, and executive power. *Labor* refers to Labor Union PAC support was drawn from the website of [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org). *Centrist* refers to membership in the New Democratic Coalition and Republican Main Street Partnership – two party caucuses made up of moderate Democrats and Republicans, respectively. The logic here follows Jungkun Seo and Sean M. Theriault, "Moderate Caucuses in a Polarized U.S. Congress," *Journal of Legislative Studies* Vol. 18, no. 2 (2012), pp. 203-21.

<sup>4</sup> Bipartisan roll call votes refer to votes where majorities of both parties vote on the same side of an issue. Cross-partisan votes refer to roll calls where minorities of varying sizes in both parties vote on the same side of an issue in opposition to majorities in their respective parties.

most other foreign policy issues during the George W. Bush years, one might have anticipated party to have a more consistent impact (Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007).

**Table 1** Ordered Logistic regression model of support for economic integration and strategic balancing, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (2005-06)

Variable	109 <sup>th</sup> Congress	
	Integration	Balancing
Republican	<b>8.297 ***</b> (1.21)	-0.482 (0.416)
Ideology	<b>0.032 ***</b> (.008)	<b>0.025 ***</b> (0.007)
Labor	<b>-0.070 ***</b> (0.024)	<b>0.039 **</b> (0.018)
Asian	-0.013 (0.029)	0.014 (0.022)
Rural	<b>0.017 ***</b> (0.006)	-0.004 (0.006)
Centrist	<b>0.845 ***</b> (0.25)	-0.321 (0.248)
Seniority	0.014 (0.013)	<b>-0.020 *</b> (0.012)
Religion	-0.270 (0.302)	0.427 (0.281)
Education	-0.005 (0.015)	-0.018 (0.013)
Foreign Relations	-0.418 (0.367)	0.304 (0.327)
Armed Services	0.084 (0.292)	-0.363 (0.289)
<i>Log-likelihood</i>	-333.73	-305.59
<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.49	0.05
<i>N</i>	431	431

Source: CQ Almanac, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress

Ideological orientation and ties to labor are more consistent predictors of lawmakers' policy preferences toward China than party. As Table 1 indicates, the more conservative lawmakers are on foreign policy generally, the more likely they will favor economic integration *and* strategic balancing toward China. Conservative lawmakers are likely to support strategic responses toward China's rise that combine economic carrots and military sticks. Liberal lawmakers, by contrast, are more supportive of strategies that combine the carrot of military cooperation with punitive economic sticks. That said ideology remains an imperfect guide to lawmakers' preferences. As Figure 5 reveals, many conservatives and liberals find themselves somewhere in between: wanting closer ties with China, but willing to punish Beijing for its trade practices.

Finally, our analysis makes clear that where lawmakers stand on China has something to do with their ties to organized labor. Lawmakers that can count on labor's support in the form of campaign contributions are significantly less likely to support free and open trade with China and more likely to vote for efforts to actively balance against Beijing in East Asia. That

lawmakers favoring more punitive economic policies toward China have closer ties to organized labor is not surprising. Previous research on the role of interest groups and campaign contributions on congressional voting suggests as much (Baldwin & Magee, 2000; Grossman & Helpman, 2002). It also comports well with journalistic accounts of U.S. policy toward China since the end of the Cold War (Mann, 2000). Perhaps more surprising is the high correlation between labor support and strategic balancing. We would expect lawmakers with ties to labor to be more concerned about the domestic (“guns versus butter”) opportunity costs of balancing against China (Trubowitz, 2011). One possible explanation for this anomaly is that the votes used to calculate support for balancing do not include direct votes on military spending.

The results summarized in Table 1 underscore the importance of domestic politics in understanding why there is so little consensus in Washington over how to respond to China’s rise. For conservative lawmakers who do not depend on the support of domestic interests (e.g., labor) hurt by China’s economic rise a strategy of engagement or hedging makes sense. Not only is it consistent with their geopolitical and economic beliefs; it is also relatively cost free politically. Meanwhile, for liberal lawmakers that do have close ties to labor, it is safer politically to favor strategies that put a premium on punishing China economically: containment and restraint. There is every reason to assume that the reverse is true when business interests are involved: Republicans would be more likely to worry about political retribution for being too hard on Beijing; Democrats would likely feel less constrained.

The results in Table 1 are suggestive, but there are grounds for caution. For one thing, the analysis here is based on a relatively small number of roll call votes.<sup>5</sup> This is because the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress gave members of Congress few chances to take a public position on U.S. policy toward China.<sup>6</sup> A larger number of votes are needed to check for robustness. Secondly, the analysis here is limited to one Congress – the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (2005-06). It would be good to know whether these patterns of alignment changed in important ways following the 2008 economic collapse and growing anxiety about Beijing’s ambitions since 2010. Ideally, I would like to track voting patterns on China policy back to the early 1990s as well to see whether the structure of political alignment has changed much since the end of the Cold War eroded one of the pillars of Sino-American cooperation: containing Soviet power.

## Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War America’s leaders have struggled to articulate a coherent and consistent strategy toward China. Some foreign policy experts attribute this inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy to conflicting strategic demands that prevent Washington from adopting a strategy of either comprehensive engagement or unrestrained containment. Presidents who veer too far in either direction on the engagement-containment spectrum are invariably forced by international imperatives to reverse course. From this perspective, the Obama administration’s

<sup>5</sup> The integration variable in Table 1 is based on votes having to do with China’s trade practices (see Appendix I). The balancing index is based on votes over arms sales to China.

<sup>6</sup> One might argue that because lawmakers have few opportunities to cast policy votes on China these few votes take on additional importance.

“pivot” to Asia is but the most recent example. Having sought to encourage closer cooperation with Beijing early in his presidency, mounting fears of Chinese power in East Asia forced Obama to reverse itself by adopting policies closer to the containment end of the spectrum.

International explanations of U.S. policy toward China rest on a model of presidential choice that is too simplistic. Presidents do factor Chinese behavior into their policy choices, but they do so for domestic political as well as geopolitical reasons. The domestic political challenge that Presidents face is that there is little consensus over how to “manage” China’s rise, even within their parties. While Republicans are more supportive of efforts to integrate China into the international economy than are Democrats, both parties are internally divided over how actively to balance against China militarily. Presidents thus have domestic political incentives to avoid appearing too accommodating and too confrontational toward Beijing. Moreover, because their own party is divided over how to deal with China, they cannot easily play the “China card” to gain electoral advantage over the opposing party.

As I have shown, the political topography of the China debate in the United States is more complex and multidimensional than conventional wisdom holds. Elected officials do not treat the military and economic dimensions of U.S. policy as though they are interchangeable. Some politicians favor a hard line on one and a softer line on the other; others see wisdom in toeing a hard line on both; and still others favor a more cooperative approach on both military and economic matters. When seen from this vantage point, it becomes easier to see why no single strategy toward China – containment, engagement, hedging, or restraint – dominates domestically and why presidents have proven to be remarkably flexible and pragmatic in how they approach Beijing over the course of their presidencies.

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