

Has American Policy Encouraged China to Become a “Responsible Stakeholder”-Or the Reverse?”

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate evolution of the relationship between the United States (U.S.) and China, with a focus on American policies influencing China’s role as a “responsible stakeholder” (“RS”). It examines whether U.S. engagement policies have catalyzed China’s emergence as a responsible global player or steered Beijing in a direction contrary to U.S. expectation. This paper first reveals the historical evolution of U.S.-China relations, starting with the containment policy in the 1950s to the post-1989 engagement policy. Then it examines the perspectives of the U.S. and China on “RS.” Both sides share the same bed but with different dreams. Next, the paper identifies the failures and successes of U.S. engagement policy. The paper concludes that engagement policy is not a complete failure and the result is nuanced.

Keywords: U.S.-China relation, engagement policy, responsible stakeholder, rise of China

1. Introduction

The relationship between the United States (the U.S.) and China, particularly in the context of American policy influencing China’s role as a “responsible stakeholder” (“RS”), presents a fascinating and complex narrative of international relations, strategic engagement, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. This research paper delves into the intricate evolution of this relationship, exploring whether American policy has been a catalyst for China’s emergence as a responsible global player or, conversely, has driven Beijing towards a path contrary to Washington’s expectations. The American policy in this context refers to the engagement policy.

The analysis is structured into three interconnected parts, each offering a unique lens to view the multifaceted U.S.-China interactions. Part II provides a historical perspective on the U.S. engagement policy towards China. It aims to dissect these policies' motivations, strategies, and outcomes, setting the stage for understanding their impact on China’s global role. Part III delves into the concept of a “RS.” It juxtaposes the U.S. and Chinese perspectives on this concept, a contrast in perceptions that is critical in assessing the effectiveness of U.S. policy in influencing China’s international conduct. Part IV addresses the central thesis. It critically analyzes the array of U.S. policies and their multifaceted impacts on China. It explores how specific U.S. strategies may have successfully nudged China towards global responsibility, while others might have inadvertently led to a more assertive and arguably less “responsible” Chinese posture.

This inquiry is pivotal in understanding the past and present dynamics of U.S.-China relations and crucial in shaping future international policy and strategy.

2. The Engagement Policy Odyssey

2.1 From Containment to Engagement

The “RS” concept comes from the engagement policy, yet it is not the whole story. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there was no formal diplomatic relationship between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the U.S. The U.S.’s policy towards the PRC was the containment. The Sino-Soviet split and the U.S.’s preparation for withdrawal from Vietnam facilitated the possibility of reconciliation between the PRC and the U.S. The normalization of PRC-U.S. relations started in the early 1970s, following Nixon’s visit, and culminated in the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1979 [1]. In the 1970s and 1980s, the primary purpose of engagement policy was not to transform China into an “RS” but rather to leverage the PRC as a geopolitical counterbalance to the Soviet Union. However, this policy did open avenues for potentially altering China’s global role [2-3]. Nixon articulated this perspective, *“We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation [4].”*

2.2 Origine of “RS”

The version of the engagement policy commonly recognized is the post-1989 one. The Tiananmen Square incident marked the end of the “honeymoon” period in the 1980s Sino-U.S. relationship. Subsequently, the end of the Cold War left China as the sole major communist power. Despite his initial anti-PRC rhetoric, President Clinton continued the engagement policy [2]. In a 1995 conversation with President Jiang Zemin, Clinton stated, *“a stable, open and prosperous China-in other words, a strong China-is in our interest. We welcome China to the great power table. But great powers also have great responsibilities.”* [5]. Following this, the U.S. reiterated this term several times. In the mid-1990s, Europe, Japan, and the rest of Asia also emphasized in their engagement policies the objective of shaping China into a “responsible power” [6]. A pivotal engagement policy under the Clinton Administration was China’s accession into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Clinton believed, *“By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products; it is agreeing to import one of democracy’s most cherished values-economic freedom.”* [7]. Without the 911 incident, this engagement policy might have concluded in the early 2000s, as the Bush Administration perceived China as a *“military competitor with a formidable resource base”* [8]. However, after 911, the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America referred to the US-Sino relationship as *“an important part of our strategy to promote a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia Pacific region”* [9]. The Bush Administration deepened the engagement policy, leveraging China’s indispensable support in counterterrorism [10]. The well-known “RS” originates from Robert Zoellick’s speech *“it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China’s membership into the international system: We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system. China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success [11].”* The post-Cold War engagement served economic and security interests of both countries, even as China emerged as a potential challenger to the U.S. hegemony [12].

2.3 The Fall of the Engagement Policy

After the 2008 financial crisis, the engagement policy began to falter. Initially, Barack Obama was optimistic about China’s potential to become an “RS” and proposed the concept of a US-China “Group of Two” to address the financial crisis. However, China not only rejected this proposal but blamed the West for the crisis and adopted a more assertive stance in the international arena. Consequently, Obama shifted from a cooperative engagement to a cautious one, aiming to hedge

against China's rise. In 2011 he initiated the "Pivot to Asia" [2, 12]. The Xi Jinping Administration signalled the final disillusionment for the U.S. Xi markedly changed Chinese foreign policy from "maintaining a low profile" to "striving to achieve." During the 2016 election, it was evident that China had lost favor with both Republicans and Democrats [1]. The U.S.'s 2017 National Security Strategy labelled China as a "revisionist power", signifying the official end of the engagement policy [13].

3. Same Bed, Different Dreams

3.1 The View from the U.S.

The U.S. view of "RS" prima facie recognizes China's important role in the international system. This term implies that the U.S. considers China as an essential participant, with a vested interest in upholding a U.S.-led liberal international system. In essence, the "RS" approach perceives China more as an opportunity than a threat. The U.S. demonstrated this perspective by establishing a series of bilateral dialogues across diverse domains, including the environment, climate change, terrorism, and traditional security [14].

This term also introduces a set of "behavioral benchmarks" that Washington used to evaluate Beijing's actions [14]. In Zoellick's 2005 speech, he outlined several key issues that Washington expected Beijing to address: economically, he urged Beijing to enhance market competition fairness, combat piracy, protect intellectual property rights, and address currency manipulation; in foreign policy, he warned against the mercantilist approach to energy, called for assistance in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), support in the fight against terrorism, and critiques support for regimes violating human rights or back terrorist groups [11]. As an "RS", China was expected to abide by the rules, norms, and institutions of the liberal international order [15].

In addition, the "RS" means that China should gradually transition into a liberal democracy. The notion of engagement is grounded in the modernization theory, which was prevalent at the time. It was believed that China would politically liberalize following economic development and the rise of the middle class. This belief in the "end of history" was widespread in the two decades following 1989 [2, 16]. Although the current U.S. government often expresses regret over engagement policy by pointing out an expectation of "regime change", such change was never considered a realistic policy goal of engagement. Clinton and his successors avoided suggesting a direct causal link between economic development and democratization, though they hoped it would happen [17]. Former Ambassador Chas Freeman stated: *"However much the American public may have hoped or expected that China would Americanize itself, U.S. policy was almost entirely aimed at changing China's external behavior rather than its constitutional order"* [18].

Fundamentally, this "RS" represents a "ceiling" that China is not expected to surpass. The core principle is that China should not alter the status quo of the post-Cold War U.S. liberal order, meaning that China must be subordinate to the U.S. hegemony. In an interview with ABC, Obama made a contentious statement: *"If over a billion Chinese citizens have the same living patterns as Australians and Americans do right now, then all of us are in for a very miserable time. The planet just can't sustain it, so they understand that they've got to make a decision about a new model that is more sustainable that allows them to pursue the economic growth that they're pursuing while at the same time dealing with these environmental consequences"* [19]. These remarks, despite their possible different intent, might highlight the "ceiling" of the "RS" concept.

3.2 The View from China

China initially viewed the "RS" positively. Beijing agreed with the U.S. that as an "RS", China should increase its responsibilities in international affairs, as this alignment also enabled China to be more

engaged in global matters to safeguard its interests. Beijing interpreted Zoellick’s speech as an official indicate of the U.S. abandoning its containment strategy, aiming instead to secure China’s contribution in managing an increasingly interdependent world. Yet, China expressed concerns about being overburdened and emphasized the need for equitable reciprocity, insisting that the U.S. should equally share accountability [6,14].

However, for many Chinese, the “RS” seemed to set a too low standard for bilateral relations. The Chinese leadership preferred the idea of the two countries becoming constructive partners, perceiving this as a more equal relationship [14].

Furthermore, Beijing was not entirely certain about the specifics of the “rules-based liberal international order”. Questions arose regarding the rules and norms China was expected to follow and the nature of the order it was supposed to maintain. Was it the post-World War II order, the post-Cold War order, or a combination of both? Beijing never fully embraced Washington’s vision of post-Cold War order, particularly due to its allowance for U.S. interventions in sovereign nations with United Nations (U.N.) endorsement. Sovereignty and territorial integrity have been the most fundamental norms in modern international relations. Regarding liberal norms, even Washington itself is not obeying some of norms [3, 17, 20,]. A recent example is the Chips and Science Act that permits large amounts of state subsidies in developing technology [21].

Most critically, Beijing did not believe that China should compromise its own interests to conform to Washington’s interpretation of an “RS”. Some Chinese scholars suggested that the U.S. used this concept to maintain its dominance and encircle China. A quote from Hwang & Brad’s paraphrasing of People’s Daily, the Chinese government’s mouthpiece, elucidates this view: “*Who defines whether actions are consistent with international norms and obligations? Are those responsibilities consistent with national capabilities? There is a fear that the U.S. will arrogate those decisions and definitions to itself. China hopes to become a responsible stakeholder and contribute to the world, but it does not want to become a responsible stakeholder solely to serve the “interests of the U.S.”*” [14].

4. The Paradox of Influence

The answer to the question posed in this research paper is not straightforward. It is much more nuanced than commonly perceived. The following discussion focuses exclusively on the perspective of Washington, in line with the title of this research paper.

4.1 The Success of Washington

The engagement policy has been successful in transforming China from a revolutionary country into a one that largely accepts international norms, including many liberal ones, and is willing to integrate into the global community. The paper assesses the success of Washington’s engagement policy in the following areas: (a) the U.N., (b) economic liberation, (c) non-proliferation, (d) anti-terrorism, (e) climate change, and (f) political liberation and human right, most of which were explicitly pointed out by Zoellick in 2005.

4.1.1 The U.N.

It is noteworthy that China has been a responsible member of the U.N. The U.N. remains the most significant international body after the Cold War, having been the dominant institution in the post-WWII international order [17]. China has actively supported U.N. peacekeeping missions since the 1980s. Beijing’s support for U.N. peace missions, including post-conflict multi-dimensional peacekeeping. It also deploys more military and police personnel to U.N. peacekeeping operations than other Security Council members. However, China’s votes on peacekeeping are conditioned by its principle of state sovereignty, which is not fully aligned with U.S. views [20, 22].

4.1.2 Economic Liberation

Washington's engagement has facilitated China's transition from a Soviet style planned economy to a market economy. For instance, joining WTO required Premier Zhu Rongji to restructure China's state-owned enterprises, various state functions, and the domestic legal framework to comply with the international trade regime and compete globally [6]. China's WTO accession marked its integration into the open and rules-based trading system. This integration has benefited both China and the U.S., with the U.S. gaining from China's cost-effective, high-quality exports and China's growing market for American exports [15]. While the Chinese economy remains relatively less open compared to other major economies, its bilateral and multilateral trade policies have generally reduced barriers. China's tariff rates have significantly decreased since the 1990s, particularly after joining the WTO [17]. According to the most recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Trade Facilitation Indicators report, from 2017-2022, China improved in all 11 indicators [23]. The latest OECD index on restrictions in service trade also shows significant decrease in China's Services Trade Restrictions Index (STRI) between 2014 and 2022, reflecting progressive liberalization on regulations governing foreign direct investment [24]. Furthermore, China remains a strong proponent of multilateralism, even as the U.S. become less supportive of it [6]. However, certain WTO-incompatible policy practices continue, including weak intellectual property protection, technology theft, and state subsidies (Johnston, [17]). Nevertheless, the U.S. accusation that Xi Jinping is reverting China to a statist economy is an overstatement.

4.1.3 Non-Proliferation

China has been a constructive partner with the U.S. in the non-proliferation of WMD/nuclear weapons. Since the mid-1990s, Beijing has significantly reduced its WMD-related exports, ceasing most sensitive exports to Iran, and implementing comprehensive domestic export control systems and regulations. China is a signatory to nearly all the major international arms control treaties, including the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and Chemical Weapons Convention. Beijing has generally been cooperative and constructive with the U.S. and others in addressing the nuclear weapons-related challenges posed by North Korea and Iran, though Chinese interests do not always converge with the American ones [15, 22].

4.1.4 Counterterrorism

The U.S.-Sino cooperation in the war against terror was impressive. Beijing support counterterrorism resolutions passed by the U.N. Security Council and the U.N. General Assembly. The two nations resumed intelligence-sharing activities, which had ceased since the end of the Cold War, with Beijing providing Washington with crucial information on radical Islamic groups. China even allowed a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) legal attaché's office to be set up in Beijing. Additionally, China might have played an instrumental role in encouraging Pakistan to support American efforts in Afghanistan. However, Beijing's support in the war on terror did not extend to active military contribution and the provision of Chinese airfields/airspace, and Beijing opposed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 [10].

4.1.5 Climate Change

China has also made significant contribution to climate change. In the 1990s and early 2000s, China was reluctant to cut carbon emission levels, viewing it as a necessary trade-off for economic growth. However, this stance changed prior to the Paris Climate Summit in 2015, leading China to become a signatory member of the Paris Climate Agreement. Both domestic environmental concerns and

international pressure to act as a “responsible power” influenced this shift [25]. Today, China is a leader in green energy, implementing policies such as green tax, green loans, and green innovation to diversify its approach to sustainability. Financing green projects has been a priority for the Chinese government over the past decade. In 2020, China ranked first globally in providing green loans and second in issuing green bonds. In April 2019, Beijing promoted the Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition, its first regional sustainable plan. In 2020, Beijing announced goals of peaking carbon by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 [26]. Despite being the largest producer of carbon emissions, China is collaborating with the international community to address climate change challenges.

4.1.6 Political Liberalization and Human Rights

Although China and the U.S. have had significant disagreements regarding regime change and human rights, the engagement policy has facilitated notable progress. Over the past four decades, China has lifted over 700 million people out of poverty, a feat achieved through rapid economic development after integrating with the global economy [27]. This accomplishment represents a substantial advancement in social and economic human rights, acknowledged and commended by the European Union [28]. In terms of political freedom, China is considerably more liberal now than in the early 1970s. The constant factor is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s continued sole governance. The CCP’s enduring power is supported by the high trust it enjoys among most Chinese people, in stark contrast to the trust deficits faced by many Western countries [18]. Moreover, China is increasingly viewing its distinct political system as a viable, if not superior, alternative to Western-style democracy [6]. As previously discussed, regime change was never a realistic objective of the engagement policy. Although the state has become more interventionist in civil society, this aspect of the engagement policy exhibits mixed success.

5. The Failure of Washington

The primary failure of Washington’s engagement policy lies in inadvertently equipping China with the means to challenge U.S. hegemony and the liberal international order, as Mearsheimer expressed regret that the U.S. did not slow China’s rise, “*Instead, it encouraged it* [29].” Given China’s population, more than four times that of the U.S., it was inevitable that its growth would eventually pose a challenge to U.S. dominance. Before 2013, Chinese foreign policy adhered to Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of “maintaining a low profile and abiding our time”; hinting at a “dragon” awakening when the time was ripe [2]. Since 2013, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has officially departed from Deng’s approach and expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo. Despite benefiting significantly from the U.S.-led liberal order, China aspires to more than just manufacturing low-cost, labor-intensive products. There are a lot of examples of Washington’s policy failure, e.g. South China Sea and Taiwan. this paper focuses on three examples, the BRI, Made in China (MIC) 2025, and BRICS, as these best exemplify China’s challenge to the U.S. hegemony.

5.1 BRI

The BRI, first proposed in 2013, is a cornerstone of Xi Jinping’s vision for achieving “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Often viewed as a materialization of Xi Jinping’s concept of a “Common Destiny of Humankind,” the BRI comprises the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It includes over 60% of the global population and accounts for over 1/3rd of the world’s GDP. The initiative aims to establish a greater Eurasian region by promoting infrastructure connectivity and investment across continental Eurasia and developing maritime routes from the South China Sea and Africa to Western Europe. Beijing’s ultimate goal is to exert its comprehensive

geo-economic, geopolitical, and strategic influence across the region. Eurasia remains a pivotal geopolitical region. China is attempting to construct a “Sino-centric” order in this region, where the U.S. is geographically absent [30].

5.2 MIC 2025

MIC 2025, launched by the Xi Jinping Administration in 2015, is another watershed policy aimed to achieve the “Chinese Dream.” This industrial policy is designed to elevate China’s role in global high-value sectors, transforming it from a manufacturing giant into a leading power in high-tech industries and establishing Chinese technological supremacy. MIC 2025 also carries significant economic and military implications. It is expected to change the structural power of the global economy. The Chinese economy will find a new way to grow, and China can escape the “middle-income trap.” Advanced technology will bolster China’s military capabilities [31]. In essence, MIC 2025 seeks to challenge the U.S. dominance over the global value chains, assuming its eventual success. Some analysts believe that the real target of the trade war initiated by the Trump Administration was MIC 2025, and the ongoing US-China tech competition under the Biden Administration is an extension, albeit more intensified, of this struggle [32].

5.3 BRICS

China considers BRICS as a framework for a post-U.S. multipolar world. Comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, BRICS represent over 40% of the world’s population and accounts for nearly 25% of global GDP. The New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) established by BRICS are steps towards an alternative financial system. The NDB aims to rival the World Bank by financing infrastructural projects, while the CRA is positioned as an alternative to the IMF, offering a financial safety net against the international market markets. They seek to better represent the developing world. Despite this, China’s considerable economic clout makes it a dominant force within BRICS. Moreover, BRICS have begun to de-dollarize by using local currency finance. For example, the US dollar’s share in the bilateral trade settlement between China and Russia fell from around 90% in 2015 to 46% in 2020 [33-34]. In 2023, at the 15th BRICS summit, the club announced an agreement to admit six new members: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. This expansion will see BRICS representing 36% of global GDP with more developing countries expected to join in the near future [35].

6. Conclusion and Implications

Whether American policy has successfully encouraged China to become an “RS” in the international system or has inadvertently led to the opposite outcome remains a complex and multifaceted issue.

The historical shift from containment to engagement, the emergence of the “RS” narrative, and the eventual decline of the engagement policy reflect the evolving dynamics of U.S.-China relations. While the U.S. has sought to integrate China into a U.S.-led liberal international order, expecting compliance with established norms and contributions to global challenges like climate change and non-proliferation, China has pursued its own interpretation of “RS,” often aligning with national interests and aspirations for greater global influence.

This divergence in perspectives is evident in the U.S. viewing China as an opportunity under the “RS” framework, yet setting behavioral benchmarks that China perceives as limitations to its ascent. Initially receptive, China’s approach to the concept has evolved into pursuing a more equal partnership and rejecting any subordination to U.S. hegemony.

The outcome of engagement policy is complicated, not a complete failure. While U.S. engagement has facilitated China’s remarkable economic and even political progress, contributing to U.S. interests

and global governance, it has also enabled China to challenge the US-dominated liberal international order and seek to reshape global power dynamics. However, China does not appear intent on overthrowing the U.S. liberal order, but rather on complementing it, and China still benefits from certain elements of liberal order. From Beijing's understanding of "RS", China is behaving like a "RS" by reforming the order to make it more just and reasonable [20].

The engagement policy might still have backfire even if the U.S. "Americanizes China." China, a vast country with more than 1.4 billion people, differs significantly from South Korea and Japan. Assuming China adopts the multi-party electoral system, it would be unrealistic to expect every party to align with U.S. interests. For instance, in response to rising labor costs, any party in power would likely implement policies similar to MIC 2025 to secure electoral success. It is possible that more hawkish parties towards the U.S. would gain popularity, leading to greater failures in engagement. It was perhaps naïve of the US political elite to expect China and Chinese people to be subordinate to its hegemony.

That being said, the engagement policy is a relatively reasonable approach by the U.S. As Nixon pointed out, containing China would be impractical and unsustainable. The U.S. at least has benefited substantially from engaging with China and incorporating it into the international system, and there remains potential for cooperation in areas where bilateral interests converge, such as climate change.

The future of U.S.-China relations will be defined by this intricate interplay of cooperation, competition, and mutual influence as both nations navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected global landscape.

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