

Broken China Policy

The incoherence of conengagement

By Justin Logan

THE MOST NOTABLE aspect of the recent White House meeting between Chinese president Hu Jintao and President Bush may have been the pre-summit wrangling over whether the deal would include a state dinner. In the end, the sides seemed to agree to disagree, with China characterizing the meeting as a “state visit” but the Bush administration calling it an “official visit,” offering lunch instead of a formal, black-tie dinner.

In a broader sense, U.S. policy toward China suffers from a similar incoherence. But what many Americans don’t know is that one of its key architects was Zalmay Khalilzad, currently our man in Baghdad.

Khalilzad has had an interesting career. In addition to his work in Iraq, he took the helm as the first post-Taliban U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, having served previous stints in government as well as having held academic posts at Columbia, UC San Diego, and at the RAND Corporation. His work at RAND may end up being more important to the future of America than any contribution Khalilzad is able to make in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

After the Cold War ended, defense wonks in Washington scrambled to find a new overarching foreign and security policy. One of the possibilities that emerged in the debates of the 1990s was the prospect that a rising China would in the future mount a threat similar to the one the Soviet Union had posed in the recent past. The China Threat debates reached a fever pitch in the mid-’90s, with the publication of several alarmist tracts,

including Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro’s *The Coming Conflict with China*.

In 1997, the Center for Security Policy declared, “The nature of the threat posed by China is in key ways of a greater magnitude ... than that mounted by the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War.” Congressional staffer and China expert William Triplett argued that Chinese missile tests in 1995 made clear that “the Chinese Communists have abandoned their responsible position in the international community and they just want to be feared in the same way the Nazis were in the 1930s.”

Alongside the debates inside the Beltway, the 1992 presidential election brought the China issue new prominence nationally. While on the campaign trail, Bill Clinton lambasted the first Bush administration’s China policy, accusing Bush of “appeasing the butchers of Beijing.” Once Clinton got into office, however, he found it much more difficult to confront the Chinese. The confluence of rapidly expanding economic ties and the idea that the United States could help to “shape China’s rise” led Clinton to soften his position, eventually pushing for—and getting—Most Favored Nation status for China approved in 1997 and also advocating that the “butchers” be admitted to the World Trade Organization. On the security side, Clinton went so far as to authorize the transfer of high-level satellite technology to China.

All this time, Khalilzad and his colleagues at RAND were wrestling with the China issue themselves. Khalilzad had

cut his teeth as a hardliner on the Soviet threat during the 1970s and 1980s, so he came to the problem of China without any delicate feelings about the use of American power. In 1999, a RAND team under Khalilzad’s leadership published a manuscript titled “The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications.” Khalilzad drew on that manuscript to draft a shorter paper, titled “Congage China,” which argued for a policy of part containment, part engagement. In the paper, Khalilzad set out the contours of what America would eventually—and somewhat inadvertently—embrace as its overall China policy. Congagement, for all intents and purposes, is our China policy today.

Khalilzad argued that both traditional strategies—engagement and containment—had shortcomings that made them undesirable with respect to China. On the one hand, engagement left open the possibility that alongside its growing economic power, China would begin to act commensurately in the political and, more importantly, military arenas. Under such a scenario, China could end up challenging the United States militarily. Engagement rested on the assumption that the ongoing relationship with China would change Chinese behavior in a favorable direction. But Khalilzad identified the inherent danger: “if the assumption is incorrect, engagement will merely help China become a more threatening adversary in the future.”

On the other hand, Khalilzad was uncomfortable with containment. Such a policy, in his view, was detrimental to