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US Foreign Policy and China

Bush's first term

Guy Roberts

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US Foreign Policy and China

This work is an exploration of how US–China relations were managed by President George W. Bush. Roberts argues that contrary to conventional wisdom, President Bush conducted a calculated, pragmatic, and highly successful strategy toward Beijing, which avoided conflict, resolved crisis, and significantly increased economic and diplomatic ties.

Roberts identifies key players and policies of the Bush White House and the specific themes of engagement (successful and unsuccessful) that unfolded during Bush's first term. Research is based on analysis of primary and secondary documentation, as well as interviews with key White House actors (including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage) and two former Australian Prime Ministers. Topics of discussion include China's changing attitude toward international engagement, China's rising economic power and the tensions this triggered in the US establishment, the nature of US–China relations, contemporary and ideological understanding of the Bush Presidency, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of different sources of information.

US Foreign Policy and China will be of great interest to students and scholars of US foreign policy and China studies.

Guy Roberts has recently completed his PhD studies at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, Australia. He is the editor of www.australian.diplomacymonitor.com.au

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Introduction

This book argues that George W. Bush, the forty-third President of the US, coordinated a pragmatic, productive, and cooperative relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) during his first term in office. This relationship was an essential part of Bush's foreign policy agenda, yet Bush's presidency has for many observers been defined primarily by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the War on Terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush Doctrine, or by the high-profile but essentially unsuccessful engagement with states such as North Korea and Iran. The popular assessment of Bush's foreign policy is generally critical and negative, and the pervasive conclusion is that Bush's leadership was characterized by missteps and mismanagement. However, as Brendan O'Connor has argued, an "uncritical criticism" of the Bush administration does not serve proper academic analysis, and Bush's successes must be as acknowledged and explored alongside his failures, lest his "undeniably flawed character and record escape proper examination."¹ A negative perception of Bush's tenure has overwhelmed analysis of the genuine and important nuances in Bush's foreign policy agenda, particularly in his management of US-China relations during his first term in office. During this period Bush was able to forge a pragmatic, practical and robust relationship with his Chinese counterparts which, at times, saw both sides gain something of what they wanted. This successful engagement with China has been overshadowed by Bush's failures in other fields of foreign policy.

This book explores Bush's China policy by examining how the administration coordinated and managed policy in pursuit of specific objectives. This topic requires due consideration of Bush's personality and background, the degree to which his various advisors were allowed to influence or manage the relationship with China, the opening gambits of this relationship and the challenges of the Hainan Island Incident and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The book also explores a number of case studies of engagement that highlight the successes or failures which distinguished Bush's relations with China during his first term. The relationship between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is important in almost all aspects of contemporary world affairs, yet the management of this relationship by President George W. Bush, in the early days of the twenty-first century, remains an underexamined

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area. Yet Bush's first term China policy is a practical model of engagement which, on balance, successfully navigated the various strains and tensions endemic to US–China relations. Bush's China policy is an underappreciated success story and a best-case example of managing relations between a hegemon and a rising challenger. The four-year period of Bush's first term represents an important moment of contemporary world history, when China's long heralded economic potential was bearing fruit, and when China was beginning to appreciate its place in the international system. Against this backdrop, Bush successfully pursued US objectives in US–China relations, sometimes on issues of mutual interest and sometimes in the face of Chinese resistance.

Overall, Bush had sound objectives for US–China engagement, and a deeper-than-acknowledged understanding of China. This was due only in part to the influence of Bush's father, G.H.W. Bush, the US's forty-first President, who had significant experience and expertise in the China field. This experience informed G.W. Bush's expectations of US–China relations. Crucial to the successful management of this relationship was that Bush Junior placed his chosen agenda into the hands of Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage for direct coordination. This ensured that his objectives were pursued with consistency and pragmatism (in contrast to other areas of foreign policy where the State Department arguably did not have the President's confidence).

An exploration of Bush's management of the relationship during this period is essential because the US–China relationship will be at least as important in the twenty-first century as the US/Soviet relationship was in the twentieth century. The evolution of the US–China relationship – whether harmonious or acrimonious – will be determined in large part by the leaders of the US and Chinese governments, as both sides try to discover how a rising China will be accommodated in the international system. It is important to see how the elites of Bush's America sought to meet the challenge of China's rise – a challenge which flows from the ongoing, decades-long growth of China's economic and political power. China's comprehensive growth raises serious questions for the US–China relationship and for the international system as a whole. Greater insight into Bush's China policy will allow better understanding of how US–China relations unfolded during the opening years of 'China's' twenty-first century.

Bush came to the White House at a time when China's leaders were enjoying a period of relative prestige and legitimacy – sustained economic growth had made the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) more secure than at any time since the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. From the mid to late 1990s, new understandings and interpretations of the international system had been gaining credence among the CCP elite. For example, the international system was seen no longer as a US-backed imperialist trap, but was now a potentially advantageous structure which the CCP could use to its own benefit. This new outlook triggered innovative Chinese moves and interactions on the international stage, many of which were perceived as challenges to the US's

interests and hegemony. President Clinton's overtures toward rising China often foundered on short-term crises or miscalculations that eroded the potential of cooperation on common interests. Coming into the White House in 2001, Bush introduced new policies and priorities that contrasted, sometimes sharply, with those of his predecessor. Bush's administration was eager to turn away from what they saw as the weaknesses, vacillations, and failures of the Clinton years. The Bush team sought the development of stronger alliances with democratic states in the Asia-Pacific region as a framework for the relationship, rather than focusing upon a direct, zero-sum relationship with China itself.

Effectively, Bush came to the White House at a moment of both tension and opportunity for US-China engagement, when potential compatibility and shared priorities was matched with peer-to-peer competition and mutual suspicion. Some sections of the US polity, including neoconservatives and pro-Taiwan Republicans rejected any need for engagement or interaction with China, seeing it as a direct competitor. However, Bush had a far more nuanced and deliberate attitude toward China than is commonly recognized and that his team was more focused and unified on Chinese engagement than is popularly perceived.² At the same time, events and developments – both bilateral and global – had an obvious influence on the relationship. The Hainan Island Incident, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the invasion of Iraq all naturally had some impact on Bush's China policy. Yet while many interpreted Bush's China policy as second-tier issues, behind the shifting successes or failures of other policies and events, or beholden to the rise and fall of different administration figures, closer examination shows that Bush's China policy was a policy priority in its own right, both sustained by pursuing specific objectives in the face of other crises, and flexible, by taking advantage of these crises to more swiftly or effectively attain specific objectives.

Showing that Bush's China policy was pragmatically coordinated and executed by Powell sharpens academic understanding of the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda, and moves past much of the current literature which focuses upon the negative aspects of Bush's foreign policy agenda, especially regarding Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Furthermore, a great deal of literature (both academic and popular) that focuses upon the divide separating Powell (and his deputy, Armitage) from Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Cheney. However, this divide, variously described as a split between "hardliners" and "moderates," neoconservatives and realists, or "Hawks" and "Doves," is actually not applicable to the Bush China policy. Although disagreements and personality clashes did not seriously disrupt the US-China relationship, they are important nonetheless, because such disagreements have so often been the definitive premise of discussion about the Bush White House. The Rumsfeld/Powell divergence is a 'given' in much Bush literature, yet was largely irrelevant to the conduct of the US-China relationship. It is therefore important to explore the limits of this division, and to compare the relative success of the Bush China policy against other areas of Bush foreign policy (such as the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo, the occupation of Iraq, and so on). Bush's China policy was

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not influenced by the “this advisor won this argument, or that advisor won that argument” scenario. This divide had relevance for other aspects of Bush’s presidency, and is “important because it’s talked about,” not “talked about because it’s important.”

Understanding Bush and his advisors allows proper analysis of the objectives enunciated during the 2000 presidential campaign, and shows how the Bush team wanted to approach US–China relations – the signposts for future engagement, as found in Candidate Bush’s campaign speeches and policy documents, need careful interrogation to justify any claim that Bush’s long-term agenda was sincere and sustained. Although constructed for rhetorical, campaign consumption, these documents illuminate Bush’s attitude toward China and his overall policy agenda. It is also important to examine Bush’s first year agenda, when he prioritized differentiation from the Clintonian engagement, and the two significant incidents of 2001, Hainan Island and 9/11. The Hainan Island Incident involved a mid-air collision between a Chinese fighter plane and a US spy-plane. The lethal collision occurred in international airspace and the US plane had to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island (Chinese territory), sparking the first serious international crisis of the Bush regime. Powell’s swift resolution of the incident consolidated his position as manager of US–China relations on Bush’s behalf, but also showed to the President that executive-level person-to-person links with the Chinese leadership needed fostering, as this allowed the US President a window to bypass the restrictions of the Chinese bureaucracy. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 also opened new windows of engagement between the US and China, but without changing the underlying priorities of engagement. Although both countries pursued cooperation after the terrorist attacks, the US leadership was careful to avoid “horse-trading” of concessions in one area for progress in another.

To argue that Bush had a specific policy of success regarding US–China relations does not imply, nor should it be interpreted as a whitewashing of Bush’s foreign policy, his personal background, or his presidency as a whole. This book explores the Bush administration’s engagement with China. The existence of successful US–China relations during Bush’s first term neither condemns nor validates any other aspect of Bush’s administration, but it does demonstrate that the administration’s foreign policy as a whole was more complex than is commonly appreciated. In contending that US–China relations were managed successfully, it does not seek to overturn or defend analyses of other aspects of the administration. For example, there is a large amount of literature that convincingly argues that US–North Korean relations were not managed successfully. A successful US–China agenda did not lead to a successful US–North Korean agenda, while an unsuccessful US–North Korean agenda did not invalidate the US–China agenda. Yet analysis of such relationships will contribute to a more critical and insightful account of Bush’s foreign policy as a whole, as well as his China policy in particular. It is important to qualify what can be defined as a “successful” US–China relationship. An actor’s success in the political realm can be defined by three

criteria: Did the actor *have* a specific objective? Did they *maintain* this objective? Did they *achieve* this objective? With regard to these criteria for defining success, I argue that Bush and his team entered the White House with set objectives for the US–China relationship, they maintained these objectives (even as 9/11 seemed to disrupt all aspects of White House continuity), and, on balance, the Bush White House achieved these objectives. This definition of success, of course, argues for a US-centric perspective of Bush, his team and their actions in the US–China relationship, and argues that these conscious choices explained why Bush was able to navigate a smoother relationship than his predecessor. Contrastingly, those reviewing this period from the Chinese perspective might interpret Bush’s behavior as negative and bullying in the extreme, and argue that forcing China to comply with US demands was a shortsighted and provocative method of engagement – and therefore unsuccessful. Yet the absence of disagreement is not a suitable criterion of success in international relations – this would only be obtained if one state became the willing, complicit vassal of another. Instead, it is management of conflict in the pursuit of objectives which is a more relevant indicator of success. It is important to clarify, therefore, that this book explores the objectives and methods of Bush’s first term as formulated by the Bush administration itself. It does not seek to condone or condemn the decisions that Bush took; it seeks to gauge their effectiveness and utility in pursuit of stated interests and objectives.

Bush’s China policy can be placed against other presidential agendas toward that nation. To suggest the US’s policy toward China is “bipartisan” ignores too many of the concrete differences of style and nuance held by US Presidents, and cannot account for the diplomatic coups and regressions that the US/China policy has experienced over the decades. Certainly, the US’s China policy has had various objectives over the years. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the US’s “Open Door Policy” sought to maintain China’s territorial integrity (and therefore to protect the US’s commercial interests in China). This policy was successful. After World War II President Truman hoped to support Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist regime. This policy was unsuccessful, and led to a suspension of relations between the US and newly Communist China that was not lifted until President Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972. Thereafter, Nixon successfully used mainland China as a strategic counterweight against the Soviet Union, yet President Carter’s granting of diplomatic recognition to the PRC triggered a domestic backlash that led to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.³ Clinton had hoped to grant most favored nation (MFN) trading status to China only if China’s Human Rights record improved – this was unsuccessful, and Clinton had to grant MFN status despite China’s lack of movement on this issue. Bush sought a stable, workmanlike relationship that acknowledged disagreement and yet allowed mutual profit. Set against other examples, Bush’s first term engagement with China can be justified as meeting the criteria of a “successful” policy. Beyond specific objectives, the administration sought stability in the relationship and wanted no repeat, for example, of those most serious moments of tension in US–China relations

during the Clinton administration – the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis and the 1999 Belgrade Chinese Embassy Bombing. These were exceptionally serious breakdowns of the relationship (one involving a US carrier fleet, the other the blockading and stoning of US consulates across China). Maintenance of stable relations, and the swift resolution or prevention of crises, were additional objectives which the Bush administration valued and attained.⁴ More extreme criteria for success should also be rejected – such as the absence of a revolutionary democratic transformation within China. Although Bush promoted a “democratic agenda” during his tenure, China’s failure to transform into a democratic state should not invalidate Bush’s objectives or technique. Bush sought pragmatism and clarity in US–China relations, which included both open dialogues and the pursuit of clearly defined US interests. Indeed, Bush was successful in stabilizing the relationship (which was of benefit to both countries), while at the same time securing important US objectives. For these reasons, because he was able to stabilize the relationship in a constructive manner and maintain this stability as he successfully pursued specific US objectives, I argue that the term ‘successful’ can, on balance, be justifiably applied to Bush’s first term China policy.

0.1 A better understanding of Bush’s China policy

A great deal has already been written about the presidency of George W. Bush. This is natural, given the great events and fateful decisions that unfolded during his leadership of the US. However, the ramifications of Bush’s foreign policy choices outside the realms of terrorism, unilateralism, and the Bush Doctrine have not been as rigorously interrogated. This book seeks to address that shortfall, by exploring the real-world, day-to-day agenda of US–China relations in Bush’s first term. It seeks to identify the actions and mindsets of those “in the room” of the White House, and to define how Bush and his advisors sought to manage and coordinate the relationship. Although informed by the conceptual framework of neoclassical realism, it is not a work of theoretical conjecture alone, but seeks to identify the real-world outcomes of how US–China engagement was defined and implemented by the Bush team. Drawing on interviews with senior administration advisors, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Senior National Security Advisor Mike Green and others, it offers a greater understanding of the practical, human side of US foreign policy during the first term of President George W. Bush.

While a great deal of contemporary literature is critical of Bush, the worst of this criticism is based on unfounded conspiracy theories and biased conjecture. This bias has had the unfortunate effect of contaminating many aspects of Bush-era study, leaving policy choices and actions popularly condemned without proper scrutiny of the accuracy or validity of critical claims. Likewise, some studies support Bush from an ideological perspective, without properly interrogating the validity of pro-Bush assumptions or assessments. Much of the Bush literature, therefore, must be carefully assessed for undue bias for or

against the President. Memoirs or autobiographies must also be carefully weighed – some are insider accounts by individuals who did not last long in the Bush White House, while many later autobiographies incline toward white-washing or self-justification. Understanding Bush's China policy through these memoirs is limiting, however, as most focus primarily on 9/11 and the War on Terror. For example, of the nine references to China in Dick Cheney's memoir, *In My Time*, four are in passing, one is an anecdote about Hu Jintao's visit in 2002, and the final four are purely in the context of the North Korean Nuclear Program. In comparison, Cheney's "sense of humor" is mentioned six times.⁵ Likewise, Rice's second journal article for *Foreign Affairs*, written in the closing days of Bush's second term, spent more time discussing democratization, the Middle East, and the War on Terror than on Europe or Asian geopolitics.⁶

While the works of *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward are often heavily cited (reflecting his remarkably consistent White House access, and the accepted accuracy of his reporting), the arguments and personality clashes he reports, while riveting, have drawn attention away from the more prosaic day-to-day management of US–China relations under Bush, and encourage readers to assume there were divisions of opinion across all spectrums of Bush foreign policy – an unsustainable claim. Only a relatively small amount of literature has emerged on Bush's China policy specifically – usually it is placed peripheral to, or contextualized by, the War on Terror.

Other sources of analysis include speeches from the campaign and government period, policy announcements, and so on. The two most significant campaign speeches were Bush's "Simi Valley" and "Citadel" addresses.⁷ Although its importance has been generally downgraded since its publication (with many assuming the "Bush Doctrine" replaced all of Bush's foreign policy plans), Rice's article "Promoting the National Interest" has proven to be a particularly relevant and useful source for understanding how the Bush administration wanted to handle US–China relations.⁸ While speeches and articles provide insight into the minds of Bush and Rice, there are many other sources that remain relevant. For example, Paul Wolfowitz's "*Defense Planning Guidance*" document,⁹ although rejected by President G.H.W. Bush (Bush Senior) when it was leaked to the press in 1992, still provides illumination about Wolfowitz's mindset, as do his academic and government writings, which include a 1997 article comparing China to Imperial Germany.¹⁰ Likewise, Donald Rumsfeld's 1990s' government activities foreshadow his antagonistic attitude toward China.¹¹ Secretary of State Colin Powell's comments during his Senate confirmation hearings are further proof of a nuanced assessment of China's threat potential.¹² The pre-2000 writings of different administration members also serve to show the ideologies and influence (or lack of influence) that they would bring to the White House, and by which they would execute presidential demands and expectations. Once in office, significant documents such as the *National Security Strategy of the United States* and the *Quadrennial Defense Review* provide further information for analysis of the Bush administration's attitude and policies toward China. Such primary sources, though sometimes

contradicted by other documents, events, or behavior, nonetheless provide further insights into the Bush China policy. For example, any analysis of the *second* Bush administration would require an exploration of Robert Zoëlick's September 2005 "Stakeholder speech."¹³ This speech presupposed the context in which US–China relations were to be managed under Secretary of State Rice, and reflected the intellectual basis and agenda of Bush's second term China policy (in many ways, of course, an evolution from Bush's first term agenda).

Secondary documents, with appropriate analysis, can also aid our understanding of the Bush White House. As mentioned, Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward is a well-known chronicler of the Bush presidency and its inner workings and conflicts. Since reporting the Watergate Scandal with Carl Bernstein in the early 1970s, Woodward has written over a dozen books on Washington politics and is credited as being the "uber-insider" of Washington in general, and the White House in particular, regardless of the President at the time. Woodward wrote four books about the Bush presidency, and was allowed access to Bush and his team. The four books, *Bush at War* (2002), *Plan of Attack* (2004), *State of Denial* (2006) and *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006–2008* (2008), examine Bush's reaction to 9/11 and the way new policies such as the Bush Doctrine were conceived and executed. Although Woodward primarily focuses on the War on Terror, Afghanistan, and Iraq, their insights can be regarded as genuine and germane for those areas of Bush's foreign policy, but may be of limited application to other areas of Bush's foreign engagement. It has furthermore been acknowledged that some of Bush's advisors sought to use Woodward for their own ends. In particular, Secretary of State Colin Powell, finding that some of his foreign policy suggestions were being criticized or dismissed before they reached the President's ears, would leak his policy positions to Woodward who, in reporting this such dissension, enabled these views to be aired in public – and thereafter discussed by the President's advisors as well. Although Woodward's work can be viewed on one level as mere "hearsay," his books remain an important reflection of the management and "vibe" of Bush's team. Woodward's insights into the dynamics of Bush's team is matched with evidence from other sources. For example, Powell's 1995 memoir, *My American Journey: An Autobiography*, includes gentle references to clashes between Cheney and himself (when they were Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, respectively, under Bush Senior).¹⁴ Woodward (and others) show that such clashes continued when Cheney and Powell were Vice President and Secretary of State. Again, however, Woodward's accounts must also be weighed carefully against the specific China context – his accounts of bureaucratic battles between White House players detracts from proper analysis by injecting a narrative of disagreement into situations where no substantive disagreements took place. This is exacerbated by other accounts of the Bush administration that highlight such themes of disagreement and dysfunction, such as *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House and the Education of Paul O'Neill*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ron Suskind after extensive interviews with O'Neill.¹⁵

O'Neill was Secretary of the Treasury under Bush until he was sacked in December 2002. O'Neill described Bush's management of cabinet meetings as comparable to "a blind man in a roomful of deaf people. There is no discernible connection." Highly critical of Bush, the work nonetheless paints a distinctive picture of the President's style and inclinations, which may be of use when understanding how the President would respond to the unique challenges that China posed. A more sympathetic portrait comes from David Frum's *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*.¹⁶ A White House speechwriter for 13 months, Frum was known for coining the term "Axis of Evil," before leaving the administration and writing *The Right Man*, a text supportive of the President, but which again focused on the War on Terror, rather than on Bush's China policy. Although Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty* was based on the views of a cabinet member, Frum's work was a genuinely insider account of the Bush White House as a whole, and can be compared and contrasted with the many memoirs and autobiographies released by members of the administration, including Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and Bush himself.¹⁷

Yet there is also a clear difficulty in relying upon such accounts. As mentioned, personal accounts of service are often written with profit, hindsight, or self-justification in mind. Autobiographies can be useful for gaining an understanding of a subject's values and interests, and her or his views on important issues – Richard Nixon's *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, for example, sheds a great deal of light on how Nixon's mind worked, and illuminates the justifications he offered and grievances he nurtured after his resignation.¹⁸ Bush's *Decision Points* includes an explanation of his rejection of stem cell research and his "Freedom Agenda" – and thus highlights his ethical outlook and the importance of Human Rights and democracy in his thinking. But there is also the obvious issue that these personal accounts are written with an inherent bias, which may contradict other memoirs or published data, or even include egregious whitewashing. This book includes interviews with participants in the Bush administration, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Senior National Security Advisor Dr. Mike Green and Dr. Dan Twining, a member of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff in Bush's second term. These interviews reflect different perspectives from within the Bush administration – the National Security Agency, for example, had different policy priorities and prerogatives from those of the Department of State. However, whether memoir or recollection, personal accounts must be tested against other sources. For example, Dick Cheney's *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* barely mentions a serious crisis over his coordination of National Security Surveillance policies. This demands a comparison with the work of Barton Gellman and Jo Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for their *Washington Post* series on Cheney (Gellman went on to write *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency*).¹⁹ Gellman argues that Cheney's surveillance demands drove a crisis moment within the administration, when a program of unwarranted (in the sense of being without a legal