The Clinton Roller Coaster

The Bush administration continues to coddle China, despite its continuing crackdown on democratic reform, its brutal subjugation of Tibet, its irresponsible export of nuclear and missile technology... Such forbearance on our part might have made sense during the Cold War when China was the counterweight to Soviet power. It makes no sense to play the China card now.¹

—Bill Clinton

Hide brightness, nourish obscurity; bide our time and build up our capabilities.²

—Deng Xiaoping

China occupies an important place in our nation’s foreign policy. It is the world’s most populous state, its fastest growing major economy, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Its future will do much to shape the future of Asia, our security and trade relations in the Pacific, and a host of global issues, from the environment to weapons proliferation. In short: our relationship with China is of very great importance.³

—Bill Clinton

China must pay close attention to those countries that are opposed to American interests, or are potential strategic enemies. It must be borne in mind that the enemies of enemies are one’s own allies. China should do all it can to warn and help these countries, and prevent them from being destroyed by the United States as the Soviet Eastern European Bloc was. It must bring together the world antihegemonism force under the flag of fighting hegemonism.⁴

—Zhongguo fuxing yu shijie weilai
A New Security Paradigm

William Jefferson Clinton, like Jimmy Carter, brought an outsider’s views to Washington. He, too, abjured the capital’s formalities, preferring to be called Bill Clinton. On the campaign trail, his critique of Bush’s China policy had been pointed, but like Carter, he, too, would adopt a pragmatic approach to global complexities and Beltway politics. Clinton established the economic focus of his presidency early on. He would make “the economic security of our nation a primary goal” of U.S. diplomacy, which would be “based on a restructuring of our armed forces to meet new and continuing threats to our security.” Defense spending would be “prudently” reduced, “but potential aggressors should be clear about American resolve.” Clinton would root policy in democratic principles, boosting “the hope of freedom to millions all across the world who have endured decades of oppression.” He pledged to support “those who share our values, because it is in the interests of America and the world at large for us to do so.” His idealistic preinauguration address to the diplomatic corps must have sent a chill down the spine of Chinese diplomats present in the audience.

The message was sharpened a month later when Clinton explained his redefinition of national security. The end of the Cold War had robbed the security milieu of clarity, but the world “clearly” remained “a dangerous place.” “Ethnic hatreds, religious strife, the proliferation of WMD, the violation of human rights flagrantly in altogether too many places around the world still call on us to have a sense of national security.” To achieve that goal, America must first “get our own economic house in order”; trade must become a priority element of American security. Washington must exercise global economic leadership and promote growth in developing countries. And America must support the success of democracy in Russia and other new republics. The coincidental end of the Cold War, fission of the Soviet Union, and economic pressures made “peace dividend” an important political objective. Clinton’s shift of strategic focus from the military to the economic made substantial military cuts inevitable. The PLA was watching.

America would continue to contribute “to the astonishing revitalization of the Chinese economy,” absorbing a large share of Beijing’s exports, but “we have a right to expect progress in human rights and democracy and should support that progress.” A more detailed explanation of Clinton’s China policy came from Winston Lord, assistant secretary-designate for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. For the first