CHAPTER 3

U.S. DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE CHINA POLICY ROLLERCOASTER

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Relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have been on a roller-coaster ever since the end of the cold war nearly two decades ago. Periods of tension have alternated with moments when the two nations have managed to maintain some stability in their relations, prompting scholars to write of “the loves-me-loves-me-not swings” in ties between the two. The sanctions that Washington imposed on China in 1989 after Tiananmen Square were followed by efforts by the George H. W. Bush administration to patch up the relationship. Bill Clinton then came into office, promising that it would not be “business as usual” with the “butchers of Beijing.” Clinton made a highly publicized effort to link economic ties to improvements in China’s human rights record, thereby placing new strains on the relationship without noticeably contributing to better Chinese behavior. Soon enough, he had to reverse course, and by the time Clinton left the White House, an uneasy stability had returned to U.S.–China ties.

George W. Bush, in turn, blasted Clinton for being soft on China and pledged that a Bush administration would recognize Beijing for the “strategic competitor” it actually was. Almost immediately, the midair collision between an American reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter, and the subsequent detention of the U.S. crew, added new tensions to the relationship. That same month, April 2001,
the White House announced the most provocative arms sale to Taiwan since the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979. The inexperienced Bush used the occasion to assert that the United States would do “whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack. The pronouncement appeared to move U.S. policy well beyond the ambiguity that previous presidents—both Republican and Democrat—had deliberately cultivated. In the early months of the Bush presidency, then, it seemed like the bottom was about to fall out of the U.S.–China relationship. But, of course, nothing of the sort happened. U.S.–China ties since mid-2001 have displayed a stability few would have dared predict when Bush entered the White House. As John Copper and others have pointed out in this volume, Bush dropped the “strategic competitor” term as soon as he became president. By the end of Bush’s first term, then Secretary of State Colin Powell could claim that U.S.–China relations were the best they had been since the days of Richard Nixon three decades earlier.2

On the Downward Slope

During Bush’s second term, however, American anxieties about China, and anger at Beijing, resurfaced, placing new strains on the relationship. Denunciations of China increasingly came to permeate daily discourse in Washington. Congress was awash in bills proposed to counter one threat or another posed by the PRC; according to The Economist of April 7, 2007, almost a dozen anti-China bills had already been introduced in the U.S. Congress since the beginning of that year.3 Washington and Beijing engaged in tit-for-tat bans on imports of foodstuffs and other goods. Newspapers and policy journals were saturated with articles predicting a serious crisis in bilateral relations. China’s rising influence in Asia, its rapid program of military modernization, its aggressive search for secure energy supplies, its periodic saber-rattling toward Taiwan, and its refusal, or inability, to clarify its ultimate intentions encouraged understandable fears about the security of American interests in Asia and beyond. The power equation in East Asia was shifting, in directions unknown, and the United States, as the preeminent power in the region, was naturally uneasy about a possible future less amenable to its interests than the present.

In February 2007, Vice President Dick Cheney took up a theme previously articulated by other senior American officials by publicly questioning the motives behind China’s growing military reach.4 Beijing’s test of an antisatellite weapon in January 2007 rang alarm bells