The China Card and American Politics:
The Domestic Sources of US Policy toward China

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Introduction

Few countries will figure more prominently in America’s politics in the future than China. China’s rapid ascent is already a potent political issue on Capitol Hill and with fully two-thirds of Americans worried about the implications of China’s rise for the United States, the debate in Congress is spilling over into the 2008 presidential campaign. Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have thrown down the gauntlet, demanding that Beijing slash its huge trade surpluses with the United States or face punitive duties on Chinese goods sold in America. Not to be outdone, Republican candidates are calling on China to spend less on the military and do more to promote stability and cooperation in East Asia. The Olympics next summer will not be the only reason Americans are fixated on Beijing.

This is hardly the first time China has roiled America’s politics. From the earliest campaigns against the importation of cheap Chinese labor after the Civil War, to the bruising battles in the 1950s over “who lost China” to communism, to the current debate over the outsourcing of American jobs to China, Democrats and Republicans have sought to exploit public sentiment toward China for partisan gain – sometimes at considerable cost to America’s geopolitical interests. Often such election-year gambits have amounted to little more than China bashing. But hope as well as fear has shaped the politics of China in the United States. Political leaders can be just as quick to extol China’s promise, especially its fabled market, as they are to fulminate about China’s policies and behavior.

In this paper, we explore how America’s party leaders have played the China card. Our purpose is twofold. First, we interested in developing a more complete picture of how political leaders use foreign policy for electoral purposes. Much of the literature views the issue through the lens of “diversionary war,” where presidents are thought to use foreign crises to distract the public from domestic problems as Election Day nears. In our view, the diversionary war paradigm conceals as much as it reveals about the impact of electoral politics on foreign policy-making. Its preoccupation with crisis politics obscures the many other ways party leaders, and not just presidents, use foreign policy to enhance their own, and their party’s, hold on power. As we show, foreign policy often serves many of the same partisan ends that scholars ascribe to domestic policy: agenda setting, party building, electoral mobilization, and so on. US policy toward China is no exception.

3 In the late nineteenth century, enterprising politicians often pointed to the fabled China market to win votes. See Thomas J. McCormick, China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901 (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967). This is
We also seek to bring some balance to work on US foreign policy towards China. The bulk of the literature on US-Sino relations gives pride of place to geopolitics in explaining US actions. While we do not doubt the importance that American leaders attach to geopolitics, we believe that when it comes to making China policy and foreign policy more generally, there is a second face of strategy. Elected officials do not only think about how foreign policies can enhance the nation’s security and welfare. They must also weigh the electoral upside and downside of those foreign policies – at least if they want to hold on to office. How such electoral concerns have shaped U.S. policy towards China, and with what consequences, internationally as well as domestically, is what interests us here.

We begin with a discussion of foreign policy and electoral politics. Drawing on work in the field of American politics we lay out our approach in the form of a spatial model depicting how party leaders can use foreign policy to expand their party’s electoral base. We then take up three cases involving Sino-American relations: rewriting the Burlingame Treaty between Washington and Beijing in the 1880s, the Chinese revolution of 1949, and granting Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) to Beijing in 2000. We show that in each of these cases, electoral considerations loomed large in politicians’ judgments about how to deal with China. In each instance, those advocating changing US policy toward China saw it as an opportunity to enhance their party’s electoral fortunes, as well as their own.