

Resettling China Policy Game Rules

A Confidential Memorandum from Brent Scowcroft to President Bush Sr.

STEFANO CHESSA ALTIERI

*Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”/Center for History,
Sciences Po*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8230-742X>

EMAIL: stefano.chessaaltieri@unina.it

ABSTRACT

The document under examination is a confidential memorandum addressed to President George H. W. Bush by his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, in early April 1990. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989, and the intense emotional response it provoked within the United States, the memorandum sought to alert President Bush to the growing domestic dissatisfaction with what was perceived as the Administration's overly cautious stance toward the Chinese leadership. The memorandum foresaw a range of dynamics and critical challenges that would subsequently unfold in Washington over the course of President Bush's presidency.

KEYWORDS

Sino-American Relations, Most Favorite Nation Status, Human Rights Imperatives, Post-Cold War

The document presented hereafter is a confidential memorandum issued to President George H. W. Bush by his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, in early April 1990. It is housed within the National Security Council Files at the Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas (“Memorandum” n. pag.). Titled “China — Game Plan for MFN,” the memorandum aimed to caution President Bush about the growing Congressional discontent regarding what was perceived as the Administration’s overly restrained approach toward the Chinese leadership following the Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989. Additionally, it sought to advise the President on the most effective strategy to adopt vis-à-vis an increasingly confrontational Congress on various China-related issues. The memorandum anticipated numerous dynamics and critical challenges that would eventually arise in Washington over the course of President Bush’s tenure.¹

Ten months had passed since the massacre of peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing’s central square.² Yet the Democrat-led Congress persisted in criticizing the Administration for not providing any compelling means to express its outrage over the events in Beijing. The crackdown had significantly undermined the widespread belief in the United States that China was on an inexorable path toward “Western-style modernization” and that the market-oriented reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s would eventually lead to political and social liberalization.³ Following a six-month debate on the visa extension for Chinese students and scholars in the United States – during which a bipartisan coalition of members in both the House and Senate questioned President Bush’s methods of managing relations with Beijing – the annual renewal of trade privileges under the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status emerged

¹ For a personal account of his presidency, see Bush and Scowcroft.

² For a comprehensive account of the events leading to the crackdown and the nature of the protests in China, refer to Brown. Additionally, see Calhoun. For an overview of Sino-American relations see Dong.

³ On US-China special relations see Wang.

as the most effective domestic platform to challenge the Administration's approach to China.⁴

The memorandum exemplifies the multifaceted challenges faced by the Bush Administration in its effort to safeguard relations with the PRC despite the June 1989 crackdown. To integrate Beijing into the upcoming post-Cold War global order led by Washington, President Bush was tasked with balancing a foreign policy driven by human rights imperatives on one side and economic interests and growing interdependencies on the other.⁵ The document conveys the many difficulties and anxieties encountered by the Administration in retaining full control of Washington's China policy. It also underscores the realization that a new paradigm of conducting foreign policy was emerging. At least three dimensions are worthy of closer examination.

Firstly, the foreign policy making involving relations with Beijing appeared to have ultimately lost its insulation from domestic policy-related issues. For nearly two decades following the diplomatic opening initiated under the Nixon Administration, the executive branch had wielded significant influence in shaping China policy, favoring personal diplomacy and secrecy.⁶ However, the crackdown in Beijing, prominently broadcasted live on television, disrupted Washington's foreign policy-making dynamics. This event, along with the emotional wave it generated in the United States, fueled a triangular policymaking dynamic where Congress and an increasing number of third-party stakeholders no longer accepted being marginalized. Although Capitol Hill had reasserted its

⁴ By granting Most Favored Nation (MFN) status to China, Washington had significantly lowered trade tariffs and barriers on a broad array of strategic products, including grain, textiles, and various manufactured goods. This status ensured that China received non-discriminatory trade privileges like those extended to the majority of US trading partners, thereby promoting increased bilateral trade and economic cooperation. See Mann, "Bush Rejects."

⁵ For an insightful examination of how the Bush Sr. Administration navigated one of the most transformative periods in contemporary history, refer to Engel.

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the rapprochement with China, see MacMillan.

prerogatives on foreign policy since the mid-1970s, issues related to China had largely remained absent from the congressional agenda.⁷

Since 1980, when Beijing was first granted MFN trade status, the annual renewal had not been a prominent issue in Washington. The establishment of trade relations between the two countries was formalized under the provisions of the 1974 Trade Act.⁸ This legislation required the President to make an annual determination by early June regarding the extension of MFN status to China, significantly reducing trade tariffs and barriers between the two nations. This decision was then subject to confirmation, or rejection, by Congress, which had a sixty-day window to vote. Specifically, both the White House and Capitol Hill were called upon to decide whether to waive the amendment named after Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) and Representative Charles Vanik (D-OH). This provision pertained to non-market states and aimed to safeguard freedom of emigration. It stipulated that MFN status could be granted to a Communist country only if certain conditions were met, including a valid bilateral trade agreement negotiated with the United States and the assurance of freedom of emigration to its citizens. Initially conceived as a legislative tool to promote human rights within an anti-Soviet framework as well as to support the Jewish community in the USSR and to attack Kissinger's *détente*, the Jackson-Vanik amendment gradually evolved into a defining aspect of the late Cold War.⁹

A couple of months before the final deliberation, the confidential memorandum anticipated that a large number of Congress members would eventually oppose a straightforward renewal of trade privileges and underscored the ongoing struggle with Congress. It foresaw that

⁷ For insights into the role of Congress in foreign policy-related issues, see Johnson. Regarding China, Congressional involvement in foreign policy-making has been limited with some notable exceptions. For a detailed analysis, refer to Sutter.

⁸ For a contemporary history of US-China trade relations see Allen. For an analysis of the origins of US-China trade relations in the 1970s, detailing the involvement of US entrepreneurs and corporations in accessing China's market and labor resources, and its intersection with China's economic restructuring, consult Ingleson.

⁹ For a study on the influence of domestic dynamics in US foreign policy in the specific case of the Jackson-Vanik amendment passage see Stern.

the upcoming months would be exceptionally challenging. “An ugly confrontation with Congress and Beijing awaits us over waiver of Jackson-Vanik for China,” warned the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 1). Brent Scowcroft advised that the Administration should promptly assert control over an increasingly combative Congress and adopt a strategic approach “to move from defense to offense domestically on China issues while maximizing incentives for China to take steps in the right direction” (1). Reports from Capitol Hill staffers suggested that Congress members were “eager to humiliate our China policy,” indicating a formidable challenge on the horizon.

These rumors were confirmed in a private letter addressed to the President by Senator Bob Dole (R-KS), a figure historically opposed to close ties with Beijing and one of Capitol Hill’s staunchest supporters of relations with Taiwan since the 1970s.¹⁰ “On the MFN issue, they smell blood [and] frankly, as things now stand, their sense of smell is probably pretty good,” cautioned Dole (“Letter to George Bush” 1). According to the Senator from Kansas, the Democrats were willing to exploit the MFN renewal debate to denounce the inconsistency and amorality of the China policy put forth by the Administration since June 1989. In his correspondence, Senator Dole signaled the bipartisan nature of the contention as he cautioned that even among Republicans supporting the Administration’s China policy, there was concern that the President’s position might not sufficiently align with the values and ideals upheld by Washington. According to Dole, Bush should “somehow eliminate the impression that does exist in some circles that the Administration cares more about China’s strategic importance than its treatment of its own citizens.” He urged the President to issue a statement affirming “in a convincing way” Washington’s opposition to the ongoing violation of human rights in China. Additionally, Dole called for a “full court” lobbying effort, involving the business community, to garner support from Republican senators and reinforce party loyalty (1).

Secondly, due to its anti-Soviet counterbalance strategic relevance in Asia, the PRC had not been a focal point of the US-led human rights

¹⁰ For a comprehensive history of US-Taiwan relations and the role of the “Taiwan Lobby” in Congress see Bernkopf Tucker.

campaign that had targeted Communist countries in the late Cold War.¹¹ With very few exceptions, Beijing had avoided direct admonition for its failure to adhere to internationally recognized human rights standards. However, in the wake of the crackdown, human rights quickly turned into the main pillar of the American domestic debate on China and, according to the NSC, the President should not be left behind on this issue, at least in its rhetorical facets. “We need to move early to signal to China and to the American public your strong commitment to human rights in China before human rights activists and political opponents seize the lead,” suggested Scowcroft in his confidential memorandum, signaling the multiplication of actors engaged in the American public debate on China and the inescapable moral dimension surrounding the policy-making process. “We will want to be seen as actively interested in the human rights of the Chinese people and working against irresponsible Chinese behavior abroad,” urged the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 2). Following the crackdown, what Scowcroft labeled the “China-watching community in the U.S.” had grown exponentially, becoming increasingly vocal on the precarious human rights situation in the country. This community, along with members of Congress displeased with Bush’s arguments on China, included former US officials, NGOs, labor unions, consumers organizations, Chinese students and dissidents, and American scholars, among others. Their sentiment resonated deeply within the American public, garnering widespread attention and concern. The events of June 1989 had compacted a multifaceted group that was now “hurt, angry, and vengeful” (3). Dissatisfied with the President’s willingness to maintain the status quo with China, this community would play a significant role in combing any attempt to safeguarding open dialogue with the Chinese leadership.

Polls confirmed the prevailing negative perception of China among Americans. According to Gallup polling data, the percentage of individuals expressing positive views of Beijing experienced a notable decline from 72 percent in February/March 1989 to 31 percent by August of the

¹¹ On the late Cold War US-led human rights crusade see, among others, Keys. For a study on how US foreign policy became intertwined with human rights imperatives see Snyder.

same year (n. pag.). This trend, characterized by a marginal deviation in favorability, persisted throughout the tenure of George H. W. Bush in the White House. These figures were particularly telling when juxtaposed with Americans' perceptions of the Soviet Union. In 1990, 64 percent expressed a favorable opinion of Moscow, whereas only 39 percent viewed Beijing positively (see Taifa). Concurrently, other polls also indicated a similar negative trajectory. According to ABC/Washington Post surveys, Americans' favorability toward China decreased from 80 percent in the spring of 1989 to 39 percent one year later.¹²

The Cold War had not officially ended, but developments in Eastern Europe, where countries were increasingly embarking on a political transition, had redirected attention towards China's future. Members of Congress and the public questioned why the same Administration, which had endorsed the democratic movements sweeping through the soon-to-be former Soviet Union, appeared hesitant to apply similar principles to China. Mass demonstrations from Poland to Hungary, from East Germany to Czechoslovakia, and culminating in the violent overthrow of Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, had effectively dismantled Soviet-aligned regimes in Eastern Europe. These events eventually resulted in the establishment of democratically elected governments to replace former socialist regimes, demonstrating that assertive US policies had yielded positive outcomes. This sharply contrasted with the Administration's cautious approach to China.¹³

The crackdown in Beijing not only disrupted the legislative inertia of Congress but also prompted a renewed emphasis on China's adherence to human rights practices. By the spring of 1990, the Administration acknowledged that the renewal China's MFN commercial status would face more challenges if compared to the same legislative process in the previous decade. The President was scheduled to submit his recommendation on the extension of trade benefits to Congress by the beginning of June,

¹² The ABC/Washington Post polls, as well as those conducted by CBS/New York Times are cited in Pomoroy Waller and Ide.

¹³ On the democratization wave sweeping across Eastern Europe see Csaplár-Degovics et al.

coincidentally overlapping with the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre. Scowcroft warned that:

Human rights activists have energy to spare following the developments in the Soviet Union and East Europe. China has rapidly become the test case for many as to how this Administration stands on human rights. They particularly like China because it is easy to make the Administration look bad. Naturally, adversaries on the Hill will exploit this to the extent their constituents permit. ("Memorandum" 4)

With the progressive disappearance of Washington's Cold War existential threat, China's geopolitical strategic relevance had been downsized and human rights double standards would no longer be accepted, as Congress members and lobby groups had switched their focus from Moscow to Beijing.¹⁴

Thirdly, the memorandum confirmed that the end of the Cold War had ushered in a reduced tolerance for diplomatic secrecy, a style of conducting foreign policy that the American public had been accustomed to and had generally accepted. After all, the rapprochement with China in the early 1970s, initially embraced with enthusiasm in the United States, had been the outcome of secret diplomacy and interpersonal maneuvering conducted away from public scrutiny. However, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, this lenience gradually eroded.

The Administration was highly criticized for the dispatch of secret emissaries to China one month after the massacre, a move perceived as contradictory to the formal suspension of high-level contacts between American and Chinese officials, enacted in response to the crackdown. The news had been leaked by CNN in December 1989, prompting Capitol Hill to challenge President Bush's prerogative in handling relations with China (see Mann, *About Face*). Therefore, the delegitimization of traditional diplomatic channels coupled with contestation of seniority mechanisms

¹⁴ See the hyper critical op-ed authored by the former US Ambassador to the People's Republic of China, Winston Lord, "Misguided Mission."

subjected foreign policy decisions to an unprecedented bargain among a plurality of stakeholders. In the words of historian and presidential biographer Herbert Parmet, Bush “aimed toward the White House, only to find, by the time he arrived at this goal, that presidential power was not what it had once been” (9).

In light of these evolving dynamics in Washington, Brent Scowcroft, in his memorandum, proposed that President Bush adopt a nuanced approach, employing a dual rhetorical strategy. “As outrage occur during the spring anniversary season in China, we should modestly escalate our rhetoric of condemnation. This will run against instinct, but even the Chinese will understand (though not agree) if they see the rhetoric protecting the policy,” suggested the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 4). The American public should be assured that human rights concerns were central to the Administration’s China policy. Simultaneously, the Chinese leadership should be reassured that, to prevent Congress from excessively interfering in Beijing’s internal affairs, President Bush needed to rhetorically express dissatisfaction with the CCP leadership’s actions while threatening the MFN revocation. “The Chinese will need to be told quietly that under present circumstances, you cannot recommend that MFN be retained” (4). After all, Scowcroft lamented that the Chinese had offered very little sign of redemption that the White House could use to justify its wait-and-see approach on the MFN deliberation. “Chinese steps so far have been small and politically useless. Beijing may be willing to do more; we need to encourage much more,” wrote the National Security Advisor in the memorandum.

Faced with an unprecedented domestic challenging environment, by the beginning of 1990, President Bush had three possible paths ahead of him. First, he could work towards the suspension of MFN status for China – or at least threaten such a move – to gain more credibility on the human rights front and restore moral authority in his dealings with China before the American people. Second, set up a more conciliatory approach with Congress and let the Hill decide whether to sustain the MFN renewal, without opposing the eventuality of negative feedback. Third, as his National Security Advisor warned, “prepare for another fight over [his] right to conduct foreign policy by signaling an intention to veto.” By opting

for this third approach, the President should aim to secure the support of the American business sector, which had a growing stake in China's markets, factories, and workforce. Simultaneously, he should also seek to align a significant segment of the Chinese American community, which had commercial interests with the PRC, with his administration's policies. The President's decision to pursue the third path initiated a prolonged, convoluted, and problematic dialogue with Capitol Hill and third-party groups regarding Washington's approach to Beijing, a negotiation that continues to persist to the present day.¹⁵

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Stefano Chessa Altieri is a PhD candidate in Global History at the Scuola Superiore Meridionale (Italy) and Sciences Po (France). His doctoral research investigates the complexities of post-Cold War US foreign policy towards China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989, focusing on the challenging dilemma faced by policymakers as they sought to balance economic integration with the promotion of human rights. His work builds on his MSc thesis, which critically reassessed the historiographical debate surrounding the perceived inconsistency between Jimmy Carter's human rights rhetoric and the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1979. Stefano graduated with distinction from LSE. At Sciences Po, Stefano has served as a teaching assistant for courses on global history and transatlantic relations and has co-convened the annual LSE-Sciences Po Seminar in International History. He has also been awarded the Columbia University Alliance Visiting Program and the Yale Fox Fellowship.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Craig. "U.S.-China Retrospective: Forty Years of Commercial Relations." *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations*. Ed. Anne Thurston. New York: Columbia UP, 2021.146-73.

¹⁵ For a comprehensive history of the relations between Washington and Beijing until today see Cohen.

- Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy. *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Brown, Jeremy. *June Fourth: The Tiananmen Protests and Beijing Massacre of 1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Bush, George H.W., and Brent Scowcroft. *A World Transformed*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Callhoun, Craig J. *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*. Berkley: U of California P, 1995.
- Chang, Gordon H. *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015.
- Cohen, Warren L. *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*. New York: Columbia UP, 2019.
- Csaplár-Degovics, et al, eds. *After Twenty Years: Reasons and Consequences of the Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin: Terra Cognita Alapítvány, 2010.
- Dole, Bob. "Letter to George Bush." 18 May 1990. OA/ID 07556-018. White House Office of Public Liaison. James Schaefer Files, China MFN. Bush Presidential Records, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station.
- Engel, Jeffrey A. *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
- "Gallup Historical Trends: China." *Gallup Polls*. 30 June 2024. <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>>.
- Ingleson, Elizabeth O'Brien. *Made in China: When US-China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2024.
- Johnson, Robert David. *Congress and the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Lord, Winston. "Misguided Mission." *The Washington Post*. 19 Dec. 1989: n. pag. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/12/19/misguided-mission/961859a4-7ad0-41fa-94aa-cff3eb14625e/>>.
- Keys, Barbara J. *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014.
- MacMillan, Margaret Olwen. *Nixon in China: The Week that Changed the World*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 2006.

- Madsen, Richard. *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*. Berkley: U of California P, 1995.
- Mann, James. *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton*. New York: Random House, 1999.
- . "Bush Rejects Extension for China Students." *The Los Angeles Times*. 1 Dec. 1989. <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-12-01-mn-146-story.html>>.
- "Memorandum: Brent Scowcroft to George Bush." 2 Apr. 1990. OA/ID CF00312-005. National Security Council, Karl Jackson Files, China – General 1990. Bush Presidential Records, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station.
- Parmet, Herbert S. *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- Pomoroy Waller, Wynne, and Marianne E. Ide. "Poll Trends: China and Human Rights." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (1995): 133-43.
- Snyder, Sarah B. "Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations." 9 May 2016: n. pag. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. Ed. Mark Lawrence. Oxford: Oxford UP. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.267>>.
- Stern Paula. *Water's Edge: Domestic Politics and the Making of Foreign Policy*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979.
- Sutter, Robert G. *Congress and China Policy: Past Episodic, Recent Enduring Influence*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024.
- Tudda, Chris. *A Cold War Turning Point: Nixon and China, 1969-1972*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2012.
- Wang, Dong. *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteen Century to the Present*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.
- Yu, Taifa. "The Conduct of Post-Tiananmen U.S. China Policy: Domestic Constraints, Systemic Change, and Value Incompatibility," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 19 (1993): 229-47.