

TOUGH CALLS:
DIFFICULT ASSESSMENTS AND
HARD CHOICES IN
U.S. POLICY TOWARD CHINA¹

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It is both a great pleasure and a high honor to be here with you this afternoon. It is a great pleasure to be back at the Wilson Center, an organization at which I spent about a very enjoyable and rewarding year and a half back in 1979-80, helping to organize and launch what is now the Asia Program and giving me my first real experience in organizational leadership. It is a pleasure, too, to resume a fuller schedule of speaking and writing about China and U.S.-China relations, having spent the last five years building a new professional school in a very different subject area: civic leadership and public policy. It is a great honor to give this lecture in memory of a good friend and outstanding scholar, the late Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, who left us far too soon but whose contributions to her country and to the study of its relations with China will not be forgotten. I want to give special thanks to Bob Hathaway and Warren Cohen for giving me this extraordinary opportunity.

In preparing for this talk tonight, I revisited parts of an impressive body of writing on the U.S.-China relationship and U.S. policy toward China, from the late 1940s until the time of her untimely death. I had read many of her articles individually before, but I had not looked at them together as a single corpus of work. When I did so, I saw a clear thread running through them: the U.S. relations with China—the difficult analytic assessments made by American observers over the years and the difficult policy choices undertaken by American decision makers at various points in the history of the relationship. By tough analytic calls I mean those where the questions are: what is happening, where are things going, and what will it mean for us? And tough policy calls are those where the issue is: what should we do about those developments, how can we advance American interests, and how can we design our policy to have the best chance of success?

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These two kinds of questions are tough calls for a very similar reason, they both

But while one tough call what to do about China could be postponed, another tough call could not be del

[Acheson] and his staff into the unwelcome but ultimately unavoidable task of analyzing national objectives in the Far East. ⁴ The policy call that emerged from that imperative was embodied in

National Press Club speech of January 1950, in which the Secretary appeared to place both South Korea and Taiwan outside the American defense perimeter in Asia. Whatever the merits of the first call to let the dust settle before deciding what to do about China the second call appeared to encourage, or at least did not deter, North Korea from attacking the South in June 1950. And that led to a quick series of further fateful decisions, including the analytical judgment that despite the lack of any direct evidence of Chinese involvement, Peking had

⁵ the subsequent

defense even though it had just been excluded from the American defense perimeter, the consequent abandonment of any thought of normalizing relations with China, the decision to interpose the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait, and finally the decision to escalate American war aims to include not just rolling back the North Korean attack but also liberating North Korea from Communist rule. There is no doubt that this rapid series of analytic and policy decisions, made in the space of less than one year, between January and October 1950, established the general context for U.S.-China relations for the following two decades, a context characterized by confrontation, hostility, and mistrust.

U.S. policy toward China dissected other tough calls. First there was the decision in 1978

Taiwan Strait increased, the prospect that the Taiwanese would voluntarily choose unification might increase as well. Although that prospect seems more remote today than it did then, the question remains highly pertinent, and Nancy did not give it a simple answer. Instead, she

costs for the United States: it would remove one of the biggest obstacles to a stable U.S.-China
Beijing the
choice either to devote fewer resources to military preparations, or else to assign higher priority
to its

China Sea or the East China Sea, or if North Korea started to implode, or if China began to use any of several forms of coercion to force Taiwan to the negotiating table. Bilateral negotiations with China over any number of issues a bilateral investment treaty, the policies governing trade between the two countries, climate change, or cyber security could also involve difficult choices. But today I want to focus instead on two broader challenges, one an analytic call and the other a fundamentally important set of policy decisions. In identifying and discussing these toughest of tough calls, I may disappoint you, since I will raise questions that I will not answer directly. But I will suggest some of the considerations that may be useful to those who will actually have to make those calls, in the hope that this approach may be more helpful than giving my own answers. In doing this, my general theme will be that even the best theories of international politics are highly indeterminate and will not give clear or definite answers to the questions I will

The Policy Call

The toughest policy call we presently face is how to maintain a balance in Asia without triggering a downward spiral in the U.S.-China relationship.

One common response to the uncertainties surrounding the rise of a new major power, as is happening in Asia with the rise of China today, is to form a counterweight against it. Not necessarily to stop it from rising but to constrain its behavior, to deter or prevent it from seeking a dominant position, and to encourage it to follow international norms and engage in cooperative

party would have expected. In a situation of suspicion, however, such costly reassurances are difficult to issue, however desirable they may be, especially if they are not immediately reciprocated.

A somewhat different solution is to engage in greater transparency: to reveal more about intentions and capabilities. This certainly can help, but only if it embodies the same spirit as

of their security concerns, much as they have done in the economic and commercial realms. The prerequisite is that both sides must be convinced that the prospective costs and risks of the security dilemma are too great, and that neither side can be confident of securing the advantage, whether by outspending the other or by developing new coercive or defensive technologies that the other side cannot counter. Whether we are yet at that point is requires a tough analytical call of its own. And even if we are, the challenges of successful negotiation will be severe.

Conclusion