

*Changing Each Other:
US-China Relations in the Shadow of Domestic Politics*

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China and the United States are not inevitably destined for conflict, but their domestic politics make it more likely, and so both governments seek security by changing the other from within. This book manuscript explains how.

In Part 1, I document how the United States and China use diplomacy to avoid the “Thucydides trap” that, according to some, structurally imperils US-China relations. I analyze original, day-level datasets of US-China interactions and US assessments of China drawn from 100,000 pages of Freedom of Information Act requests. Chinese diplomacy, I find, improves American perceptions of China and increases bilateral cooperation. This suggests that Sino-American conflict is not inevitable, even during moments of mutual suspicion.

In Part 2, I show how domestic politics in China and the US have consistently destabilized the bilateral relationship and made each side less secure. In China, the paramount leader must satisfy elite demands for patronage. When economic downturns threaten his ability to do so, he routinely initiates diversionary conflict with the United States to generate a “rally around the flag” effect. Some 40% of Chinese-initiated conflict with the United States, I show, is diversionary. In the US, legislators have electoral incentives to support anti-China legislation, which elicits hostility while generally failing to secure meaningful change in Chinese trade policies, military behavior, and domestic repression.

Both governments understand that the other’s domestic politics threatens their security, and so, in Part 3, I show how they change the other from within. Using data from the Foreign Agents Registration Act, I show that Chinese lobbying compels lawmakers to support pro-China legislation and makes American media less likely to cast China as an adversary. Using data on broadcast areas for the Voice of America and writings from former Chinese Fulbright scholars, I show that America’s cultural outreach efforts have fostered protests and built constituencies for democratic change.