The Clinton Administration policy of “constructive engagement” towards China rests on a simple causal claim: if we treat the Chinese as an enemy we will certainly make them an enemy, but if we treat them as a friend we may make them into a friend. The near term costs of constructive engagement -- downplaying Chinese challenges to our interests and overlooking Chinese irregularities in honoring its commitments -- are justified by the hopefully higher payoffs from a future friendship. As currently articulated and practiced, the Administration’s policy suffers from several internal contradictions.

1. **Constructive engagement overstates U.S. influence over Chinese behavior, perceptions, interests and domestic politics.**

   The Clinton administration defends its policy as a less ambitious alternative to a hard-line policy of containing or even confronting China. In fact, however, constructive engagement is the more ambitious policy because it exaggerates U.S. influence over China. Constructive engagement overstates the ability of the United States to shape Chinese behavior promising, in effect that we can shape their conduct by shaping their perceptions, their interests, and ultimately their domestic political order.

   Constructive engagement assumes the Clinton Administration can shape the way the Chinese perceive the behavior of the United States. Constructive engagement promises that if we avoid demands and embrace concessions they will see us as reasonable and friendly rather than as weak and hostile. When we soft-pedal a Chinese challenge for the sake of preserving the
constructive engagement strategy, the Chinese can draw one of two general inferences. On the one hand, they could conclude that the United States is weak and unwilling or unable to defend its interests. On the other hand, they could conclude that the United States is accommodating and reasonable. Constructive engagement depends on the Chinese drawing the latter, not the former, inference. The strategy, as articulated by the Clinton Administration, does not explain how we can manage Chinese perceptions so adroitly. It is not simply a matter of being consistent in our behavior (something over which we have more control), because the same level of accommodation can mean either that we are irresolute or that we are friendly. What matters is how China interprets it. Constructive engagement depends on the Clinton Administration successfully shaping Chinese perceptions.

The Clinton Administration’s constructive engagement policy, then, is one of the most ambitious perception management campaigns ever attempted. Success depends not so much on whether the United States executes the proper action but rather on how Chinese leaders perceive those U.S. behaviors and the new strategic environment engendered by them. For the policy to succeed, the Clinton Administration must ensure that the Chinese develop the following perceptions about U.S. motivations, the changing distribution of power, and about the consequences of challenging the United States:

A. The Chinese must interpret U.S. policy as “reasonable accommodation” rather than as “irresolution” or “submission to Chinese demands.” Specifically, the Chinese must believe that:

- U.S. policy reflects an underlying confidence in the future rather than apprehension of growing Chinese power.
- U.S. policymakers have a clear idea of U.S. interests in the region.
- U.S. concessions are generated by a U.S. desire for cooperative relations rather than by Chinese ultimata.

B. The Chinese must perceive the United States to be a “secure and stable power” rather than a “declining power.” Specifically, the Chinese must believe that:
- the United States will be an active player in Asian-Pacific affairs well into the next century.
- the United States will not be markedly less powerful relative to China in a few decades than it is now
- the growth in Chinese power is not inexorable -- that Chinese missteps could alter the course of Chinese history
- failure to reach accommodation with the United States could derail expansion of Chinese military, political, and economic influence

C. The Chinese must perceive that if they challenge the United States they will be worse off than if they cooperate. Specifically, they must believe that:
- there is a readily identifiable limit to the concessions the United States is willing to grant to China
- failure to contest the last Chinese challenge does not lower the likelihood that the United States will contest the next challenge posed by the Chinese
- the alternative to the current policy is one less favorable to Chinese interests, not more favorable.
Constructive engagement also assumes the Administration can shape Chinese interests. Constructive engagement promises that if we make the existing world order look more benign we will make China see they have a stake in the existing order -- in short, that we will change how they conceive of their interests. The existing world order consists of rules more or less tailored to Western, especially American, interests. The Clinton team sells constructive engagement as a way of increasing the stake China has in the existing order and thereby moderating China’s behavior. If China is determined to rewrite the rules to be more congenial to Chinese interests than to ours, then constructive engagement collapses and may even be counterproductive (by hastening China’s accumulation of the power it needs to reshape the world order). For Clinton’s policy to succeed, the Chinese must perceive that they have more to gain from joining an existing world order than from rewriting the rules of global governance to be more favorable to Chinese interests.

Specifically, the Chinese must believe that:

- the existing rules do not unfairly cater exclusively to Western and especially U.S. interests
- Chinese efforts to rewrite the rules in their favor would not be successful
- Chinese efforts to rewrite the rules in their favor would jeopardize the benefits they currently garner from the existing system

In this way, the Clinton policy of constructive engagement reduces to a gamble that China’s growing stake in the existing order will trump any interest they have in reshaping the order. If the gamble pays off, it would be unprecedented. Every rising power in history has sought to rewrite the rules in its favor rather than be content with conforming its interests to the existing system.

Finally, constructive engagement assumes the Administration can shape China’s political
order. Constructive engagement promises that U.S. cooperation will undermine the position of
the hard-liners and reinforce the position of the soft-liners within China. In fact, the United States
has very little influence over the distribution of power within the Chinese government which
derives chiefly from the success or failure of the Chinese economic reforms and the ability of the
government to contain the political reform process. Because the United States is limited in its
ability to shape Chinese perceptions, every concession by the Clinton Administration
simultaneously reinforces both the hard-liners (“see, the United States is weak let us press our
advantage”) and the soft-liners (“see, the United States is reasonable, let us be reasonable”). Even
military-to-military contacts can have this double-edged effect, reinforcing the views of both soft-
liners and hard-liners. The same visit can impress some Chinese visitors that they should imitate
the U.S. model of a professional, apolitical, subordinate military and can convince others that
China needs to imitate the U.S. model of a forward-deployed, global presence.

2. Constructive engagement promises a virtuous cycle of cooperation but risks a vicious
cycle of concessions.

Constructive engagement promises a virtuous cycle. Clinton Administration concessions
will be matched by Chinese concessions which will facilitate further American cooperation and so
on. As currently articulated, however, there is nothing internal to the policy to prevent a vicious
cycle. In response to every Chinese disagreeable action, the constructive engagement strategy
advises the Administration decisionmaker to think thus: if we mollify the Chinese on this point,
then we leave open the chance that a mutually agreeable friendship will emerge, but if we
challenge the Chinese then we accelerate the process whereby enmity emerges. Framed this way, it is always preferable not to confront. No matter how egregious the Chinese provocation, it is always true that the United States has both options (confront or accommodate) and if accommodation always prolongs the game leaving open the possibility that the Chinese will moderate their behavior, then accommodation is always preferable.

Put another way, if under constructive engagement the Clinton Administration views “starting another Cold War” as a catastrophic outcome to be avoided at all costs, then it never makes sense to get tough with China. To break this cycle, a policymaker must first decide to abandon constructive engagement, at least insofar as it is articulated by the Clinton Administration.

The longer the game is played this way the more irresistible is the pressure to avoid confrontation because the long series of concessions to the Chinese become a cumulative sunk cost invested in the relationship. After every Chinese challenge, the Administration is faced with the following calculus. It compares the costs of acquiescing to China in this instance to the costs of starting another Cold War. The calculus also involves comparing the new challenge to the sum of all previous challenges, none of which was enough to drive the Clinton Administration off the cooperation course. If the Clinton Administration was willing to let pass all the previous challenges, surely it is not worth throwing the entire policy away just for this latest challenge. The greater the cumulative list of concessions already made, the greater must be the next Chinese challenge to justify switching tracks. Therefore, a player that has committed to the “avoid making an enemy” course of action will be willing to endure ever higher provocations and challenges.

Clinton’s constructive engagement strategy sounds active but is in fact a passive strategy.
The initiative lies with the China who is free to choose between pursuing its self-interest or pursuing a more other-interested course of action. The burden of response is placed on the United States who must choose between acquiescing, and therefore choosing partnership, or countering the challenge, and therefore choosing the new Cold War. The Administration’s list of options is constrained and any blame for the breakdown in friendly relations rests on the United States.

3. Constructive engagement promises to protect the military from blame for precipitating a new Cold War but opens up the military up to blame that it squandered the temporary U.S. advantage.

Constructive engagement poses special risks for the U.S. military. The military will be blamed if overly bellicose behavior now drives China into the “confrontation” course of action. Fear of such blame appears to be a primary impetus behind the strategy.

But the military will be just as vulnerable to criticism and will receive just as much blame if it turns out that this temporary period of decisive U.S. advantage was squandered. When China becomes something closer to a peer state, the United States will have fewer leverage points with which to coerce it. At that time, the central question will be whether we adequately exploited our current, but temporary, advantage so as to lock in as many advantages as possible for when the balance of power is less favorable to U.S. interests.

Put another way, the constructive engagement strategy assumes that the most damning question the military will face is, “what did you do to make China an enemy?” In fact, the most
damning question is likely to be, “why did you not take steps to prolong the American advantage, or at least to minimize the deleterious effects of the changing distribution of power?”

From the parochial perspective of an American policymaker, the goal of constructive engagement should not be to avoid making China an enemy. Rather the goal should be to do everything possible to establish leverage points over China that would be useful in any future conflict, albeit without needlessly hastening any direct confrontation with China.

4. The Debate Over Constructive engagement Misstates the Alternatives

The Clinton Administration frames the debate as a choice between constructive engagement and containment. This is sloppy analysis but shrewd rhetoric. Sloppy analysis because, in fact, containment is not the opposite of engagement. The opposite of engagement is isolationism. Isolationism can either be generalized, as was the case for the first hundred years of the American Republic (at least vis-a-vis Europe) or specific, as was the case with US-Albanian relations during the Cold War. Framing the issue this way, however, is shrewd rhetoric because virtually no one supports isolationism. The Clinton Administration says that if you do not want isolationism, you must therefore support our policy.

This of course, misstates the area of real debate. There is a widespread consensus that the United States needs to engage China. The true debate is over how to engage.

Under the rubric of constructive engagement, there are four basic options depending on the degree to which the interests of the players overlap: (1) direct confrontation/rollback, where one country seeks to diminish the position of the other (viz. U.S. policy on Iraq); (2) containment, where one country seeks to limit the advances of another country’s position (viz. U.S. Cold War
policy on the Soviet Union); (3) *appeasement*, where one country seeks to manage the apparently inevitable advance of the other with concessions on minor points so as to avoid concessions on major issues (viz. British policy on the United States at the turn of the century); or (4) *enlargement*, where one country views the other’s interests as so harmonious that virtually any advance for one is an advance the other (viz. U.S. policy on Great Britain ever since World War I).

Given this more accurate range of choices, it is evident that the Administration has adopted a general posture of constructive engagement (not isolationism) and under that general rubric is pursuing a specific policy of appeasement. Several years ago, I asked the architect of the Administration’s Asia security policy what was the difference between our policy and a policy of appeasement. His response: “Appeasement has a long and distinguished history in diplomatic affairs.”

5. A Concluding Caveat

Appeasement does have a long and distinguished history in diplomatic affairs. The sorry experience of Munich is balanced by Great Britain’s felicitous appeasement of the United States late in the 19th century. Established powers need not always expend precious resources trying to check the rise of competing states. Given U.S. business interests and a public weary of bearing the burdens that comes with being the world’s only superpower, the Clinton policy does have the virtue of appealing to the voters desire to enjoy peace for a while.

But before going too much further, we would do well to reconsider the logical foundations on which this policy rests. The Clinton Administration is selling appeasement (but calling it constructive engagement) on the grounds that it is less costly and less onerous than the
alternatives. In fact, however, the Clinton policy will only work if the United States is able to influence Chinese decision-makers in extraordinarily subtle ways.

Perhaps the Administration does enjoy such power and influence over how the Chinese perceive, think, and calculate. If so, Clinton’s policy just might work and he will go down in history as one of the more far-sighted statesmen the United States has produced. If not, the Clinton Administration is setting up the United States for a serious catastrophe.