



The Bipartisan Race to be Tough on China

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The 2022 midterm congressional elections in the United States have been characterized by stark, sometimes shrill, partisan disputes on an array of issues, both foreign and domestic. One area that has not featured such a division, however, is policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). Instead, there has been a growing consensus regarding that issue; the only contest appears to be about which party can and will take the harder line toward Beijing. Indeed, within the Republican Party hard liners are even bashing fellow members who advocate restoring the traditional GOP stance that favored a policy of engagement with China.

The strength of the anti-China trend is evident on multiple issues, including trade policy, human rights, Taiwan, and the extent of the security threat that the PRC now supposedly poses to the United States. Going forward, it matters little whether Republicans or Democrats are the majority party in Congress; the days of bipartisan support for a policy of cooperation with China are over.

Hostility toward the PRC has been building for several years in both Congress and the American public. Beijing's imposition of an uncompromising national security law on Hong Kong in June 2020 both broadened and deepened that hostility. The PRC's tightened restrictions on Hong Kong followed on the heels of growing anger and suspicions in the United States about the Chinese government's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak. Even moderate American critics condemned PRC authorities for their apparent failure to provide timely information about the onset of the virus and its rapid spread. Hawks on China policy openly charged that the virus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology, not in nature. Public opinion surveys taken in 2020 showed a surge of negative opinion about the PRC on multiple issues, and that the growing hostility was strikingly bipartisan.

Animosity toward Beijing played out in various ways. One of the more noticeable developments was the growing security cooperation between the United States and Taiwan. Congress lifted restrictions on interactions between high-level U.S. and Taiwanese officials that had dated from passage of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). During the final months of Donald Trump's administration, there were even meetings in Taipei involving Cabinet-level administration officials. Overall U.S. diplomatic and strategic cooperation with Taiwan had reached the point that the relationship began to resemble the old bilateral defense alliance that Jimmy Carter's administration had terminated when Washington switched formal diplomatic ties to the PRC.

A statement issued by leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee in December 2020 underscored both the virulence and the bipartisan nature of the hardening attitude toward China in Congress. “Beijing’s infiltration of U.S. society has been deliberate and insidious as they use every instrument of influence available to accelerate their rise at America’s expense,” acting Chairman Marco Rubio (R-FL) said in a joint statement with Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the panel.

Sentiment also was building for “economic decoupling” from China to reduce America’s heavy dependence on Chinese sources of such key products as electronic components and pharmaceuticals. The call for decoupling was most evident in articles by conservative and economic nationalist analysts, but the sense of alarm was not confined to that portion of the ideological spectrum. Mainstream-establishment publications began to call attention to the vulnerability as a cause for concern.

However, the view within the U.S. foreign policy establishment remained that Joe Biden, despite his campaign’s hawkish rhetoric about the PRC during the 2020 presidential campaign, would reject Trump’s confrontational approach and return to the more cooperative policy that prevailed previously. By and large, that softer approach did not emerge. Indeed, the White House’s policy on both economic and security issues exhibited little difference from the Trump years. One key reason for the lack of a rapprochement likely was the tenacity and intensity of anti-PRC attitudes in the American public. A March 2021 Pew Research survey revealed strong majorities for a tough stance toward China on both human rights and economic issues. Even if Biden had been inclined personally to restore the previous level of bilateral cooperation, he likely was wary about defying such public sentiment.

Bilateral relations have continued to deteriorate during the current administration. Biden has retained most of the protectionist trade policies restrictions on Chinese trade that his predecessor installed. On multiple occasions, the president also has emphasized that the United States is committed to defend Taiwan if the PRC uses force to compel the island to accept political unification with the mainland. His promises go far beyond the limited commitments to Taiwan’s security enshrined in the TRA. Nevertheless, Republicans charge that the president “bows to China” rather than confronting that country about its abuses and misdeeds.

Anti-PRC sentiment in both parties has surged in the months leading up to the midterm congressional elections. One of the clearest examples was the widespread support in both parties for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s provocative trip to Taiwan in the summer of 2022. Republican leaders who never before said a favorable word about Pelosi on any other issue praised her move with respect to Taiwan. Pelosi herself said that the trip was intended to make “unequivocally clear” that the United States would “not abandon” the island in the face of PRC pressure. A few remaining advocates of a cooperative policy toward Beijing criticized the visit as destabilizing and needlessly provocative, but that was decidedly a minority view. In the weeks following her trip to Taipei, several congressional delegations with members from both parties also traveled to the island to show their support for Taiwan’s democracy and de facto independence.

A similar reaction took place following Biden's decision in early October to place sweeping tech restrictions on China. The measure included a provision barring China from using semiconductor chips made with U.S. tools anywhere in the world. It constituted the harshest economic measure by far ever leveled against Beijing since the normalization of diplomatic relations. A Bloomberg analysis described it as “a kneecapping of the Chinese tech industry, depriving it of the advanced chips—and the means of making them—vital for everything from smartphones to self-driving cars.”

Referring to the latest annual national security strategy report the White House released in early October, the Wall Street Journal noticed a significant change. Although the document continued to regard both Russia and China as threats, “the weakening of Russia's military and of [Moscow's] position on the global stage since the invasion and battlefield losses to Ukrainian forces have reinforced the view that China is the U.S.'s most consequential threat.” That perception helps explain why both parties seem so eager to embrace an uncompromising policy toward Beijing. It is a trend that is unlikely to change for the better anytime soon.

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