

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Jan 9, 2012): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/insecure-america-scapegoats-china-6348>

An Insecure America Scapegoats China

    |  [More](#) ^[1]

January 9, 2012

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#) ^[2]

A new year brings new opportunities for harsh rhetoric [toward China](#) ^[3]. On issues ranging from Beijing's [valuation of its currency](#) ^[4] to China's military modernization program, to the PRC's expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, critics in the United States are voicing [shrill complaints](#) ^[5]. Many of [those critics](#) ^[6] warn that Washington must "stand up" to Beijing.

Some of this is the typical posturing that seems to occur in every U.S. presidential election cycle. There are many political points to be scored by bashing China, and fewer to be scored by advocating a friendly, "soft" policy. Staunch conservatives still often regard China as an evil totalitarian power, despite the numerous capitalist economic reforms that have taken place since the late 1970s. Human rights activists across the political spectrum loathe Beijing's policies toward Tibet and toward political dissidents generally. And labor unions resent China's low-wage competition in a growing number of industries. The combination of those factors has long made China a convenient whipping boy in election campaigns.

Chinese officials and opinion leaders have tended to brush-off the anti-China rhetoric. In my conversations with those individuals over the years, they note that successful candidates for president have never drastically changed the substance of U.S. policy toward China, no matter what they said when running for office. They have a point. In 1992, Bill Clinton's campaign [referred](#) ^[7] to Chinese leaders as the "butchers of Beijing" and the candidate himself denounced President George H. W. Bush for appeasing China in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre, Chinese exports of advanced weapons to radical regimes, and other sins. Yet within a year, Clinton's stance moderated and U.S.-China trade soared. Candidates George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan also signaled an intent to adopt more confrontational policies toward China, but once in office, their policies were generally conciliatory.

It is tempting to assume that this pattern will hold following the 2012 election. But there are new factors that suggest a possible divergence. On previous occasions, the gap between America and China in military and economic capabilities was enormous. Washington could always approach relations with China from a position of strength and confidence.

That is less true today. The gap in economic power [has narrowed dramatically](#) ^[8], with some experts predicting that [the Chinese economy could overtake America's](#) ^[9] as the world's largest by the early 2020s. The gap in military power has not narrowed as much, but Beijing has developed some important asymmetrical capabilities and could make U.S. power projection into the western Pacific problematic.

And most telling, there has been a dramatic shift in fiscal fortunes. The massive U.S. federal budget deficits have made China our principal foreign banker, giving Beijing potential financial and diplomatic leverage and heightening the sense of vulnerability among many Americans. That has bred resentment at America's dependence and increased the temptation to [blame China](#) ^[10] for Washington's woes.

It is that decline in confidence and the corresponding increase in resentment that may cause this round of China-bashing to endure rather than fade following the election. That shift might occur despite the continuing importance of the mutually beneficial bilateral economic ties. Chinese leaders do not seem to grasp the magnitude of the change in attitude that has taken place in the United States. They are in danger of being blind-sided by increased hostility among both the American population and the U.S. political and policy elites in the coming years.

More by

Source URL (retrieved on Jan 9, 2012): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/insecure-america-scapegoats-china-6348>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>
- [2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/ted-galen-carpenter>
- [3] <http://thehill.com/video/campaign/202915-gop-debate-romney-huntsman-spar-on-china>
- [4] <http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2011-09-05/Romney-My-10-point-plan-to-create-American-jobs/50265720/1>
- [5] <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/aug/10/holmes-south-china-sea-its-not-beijings-lake/>
- [6] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/08/23/america-s-china-threat-u-s-must-retain-asia-pacific-clout-despite-debt-woes.html>
- [7] <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/31119-1>
- [8] <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/imf-bombshell-age-of-america-about-to-end-2011-04-25>
- [9] http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/12/save_date
- [10] <http://www.cnn.com/id/45232734/page/14/>