



**WASHINGTON'S "WHOLE-OF-
GOVERNMENT" PUSHBACK AGAINST
CHINESE CHALLENGES—
IMPLICATIONS AND OUTLOOK**

BY ROBERT SUTTER

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Washingtonians often exaggerate the importance of developments “inside the beltway” influencing international affairs, but it’s no exaggeration to conclude after reviewing the remarkable hardening of US policy toward China since late 2017 that this seminal change in US policy and its broad implications have been “made in Washington.” The National Security Strategy in December 2017, quickly followed by the National Defense Strategy, targeted China using harsh language unseen in executive branch discourse since the Nixon administration. Because of acute internal differences on trade issues and distractions with North Korea, the Trump administration at first was muddled and erratic in following through with its strategy. But Republicans and Democrats in Congress joined senior administration officials in voicing urgent concern with US security and economic competitiveness in the face of an ever more powerful China that if not countered would become dominant in high technology and national defense. Congress led the charge resulting in authoritative legislation. Notably the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019, passed in August 2018, called for a “whole-of-government” pushback against China’s economic, security and political challenges to the United States. Close collaboration between the administration and both Democrats and Republicans in the Congress broke the mold of past practice where the Congress usually served as a brake and obstacle impeding administration initiatives in dealing with China.

Despite acute partisanship in Washington, opposing China now represented one of the few areas where both sides of the congressional aisle and the Trump administration agree.

President Trump complemented this effort with a sequence of punitive tariffs against China, with promises of more to come. Vice President Mike Pence laid out the administration’s indictment targeting Chinese practices in October, amid an array of unprecedented steps taken by various departments to counter Chinese challenges. The Justice Department and especially the FBI launched a special initiative that resulted in efforts to publicize examples of egregious Chinese espionage and influence operations for review by the US public. Pence, substituting for Trump at annual Asia-Pacific multilateral meetings in November, went toe-to-toe with Chinese leaders about their acute differences.

President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed in December to a truce in their tariff war and started negotiations that were supposed to end on March 1 but have lasted much longer, though optimists say an agreement is likely soon. Presumably to avoid disrupting the sensitive negotiations, the administration has been less publicly outspoken against China, though senior leaders make critical statements and implementing the pushback continues in various agencies. Congress has not let up the pressure with legislation and other initiatives that sustain the anti-China drum beat with hearings, letters, and other public bi-partisan demonstrations to reassure Asia of US support in the face of China, to criticize China-Russia cooperation, to condemn acute suppression in China’s Xinjiang, and to spotlight dangers posed Confucius Institutes.

Forecast: uncertainties but continued hardening

Factors showing continued uncertainty in the course of US policy toward China include:

- Avowedly unpredictable President Trump may accommodate China.
- Costs of Chinese retaliation could be very high. Costs of hardening US defense, internal security, and economic operations could be

formidable. Costs of tariffs and turmoil to US consumers, businesses, and stockholders could mount. Public opinion and the media may respond negatively.

- Asian partners and allies also have constituencies impacted by US-China tensions, making their support for US pressures on China less than uniform.
- China resorting to the use of force against US pressure or heavy coercion on Asian neighbors could cause them to hedge against Trump policy.
- Rise in US-China tensions may lead to armed conflict, very unwelcome by Americans.

Nevertheless, the factors driving the hardening seem stronger. They include:

- The new US hard line toward China has momentum and wide support in Congress; the media is more attuned to and often supportive of the harder posture than it was last year. Public opinion does not show the sense of urgency seen in Washington seeking action now to counter China, but it is moving toward a more negative view of the Chinese government.
- US critics of Trump's policies often in the past worked for accommodation of China for the sake of a stable relationship and benefits of engagement; they remain on the defensive.
- Atrophy of US government engagement with China means US government stakeholders no longer can argue that tough measures against China risk endangering their programs with China, as those programs have declined.
- Beijing, loathe to compromise, does not give way to foreign pressure.

Also among drivers, Richard Madsen and other specialists have identified four groups of Americans as ever more focused negatively on China's practices. They are Americans who judge they lost their jobs because of Chinese competition and received little

support from US elites who benefited from interchange with China; some manufacturers forced out of business with similar assessments of China and US elites; Americans suspicious of foreign influence and immigration, viewing China as the largest problem; and evangelical Christians sensitive to China's harsh suppression of religious freedom. When combined with *Politico's* judgment a month ago that the major conservative organization CPAC will be giving top priority to targeting China's practices going forward and the reestablishment of the Committee on Present Danger (now focused on China), the sum seems to represent a major shift in the US approach to China that will last a long time – well beyond Trump's first term. Meanwhile, one can add here Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford's speech in March entitled “Re-learning a competitive mindset in great power competition”; in Ford's judgment “the center of gravity in the US policy community – alarmed by aspects of what modern China is unfortunately becoming – has crossed its intellectual Rubicon and, irrespective of which political party holds sway in Washington, will never again return to the fallacies and competitive unpreparedness of our uncritically rise-embracing past.”

What to watch for

Regarding recent urgency and angst seen in the administration and the Congress that the United States is falling behind a rising China in high technology and national security leading to possible Chinese dominance, will they subside? Unless they do, the tough US posture against the wide range of Chinese challenges seems likely to persist as the stakes are seen as high – protecting the US from pernicious Chinese dominance.

Some believe that the Chinese threat has been overblown and careful examination will reveal government practices in a more favorable light. Unfortunately, there are a number areas of largely unexamined Chinese government behavior that if examined thoroughly are likely to show China as a keen opponent of the US. China's relations with Putin's Russia heads this list.

The costs of the tougher US policy toward China noted above may force US policymakers to ease

tensions and find common ground with China, despite ongoing US concern with Chinese dominance. American public opinion thus far has not been persuaded of the wisdom of the current hard US approach and may have little patience with elected officials stressing vigilance that they, the voters, would rather not pay for.

On balance, I agree with Christopher Ford that there will be no return to the past practice of engagement. What lies ahead remains to be determined.

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