



# Countering Partisanship and Threat Inflation in U.S.-China Policy

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In Congress, U.S.-China policy is often perceived as an area that unifies Republican and Democratic legislators.<sup>1</sup> Commentators note that policymakers “sound shockingly similar” when discussing how the United States should respond to a rising China.<sup>2</sup> And despite major differences on almost all other areas of foreign and domestic policy, the Biden administration has maintained much continuity with Trump-era China policy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet with congressional polarization at its highest levels since the late nineteenth century, salient foreign policy issues—including U.S.-China policy—will eventually be subsumed by the partisan divide.<sup>4</sup> Legislators will face partisan pressures to inflate the threat posed to the United States by China. In turn, politicians will have incentives to weaponize the China threat by discrediting their opponents for being “soft on China” and portraying themselves as “tough on China.” These deliberately vague phrases hold little meaning when considering the multidimensional nature of the China challenge that includes military competition, trade, human rights, and technology policy, where “toughness” does not correspond neatly to progressive or conservative politics.

Such extreme partisanship makes it increasingly difficult for Congress and the White House to craft pragmatic China policy. In an era where competition with China is one of the most complex and contentious challenges to the United States, theatrical posturing will not lead to thoughtful or nuanced policymaking. While bold and decisive action may be warranted in some instances, competition with China requires complex strategy, carefully tailored for each dimension of the bilateral relationship. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained, U.S. policy towards China should be “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, [and] adversarial when it must be.”<sup>5</sup> Politicizing the China threat is the quickest way to dismiss that complexity, resulting in unduly reckless policymaking.

To preempt partisanship in U.S.-China relations, the United States should focus on restoring its own strengths rather than stoking the China threat. Such a strategy will best prepare the country for a range of potential outcomes with Beijing—irrespective of whether the relationship becomes more adversarial in the future. There are also potential areas for bipartisan cooperation, including human rights and technological competition.

## Partisanship and the China Threat

In recent years, American rhetoric regarding the China threat has become increasingly hostile. In some respects, this shift in discourse appears bipartisan. Prior to the 2020 presidential election, Democratic presidential candidates adopted the Trump administration’s hawkish rhetoric around China. Then-candidate Joe Biden’s rhetoric shifted dramatically in 2020 as he urged the United States to “get tough with China.”<sup>6</sup>

Once in office, President Biden’s China policy deviated from the previous administration in a few ways. For one, Biden rejected Donald Trump’s “America First” framework in favor of a multilateral approach to confronting China.<sup>7</sup> The administration also took a tough stance on China’s human rights abuses, officially labeling China’s repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang a “genocide.”<sup>8</sup> Overall, however, Biden’s China policy closely resembles Trump’s. Like his predecessor, Biden has continued to criticize Chinese leadership, expand U.S. relations with Taiwan, and maintain many Trump-era tariffs.<sup>9</sup>

On Capitol Hill, China rhetoric is growing progressively incendiary. According to a search conducted through Quorum, in the past two years, legislators have been increasingly likely to invoke the “China threat.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) spoke of China as a “perilous threat” under a headline decrying China as an “existential threat.”<sup>11</sup> Representative Mike Waltz (R-FL) described China as “the biggest existential threat the nation has ever faced.”<sup>12</sup>

As the hostility between Beijing and Washington grows, policymakers are beginning to weaponize the issue, labeling political opponents as “soft on China.” In the summer of 2021, for instance, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) tweeted: “Biden is weak on China. And appeasement never works.”<sup>13</sup> Amidst this trend, some experts argue that a “China litmus test” is emerging in Congress.<sup>14</sup> Some Senators have indicated they would withhold support for administration nominees who are not sufficiently aligned on confronting China.<sup>15</sup>

Public opinion polls foreshadow a similar dynamic among the American public. Polling shows that Republicans and Democrats are more likely than ever to view China in a negative light in 2021 relative to years past.<sup>16</sup> However, these attitudes are also highly susceptible to politicization. To demonstrate this, Duke University conducted an original survey on a nationally representative sample of 1,000 American adults in October 2020, directly before the 2020 presidential election.<sup>17</sup> Half the respondents were told to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which Biden won the election while the other half were told to imagine a situation in which Trump won. Both sets of respondents were informed that “despite all the tough talk,” the respective presidential candidate would be “soft on China if elected.” We then asked how respondents thought the United States should approach China policy.

The key finding from the survey was that both Republicans and Democrats were most likely to express hostility towards China when told the candidate from the *opposing party* was “soft on China.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the easiest way to stoke anti-China sentiment was to frame the opposing party as weak on China. The survey demonstrated that partisan pressures to inflate the China threat may generate further polarization.

## The Risks of Weaponization

The Chinese Communist Party has proven itself to be a repressive regime. Its actions abroad—including trade practices, cyber espionage, human rights abuses, and theft of intellectual property—jeopardize many American values and national interests. However, the hyperbolic rhetoric of Congress is becoming dangerously counterproductive and risks manifesting in four negative consequences.

First, labeling China an “existential threat” is hardly suited to accurately describing the nature of the challenge. Recent invocations of a “new Cold War”<sup>19</sup> with China echo past Manichean attempts to galvanize the public against a clear villain: a communist threat, an “Axis of Evil,” or the specter of transnational terrorism.<sup>20</sup> Policymakers would do well to avoid such references given both the limitations of the analogy<sup>21</sup> and evidence suggesting foreign threats are not always likely to unite the country.<sup>22</sup>

Second, exaggerated narratives stoke xenophobic sentiment and warp domestic public opinion in both countries, all while doing little to contain China’s ambitions. In 2021, leaders of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and over sixty activist groups warned policymakers to refrain from “xenophobic rhetoric” and to speak more responsibly about U.S.-China relations to prevent escalation of anti-Asian sentiment.<sup>23</sup>

Third, linking foreign policy with extreme rhetoric constrains Washington’s flexibility in recalibrating its relationship with Beijing. Inflammatory statements hamper the administration’s ability to pursue constructive policies to confront China, a country with whom the United States still needs to cooperate on transnational issues. American officials should be unrestricted in making balanced risk calculations from a dispassionate standing in accordance with American objectives.

Finally, overheated, partisan rhetoric diverts attention from opportunities for bipartisan legislation that would increase American competitiveness. The specter of China’s rise could be a powerful motivator for political action. However, American efforts should be channeled towards strengthening domestic capabilities rather than stoking an adversarial relationship with Beijing.

## **Towards a More Bipartisan U.S.-China Policy**

While the China threat is multifaceted, four areas tend to dominate the political dialogue—trade, military competition, human rights, and technology competition. Each has its own constituency on Capitol Hill, and some inspire greater division than others. Trade and military competition are most at risk of politicization given relevant stakeholders inside and outside of government. By contrast, human rights and technology competition provide more promising avenues for bipartisan cooperation.

The issue of trade with China galvanized the American business community, which collectively has \$124 billion in direct investments in China.<sup>24</sup> Companies have pressed the Biden administration to lift tariffs on Chinese goods and demanded clarity about its Beijing economic agenda.<sup>25</sup> While unraveling tariffs would provide price relief to Americans, it would also likely open the administration to Republican criticism that Biden is “soft” on China.<sup>26</sup>

Positions on military competition and the defense budget with respect to China are also likely to be politicized. For example, Republicans in Congress advocated for Biden to increase defense spending to 3-5 percent above inflation to compete with China. House Armed Services Committee Republicans called on the administration to “reject demands from many on the left to cut or freeze defense spending.”<sup>27</sup>

Other less politicized issues reflect core American values and interests. Human rights is one area of global moral leadership, and technology development is critical for ensuring American security in competing with Beijing.

Legislation responding to human rights abuses in China has remained relatively bipartisan. The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which bans imports from China’s Xinjiang region unless firms prove they are not made with forced labor, unanimously passed the House and Senate in December 2021.<sup>28</sup> The same week, the Biden administration called for an economic and diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics to protest what the administration calls an “ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang.”<sup>29</sup>

At a time when America’s international reputation has taken a hit, placing core values above profits could help restore America’s global standing as it seeks to rebuild relationships with allies to counter a rising China. As House Speaker Nancy Pelosi remarked, “If we do not speak out for human rights in China because of commercial or economic ties, we lose all moral authority to speak out against human rights violations anywhere in the world.”<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, technology competition with China is a rare topic of relative consensus for legislators. In June 2021, the Senate passed the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act (USICA).<sup>31</sup> The \$250 billion bill aims to counter China’s technological ambitions, investing in areas such as semiconductor research, design, and manufacturing, and an overhaul of the National Science Foundation. The bill passed 68-32 in the Senate, reflecting its broad support across party lines.<sup>32</sup>

Other examples of successful bipartisan efforts related to technology and national security abound. The bipartisan Artificial Intelligence Caucuses in the House and Senate have drawn attention to the security risks of AI.<sup>33</sup> These caucuses were critical in the creation of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence and similar efforts to counter China.<sup>34</sup>

Domestic investments to maintain American competitiveness are increasingly viewed as the best option. Attempts to stonewall or limit the development of China’s tech-powered economy are unlikely to be successful. And the Chinese and American economies are too intertwined—China remains one of the largest trading partners of the United States—to withstand effective sanctions.<sup>35</sup> American industries are also heavily dependent on Taiwan’s semiconductor industry, meaning that the U.S. likely needs to avoid directly provoking China, which could prompt aggression toward Taiwan.

Now more than ever, legislators should cooperate to ensure American competitiveness for the future. The Trump administration’s policies did little to spur America’s technological edge. The United States underinvested in research and development and failed to implement proactive technological security measures. China benefits from key asymmetric advantages in the technology competition, including favorable demographics and population size, and its prioritization of science and technology. Moreover, Beijing enjoys a permissive regulatory environment and close coordination between the public and private sectors.

In spite of these dynamics, the United States continues to attract the best talent with one of the most vibrant innovation ecosystems in the world. In 2020-21, over 300,000 Chinese students studied in American universities, making China the top sender of international students to the United States.<sup>36</sup> Policymakers must overcome partisan differences and remember these core advantages to prioritize investment in critical technologies. These include key inputs like semiconductors, data-driven innovations in artificial intelligence, digital currencies and Web 3.0, and platform technologies that underlie and enable other technologies. Focusing on technology policy could allow congressional leaders to set aside inflammatory partisan rhetoric and make tangible progress for the sake of American security.

## Conclusion

While U.S.-China relations are generally perceived as an area of bipartisan cooperation, the current political climate threatens to undermine agreement across party lines. Instead, extreme partisanship within Congress will lead legislators to weaponize the China threat as a political tactic. Reductionist accusations of being “soft on China” neglect the nuance and complexity of the U.S.-China relationship. These accusations also obscure areas of common ground which could unite both parties.

Pragmatic policy on issues—including human rights and technology competition—requires level-headedness and substantive debate. Empty partisan rhetoric will not get us there. To shape the future of American leadership internationally, policymakers must craft a thoughtful and robust agenda that cements our technological edge and our moral red lines. Legislators must put politics aside and take account of the nuances and complexities of the U.S.-China relationship. Long-term American success depends on it.

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