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Congress Ensures Continuity in US Policy Toward China and Taiwan

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CONGRESS ENSURES CONTINUITY IN US POLICY TOWARD CHINA AND TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the evolution over the past six years of the US government's clearer awareness of the dangers that Chinese challenges pose to America. It focuses on the central role of the US Congress in advancing US awareness and driving American responses. With Congress and both the Trump and Biden administrations working cooperatively together, the US government has been increasingly effective in building positions of strength at home and in working constructively with allies and partners abroad in carrying out acute competition with China and countering its ambitions. Regarding Taiwan, the most important matter in dispute between the United States and China, US resolve in countering China is very much in the interests of the government and people of Taiwan. This article forecasts strong congressional resolve to defend America from Beijing challenges, concluding with brief observations about the implications of the presidential elections in Taiwan in January 2024 and the United States in November 2024.

KEYWORDS: CONGRESS, US HARDENING, CHINA'S CHALLENGES, TAIWAN ELECTIONS, US ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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The existing world order in the current tumultuous period of international affairs faces many uncertainties. Among the most important is doubt about US leadership and its ability and resolve to deal effectively with major challenges to that order.¹

Vladimir Putin led Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the ongoing war there has represented the most serious challenge to basic principles of national sovereignty since the end of the Cold War. The US government has been effective in leading a strong united front of mainly developed countries working well together to support the highly motivated Ukrainian resistance, bolster military preparations and deterrence elsewhere in Europe against further Russian aggression, and impose sanctions and other measures that markedly weaken Russian capacities. The American-led efforts combined with the remarkably determined Ukrainian resistance may in time cause Moscow to seek peace and thereby restore and reaffirm the existing order.²

The surprise attacks on and indiscriminate killings of Israeli civilians by Hamas fighters in Israel on October 7, 2023, set off large Israeli military attacks on targets in the Gaza Strip, with escalating casualties and prominent forecasts of wider warfare. Strongly backing Israel, US President Joseph Biden visited the Israeli leaders under threat of Hamas rocket attack on October 18, pledging billions of dollars in support, including aid to Palestinian civilians, while counseling restraint to avoid massive casualties of Palestinian civilians.³

Despite such important developments warranting strong measures by the United States, an arguably much more serious longer-term challenge to America and the existing international order it leads comes from the policies and practices of the Chinese government. That government is under the firm control of strongman Xi Jinping, now entering his second decade as the most dominant ruler of this increasingly influential world power since the death of its founder, Mao Zedong, 50 years ago. Despite Chinese officials’ public denials and advocacy for mutual benefit within the scope of existing international norms, China’s headlong pursuit of wealth and power comes very much at others’ expense. The pursuit involves

¹ Arlette Saenz and Kevin Liptak, “Biden Tries to Project His Global Leadership as Challenges Pile Up at Home,” *CNN*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/18/politics/joe-biden-unga-auto-strike/index.html>.

² Robert Sutter, “A View from the US: The November 2022 Summits,” *Asan Forum*, December 13, 2022, <https://theasanforum.org/a-view-from-the-us/>.

³ Peter Baker, “Biden Urges Caution in War on Hamas,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2023, A1.

strategic, economic, territorial, and governance measures that collectively undermine the existing order in favor of Beijing's aims, which are centered on advancing China's control, influence, and prosperity within a new order where the United States is subordinate and weakened and China fills the leadership role.⁴

The US government came late to an accurate awareness of China's challenges and to crafting effective responses. That process began at the end of the first year of the administration of President Donald Trump (2017–2021), developed erratically for two years, became much more determined to counter Chinese challenges during the 2020 US presidential election, and saw the gradual emergence of more systematic and more effective US responses to Chinese challenges during the administration of President Biden (2021–).⁵

This article explains the evolution of the US government's clearer awareness of the dangers posed by Chinese challenges, as well as the evolution of its responses. The assessment focuses on demonstrating and explaining the central role of the US Congress in advancing US awareness and driving the American responses. Over the course of six years, bipartisan majorities in Congress are assessed as more aware of and resolved in defending America and its interests than President Trump and some others in his administration and Democratic leaders during the 2019–2020 presidential campaign, including presidential candidate Biden, who only belatedly came to understand the seriousness of Chinese challenges and advocate substantive responses.⁶

The assessment shows that the United States government, with Congress and the administration working cooperatively together, has become in recent years increasingly effective in building positions of strength at home and in working constructively with allies and partners abroad in carrying out acute competition with China and countering its ambitions.⁷

It concludes by addressing major uncertainties posed by the 2024 US presidential election. President Trump could be reelected, or a like-minded candidate favoring the America First approach to foreign affairs supported by Trump could be elected. Trump's presidency saw the chief executive under the America First rubric repeatedly undermine US strategy to deal with both Russia's Putin and China in defense of the existing order, focusing instead on narrow US interests. If such an election outcome were to take pace, the result could be serious complications and a weakening of US countermeasures defending America against Chinese challenges. Under such circumstances, bipartisan majorities in Congress determined to continue countering Chinese challenges are forecast to offset possible presidential shortcomings and work toward ensuring sustained US leadership in defense of its major interests in the existing international order.

⁴ Robert Sutter, "PacNet #47—China's Challenges and Effective Defense: America's Conundrum," *Pacific Forum*, October 14, 2021, <https://pacforum.org/publication/pacnet-47-chinas-challenges-and-effective-defense-americas-conundrum>.

⁵ Dean Chen, "Competitions and Coalitions: An Emerging US Domestic Nationalist Consensus, Executive Branch Prerogatives, and the Taiwan Strait Tensions," in *Protests, Pandemic, and Security Predicaments: Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and the US in the 2020s*, ed. Wei-chin Lee (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023), 347–396.

⁶ Robert Sutter, "America Counters China: Congress, Resolve, and Constraints," in *Protests, Pandemic, and Security Predicaments: Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and the US in the 2020s*, ed. Wei-chin Lee, (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023), 402–403.

⁷ Robert Sutter, "US Congress' Role in Countering the China Challenge," *Diplomat*, September 23, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/us-congress-role-in-countering-the-china-challenge/>.

Regarding Taiwan, the article argues that US resolve in countering China is very much in the interests of the government and people of Taiwan. Potentially serious are the implications of an important uncertainty unique to Taiwan. That uncertainty now rests in the hands of voters on the island. They will choose a new president in January 2024 to take power in May 2024.

The path the US government has followed in the past six years targeting Chinese challenges and supporting Taiwan has strong support in the current administration and Congress, with American media and public opinion more supportive of Taiwan than at any time in recent decades.⁸ That path has involved close collaboration with the outgoing government of President Tsai Ing-wen. If and how Taiwan's new president changes the Tsai government's policies remains to be determined. Although congressional support for Taiwan has been strong for decades, a significant change in Taiwan's approach to China and the United States could prompt American adjustments in dealing with the challenges coming from Chinese practices regarding Taiwan and possibly other matters.

An important overall finding of the article has to do with the leadership role in determining recent US-China policy by a cohort of bipartisan majorities in Congress whose members have driven the US hardening toward China more resolutely and effectively than the erratic Trump and the initially hesitant Biden, with ever-growing influence on US policy going forward. This congressional role in making American-China policy has become uniquely powerful and important—more significant than in any other period in the history of the United States.⁹

Illustrating this recent unique congressional role is a comparison of the past six years of congressional activism in China policy with previous episodes of congressional activism dealing with China. Members of the congressional majorities involved in the current period of congressional activism on China policy came to their judgments largely through their individual calculations about the dangers posed by Chinese behavior. Those calculations led to policies that were carried out without significant impetus from swings in public and media opinion or pressures from special interests, which sometimes influenced congressional activism in China policy in the past. Also secondary in recent years have been motives seen in past congressional behavior on China policy regarding competing with the executive branch to lead the US government in foreign affairs and seeking partisan advantage in differing with the administration on China policy. In addition, the congressional record on China policy and many other issues shows that when members deliberate on their own and make up their mind on a set of issues, they tend not to change their opinions easily. The above argues for steady resolve from congressional members seeking to defend America in the face of serious Chinese challenges, perhaps lasting to the end of their public service. Because the members of this congressional cohort occupy seats largely safe for incumbents, they will remain in power in pursuing efforts to defend America from China's challenges well into the future.¹⁰

⁸ Craig Kafura et al., "US Opinion Leaders Support Aid to Taiwan," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 1, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/us-opinion-leaders-support-aid-taiwan>.

⁹ Sutter, "America Counters China," 413–422; Sutter, "US Congress' Role."

¹⁰ Robert Sutter, *Congress and China Policy: Past Episodic, Recent Enduring Influence* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), Conclusion.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS OF CONGRESSIONAL ACTIVISM AND ACHIEVEMENT

2018. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2019 was passed and signed into law in August 2018. It was the most important foreign-policy legislation in 2018.

The legislation and other congressional initiatives in 2018 supporting a much harder US policy toward China were generally in line with the Trump administration's National Security Strategy announced in December 2017, which depicted China as America's number-one national-security danger. That declared strategy reflected the views of senior administration leaders, many of whom worked closely with Congress. But it received little attention from media and the public. And President Trump rarely referred to or followed the strategy as he nurtured a friendship with President Xi and used punitive tariffs and investment and export controls in pursuing an advantageous trade deal with China.

In contrast, bipartisan majorities in Congress used the NDAA and other measures to broadly harden US policy toward China.¹¹ The law directed a whole-of-government US strategy targeting Chinese challenges. Provisions focused on greater support for Taiwan. They strengthened US restrictions on Chinese investments in high-technology enterprises in the United States and on US high-technology exports to China.

2019. US resolve in countering Chinese challenges came into question in 2019. There was considerable evidence that the US government might be moderating its approach to China. As trade negotiations dragged on in 2019, administration spokespersons were publicly more restrained in criticizing China. President Trump remained ambivalent, and he was usually more positive toward China than any other senior administration official. The phase-one trade deal with China announced in January 2020 was a cause for public celebration for the administration. The administration kept postponing the imposition of proposed export controls regarding advanced US computer chips going to the controversial Chinese company Huawei, despite the US government's strong rhetoric against the firm.¹²

Meanwhile, even though public opinion in early 2020 registered more disapproval for China than seen in the 2019 ratings, there was little evidence that the US public shared the urgency to counter China's behavior seen in the administration's strategies strongly backed by bipartisan congressional members. More than 100 China and foreign-policy experts signed a letter disagreeing with administration policy, calling for greater moderation toward China. Last but not least, Democratic candidates for president gave little priority to China and were much more moderate than the debate in Washington. Biden averred that the United States was notably more powerful than China and could readily handle challenges coming from Beijing.¹³

Nevertheless, Congress sustained an anti-China drumbeat with legislation, hearings, letters, and other public bipartisan demonstrations to reassure Asia of US support in the face of China's advances, to

¹¹ Vivian Salama, "Trump Signs Defense Bill to Boost Military, Target China," *Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-signs-defense-bill-to-boost-military-target-china-1534196930>.

¹² Robert Sutter, "Has U.S. Government Angst over the China Danger Diminished?" *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, no. 497 (January 2020).

¹³ Craig Kafura, "Americans Favor US-China Trade, Split over Tariffs," *Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/americans-favor-us-china-trade-split-over-tariffs>; Sutter, "U.S. Government Angst."

criticize China-Russia cooperation, to condemn acute suppression in China's Xinjiang, and to spotlight dangers posed by Confucius Institutes.

2020. President Trump adopted a strident anti-China position in the presidential-election campaign as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States with a vengeance beginning in March 2020. Seeking partisan advantage, the Trump campaign attacked Biden's involvement with past failed US-China policies.¹⁴

An explosion of anti-China measures undertaken by the administration endeavored to ensure there would be no reversal of the anti-China direction of US policy if President Trump was not reelected. Candidate Biden was compelled to harden his position on China, while Congress basically agreed with most Trump-administration measures; a surge of members sponsored new legislation as Congress considered almost 400 bills targeting Chinese challenges at the end of the year.¹⁵

2021–2023. Soon after taking power, President Biden and his administration leaders brought their earlier, more moderate views of Chinese dangers into line with views in Congress. Notably, Biden supported a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill, warning of China's ambitions to dominate the Fourth Industrial Revolution and advising, "We can't let them win." The warning meshed well with Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer's concurrent extraordinary legislation to advance American technology to counter China. Schumer said the alternative was a world where "the Chinese Communist Party determines the rules of the road."¹⁶

The infrastructure bill and another bill curbing US imports of products coming from forced labor in concentration camps in Xinjiang had bipartisan congressional support. Many provisions targeting China in the annual NDAA and the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY 2022 added momentum.¹⁷

The overall effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the Chinese reaction criticizing the United States and denouncing US sanctions was to strengthen US resolve to counter China. The developments also markedly increased the resolve of European and Asian allies and partners to work closely with the US government in countering dangers from China as well as Russia.¹⁸

The most significant US public debate on the hardening of US policy toward China came in the lead-up to and aftermath of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2, 2022, which was followed by more than four days of live-fire Chinese-military exercises surrounding Taiwan. Yet Congress and the administration remained resolved, and the debate subsided with no discernable impact on policy.¹⁹

Congressional and administration efforts to counter Chinese challenges advanced most substantially with the passage that August of two massive bills calling for more than half a trillion dollars of spending

¹⁴ Kafura, "Americans"; Sutter, "U.S. Government Angst."

¹⁵ "Bizarre Bills Against China Stack Up in the US Congress Amid COVID-19 Pandemic, Showing US' Last Attempt before Losing Hegemony," *Global Times*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191994.shtml>.

¹⁶ Robert Sutter, *US–China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 181.

¹⁷ Sutter, "China's Challenges."

¹⁸ Sutter, "US Congress' Role."

¹⁹ Bonnie Glaser, "The Bali Summit: US and PRC Leaders Attempt to Arrest the Slide," *Comparative Connections* 24, no. 3 (January 2023), <https://cc.pacforum.org/2023/01/the-bali-summit-us-and-prc-leaders-attempt-to-arrest-the-slide/>.

to compete with China on high technology and climate change. Arguably even more important in countering China's high-technology ambitions, the administration, with strong congressional support, in October 2022 imposed a ban on the exports of US advanced computer-chip technology to China. The move was widely viewed as the most substantial US measure to counter China's economic rise, by targeting Beijing's continued dependence on imports of high-technology computer chips.²⁰

Republican control of the House of Representatives in the 118th Congress (2023–2024) added to US-government resolve to counter serious challenges coming from Chinese practices. A bipartisan special committee, along with many other now-Republican-controlled House standing committees, set to work to strengthen US and allied capacities targeting China and to ensure enforcement of existing restrictions on US interactions with China.

Their efforts ranged widely, including advancing military support for Taiwan, curbing US financing for Chinese industries, banning or restricting social-media companies' access to US personal information, restricting Chinese firms from purchasing US land, and investigating and discovering new elements among the often hidden and disguised tools used by the Chinese government to expand its international influence and control. The discovery of Chinese spy balloons secretly surveilling US bases and charges of malevolent use of massive amounts of US personal data by Chinese authorities on the video-sharing app TikTok headed the list of recent, heretofore hidden and disguised dangers to Americans getting the attention of Congress.²¹

Whether or not the Republican-controlled House would resort to partisan measures in criticizing Biden-administration policies and undermine the recent strongly bipartisan congressional effort on China policy remained to be determined. On the one hand, reflecting continued bipartisan resolve in countering China in the Democratic-controlled Senate, Majority Leader Schumer in May announced a massive legislative package covering many of the issues highlighted in the House deliberations on China.²²

On the other hand, the Republican majority in the House was fractious and hard to control, with individual members voicing criticisms of Biden-administration policy. Most significant, Mike Gallagher, the chairman of the House special committee on China, seemed to go beyond his repeatedly stated emphasis that the committee would seek bipartisan measures in dealing with China when he published an editorial on June 14 sharply critical of efforts by the Biden government to seek talks and better overall communications with Chinese leaders. The talks grew in scope and reached a climax during President Biden's summit meeting with President Xi in California on November 15, 2023. They were intended to improve relations in limited areas of common interests and to set guardrails that would ensure that rising US tensions with China would not lead to military conflict.²³

²⁰ Robert Sutter, "Beyond Pelosi's Taiwan Trip: How Congress Is Shaping US China Policy," *Diplomat*, August 1, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/beyond-pelosis-taiwan-trip-how-congress-is-shaping-us-china-policy/>.

²¹ Briana Reilly, "Chairman Gallagher Outlines China Committee's Agenda," *Roll Call*, January 24, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/01/24/chairman-gallagher-outlines-china-committees-agenda/>.

²² Lindsey McPherson, "Senate Democrats Announce Sweeping Efforts to Outcompete China," *Roll Call*, May 3, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/05/03/senate-democrats-announce-sweeping-effort-to-outcompete-china/>.

²³ Mike Gallagher, "Zombie Engagement with Beijing," *Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2023, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/zombie-engagement-with-beijing-biden-xi-spy-cuba-tech-human-rights-b79bc890](https://www.wsj.com/articles/zombie-engagement-with-beijing-biden-xi-spy-cuba-tech-human-rights-b79bc890;);

WASHINGTON'S DIRE VIEW OF CHINESE CHALLENGES

The record of the past six years shows that so-called consensus in Washington on China policy has hardened and is here to stay. The consensus centers on the alignment of views held by the administration and bipartisan majorities in Congress on the priority of countering the multifaceted challenges posed by Chinese-government practices. The hardened views have garnered increasing support in mainstream US media, while American public disapproval of Chinese leader Xi and Chinese-government practices has remained at an all-time high.²⁴

Because of the wide array of congressional committees with a role in making US foreign policy, among other reasons, Congress has long had difficulty in crafting legislation dealing comprehensively with relations with large powers like China. Thus, congressional legislation and other actions taken by bipartisan majorities in Congress against Chinese practices over the past six years have dealt with only parts of the challenges posed by China. Nonetheless, those many and multifaceted challenges can be grouped into three broad categories.²⁵

First is the challenge posed by more than three decades of rapid development of modern Chinese military power tipping the balance in the Indo-Pacific region, supporting Chinese territorial expansionism and undermining US alliances and partnerships in seeking dominance in the region. Since World War II, the American strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region has been based on preventing the region from falling under the control of a power hostile to the United States. If that were to happen, that power would pose a direct threat to the United States, comparable to the threat the US faced from imperial Japan's dominance in Asia and Nazi Germany's dominance in Europe in the dark days at the start of World War II.

Second is the challenge posed by China's similarly long-standing efforts to use state-directed development policies to plunder foreign intellectual-property rights, as well as massive intervention by the wide-ranging and well-financed apparatus of the Chinese party-state structure to undermine international competitors, having increasingly profoundly negative impacts on US and Western interests. Beijing does so with hidden and overt state-directed economic coercion, egregious government subsidies, import protection, and export promotion, using highly protected and state-supported products to weaken and often destroy foreign competition in key industries. In this way, it seeks dominance in major world high-technology industries and related military power in order to displace the United States and secure China's primacy in Asia and in world leadership.

Third is China's challenge to global governance. More than any other major power, Beijing leverages economic dependence, influence operations including pervasive corruption and elite capture, and control of important infrastructure to compel deference to its preferences. In the Indo-Pacific region, these practices are backed by intimidating Chinese military power. China's preferences include

David Sanger and Katie Rogers, "Delicate Dance as Biden Hosts China's Leader," *New York Times*, November 16, 2023, A1.

²⁴ Laura Silver, "Some Americans' Views of China Turned More Negative after 2020, but Others Became More Positive," *Pew Research Center*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/09/28/some-americans-views-of-china-turned-more-negative-after-2020-but-others-became-more-positive/>.

²⁵ Sutter, "China's Challenges."

legitimizing the above predatory Chinese economic practices and territorial expansionism; opposing efforts promoting accountable governance, human rights, and democracy; opposing US alliances seen to be impeding China's rise; and supporting the forceful foreign advances of Putin's Russia and the rule of other authoritarian and often corrupt world leaders unaccountable to their citizens.

Two challenges have been seen as particularly dangerous existential threats to fundamental American national security and well-being:

- The first is the Chinese effort to undermine US power and influence in Asia, in order to dominate the region.
- The second is the Chinese effort to seek dominance in the high-technology industries of the future; such dominance will make America subservient to Chinese economic power and, because such technology is essential to modern national security, military power.

Seeking to avoid Chinese dominance has remained a strong overall driver of the efforts of bipartisan majorities in Congress and administration partners to defend America against China's challenges.²⁶

TAIWAN'S IMPORTANT ROLE IN US HARDENING TO COUNTER CHINA'S CHALLENGES

Taiwan figures prominently in all three of the aforementioned clusters of challenges that China's behavior poses for the United States.²⁷ Taiwan's key location and its role in the Indo-Pacific region are important elements valued by US policymakers seeking to compete with and counter adverse Chinese advances in the region. Taiwan's high-technology industries are valued greatly in economic competition with Beijing. Taiwan's political democracy, free-market economy, and support for international norms that America seeks to advance are valued by US leaders seeking to protect the existing governance norms and international order from Chinese challenges.

Other reasons for greater US support for Taiwan include Beijing applying heavy and growing military, diplomatic, and economic pressure on Taiwan in order to change the status quo of the Taiwan issue in directions favored by China. US policy seeks to push back and sustain the status quo. And key brakes that in the past stressed US efforts to preserve a cooperative US relationship with China and curbed US advances in relations with Taiwan that risked antagonizing Beijing are now much less important in current US policymaking.

Patterns of recent greater US support for Taiwan feature incremental but ever-stronger military, diplomatic, and economic advances in US-government interactions with Taiwan. The practices are

²⁶ Robert Sutter, "Trump, America and the World—2017 and Beyond" H-Diplo/ISSF POLICY Series (January 19, 2019), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/3569933/issf-policy-series-sutter-trump%E2%80%99s-china-policy-bi-partisan> (accessed July 9, 2022); US-China Policy Foundation Newsletter (2021) "US View of China Competition" (May 21, 2021) <https://uscdf.org/v3/2021/05/21/us-china-competition/> (accessed July 10, 2022).

²⁷ For a recent overview of the issues involving Taiwan and US-China-Taiwan relations reviewed in this section, see Susan Gordon, Michael Mullen, and David Sacks, *US-Taiwan Relations in a New Era*, Independent Task Force Report no. 81 (June 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-Relations-in-a-new-era>; see also Sutter, *US-China Relations*, 253–260.

asserted to still be in line with the broad-ranging US definition of its one-China policy. Notable are President Biden's repeated affirmations that the US will support Taiwan if it is attacked by China.

The Russian war in Ukraine and China's opposition to the US and support for Russia deepened US antipathy toward China and raised alarm about China's intentions toward Taiwan. The result has been stronger US efforts to deter a Chinese attack by strengthening US forces and supporting Taiwan's stronger military preparations. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine also increased and facilitated US-led efforts to deter China by demonstrating stronger determination to counter Chinese aggression militarily by Japan, Australia, and possibly some NATO countries, and by demonstrating stronger determination by these powers and others in NATO to employ significant economic sanctions in the event of an attack on Taiwan.

OUTLOOK—STRUGGLE AHEAD

The imperatives of the 20th Chinese Communist Congress held in Beijing in October 2022 for Chinese policies and practice for the next five years represented the consensus of Chinese leaders more united behind a single powerful ruler than at any time since the high point of Mao Zedong's authoritarian rule. They demonstrated that China is determined to continue its headlong quest for dominating wealth and power at the expense of the United States, its allies and partners, many of China's neighbors, and other countries with a stake in the existing international order.²⁸

How long this direction will last depends on many factors, most notably the calculations of the dominant leader, Xi. Xi has spent more than 10 years solidifying support for the current trajectory, indicating strongly that change would come only in the event of major unanticipated adverse circumstances.

For their part, US administrations and Congress have a record of increasing and enduring resolve in countering Chinese challenges over the past six years. The United States government is more determined than ever in its efforts to solidify a wide-ranging whole-of-government enterprise that also involves a variety of increasingly powerful coalitions of like-minded allied and other foreign governments in countering the multifaceted and often dangerous challenges China poses to the interests of the United States and many others with a stake in the existing international order.²⁹

In sum, the most likely short-term development is growing tension in US-China relations. Notably, the United States and its partners are increasingly cutting off heretofore easy Chinese access to the economies and polities of the liberal order among the developed nations. And they are more than ever prepared to stand against often coercive Chinese practices that undermine the security, economies, and governance in the existing world order.

Facing broad-ranging pushback and no longer having open access to manipulate and exploit the advanced technology, economies, and political structures of developed countries, the Chinese

²⁸ The determination was underlined in Xi Jinping's remarks and his tight control of leadership selection and setting government policies at the initial meetings of China's 14th National People's Congress in March 2023. Chris Buckley et al., "China Sets a Post-Covid Agenda, with Xi Aiming for Growth and Power," *New York Times*, March 6, 2023, A7.

²⁹ Ryan Hass, "Great Power Competition Has Shifted in the United States' Favour," *East Asia Forum*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/01/04/great-power-competition-has-shifted-in-the-united-states-favour/>.

government has reacted with anger and retaliation. It has shown no sign of compromising its determination to advance its wealth and power at the expense of the United States and many others. As a result, the security situation in disputed regions along China's border continues to worsen. This deteriorating situation involves a growing danger of military conflict over Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the border with India. And the international economy faces negative consequences of increased disengagement of advanced economies from China.

On the other hand, both Washington and Beijing have shown interest in discussions to manage rising tensions and avoid war. And the rising tensions do not preclude cooperation over climate change and other common concerns. Such practices would set limits, allowing the growing rivalry to advance without major military conflict in the period ahead. Roughly similar behavior came to characterize US-Soviet competition during the Cold War and could prevail once again.

A UNIQUE CONGRESSIONAL ROLE BUTTRESSES US-GOVERNMENT RESOLVE

The record of the past six years examined above has featured a sustained and ever-stronger resolve of bipartisan congressional majorities to counter Chinese challenges in cooperation or in tandem with administration hardening against China. The congressional effort established patterns of behavior demonstrating important, unique features contrary to congressional motives and concerns in previous periods that made congressional activism on China policy episodic rather than enduring.³⁰

The recent congressional effort came despite the lack of strong support and understanding of the need for such dramatic change from American public opinion and media until 2020, and despite continued resistance from strong domestic political interests, notably the many US businesses and investors deeply involved with China. In past episodes of congressional activism in China policy, Congress had often been reactive in the face of changes in public and media opinion, such as in response to the Chinese government's brutal crackdown against dissenters during the Tiananmen crisis of 1989. The high level of congressional concern over the Tiananmen crackdown subsided, with many in Congress and the administration seeing the wisdom in restoring US engagement with China following the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–1996. And business opposition to congressional efforts to stop most-favored-nation (MFN) tariff treatment for Chinese imports was sufficient in ensuring enough congressional support to sustain MFN treatment during the 1990s.

Partisanship has dominated most areas of recent public policy, but the bipartisan congressional majorities have remained united in pursuing efforts to counter China's practices. This has stood in contrast with past congressional activism in China policy for partisan reasons, seen in Republican congressional members criticizing the Harry S. Truman administration's failed China policy; in presidential candidate Bill Clinton and some congressional Democrats strongly criticizing President George H. W. Bush's moderate China policy in successful efforts to defeat Bush and elect Clinton; and in congressional Republicans attacking Clinton and Vice President Al Gore over issues in China policy, seeking Gore's defeat in the election of 2000.

Congress's recent efforts to work together or in tandem with the White House on China showed little of the sometimes active congressional efforts to seek greater control of US foreign policy from a

³⁰ Sutter, *Congress and China Policy*, Conclusion.

dominating executive branch. The latter was one of several reasons behind congressional opposition to President Jimmy Carter's acceptance of Chinese conditions in normalizing relations with China at the expense of US interests in Taiwan, other Asian countries, arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union, and long-standing US values of importance to many congressional members.

At bottom, the most important driver in recent bipartisan congressional activism in China policy has been the calculations of individual congressional members on how to deal with the growing danger posed by Chinese behavior. Such determinants—the personal calculations and convictions of individual members—were also seen in the resolve of congressional members resisting the Carter administration's advances in relations with China seen to be coming at the expense of US interests valued by many in Congress. Their impact on policy nonetheless remained secondary because the congressional critics were in the midst of a broader competition for control of American foreign policy, working against a highly motivated president and administration leaders using the many powers of the executive branch in seeking an advantage in engagement with China as a top priority in American foreign policy.

In contrast, in the past six years, the bipartisan majorities of Congress have been remarkably effective in working together with like-minded leaders in both Republican- and Democratic-led administrations in driving forward US-government efforts to defend America from very serious challenges posed by the Chinese's government policies and practices. In sum, those familiar with the behavior of congressional members understand the significance of a member taking the time to make up his or her mind about an important issue. These decisions are less subject to the changeable influence of public and media opinion, partisan politics, and competition for control of foreign policy. They are based on the member's personal calculations and convictions, which are less likely to change, resulting in continuity in the member's approach to the issue going forward.

Because most members of Congress occupy so-called safe seats, they and their calculations and convictions are likely to endure in Congress for some time, leading to predictions that the congressional resolve to defend America from Chinese challenges that has emerged in the past six years will remain strong during the tenure of these congressional policymakers.

US AND TAIWAN ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS

President Biden's reelection promises continuity in US-China policy, including policy toward Taiwan. The bipartisan majorities in Congress will ensure continued resolute efforts to counter Chinese challenges, which will provide continued strong support for Taiwan. As discussed at the outset of this paper, the reelection of President Trump or another America First advocate could complicate US policy toward China and support for Taiwan. The congressional majorities are forecast to work against weakening resolve against China or in support of Taiwan.

Meanwhile, continuity in US support for Taiwan also seems likely if Vice President William Ching-te Lai is elected in January 2024. Lai has tempered past statements advocating a more independent stance for Taiwan in the recent fraught situation in cross-strait relations, in which Taiwan is loath to risk alienating the United States. A significant complication could arise if the KMT candidate or the leading independent were to win and pursue policies weakening Taiwan's defense and security efforts against Chinese pressures and seeking to accommodate Beijing in ways that would alienate US support. Such changes could be especially damaging to continued US support for Taiwan if former President Trump or another America First advocate were to win in November. They could portray Taiwan as an unreliable partner in countering China, exploiting US security support while avoiding undertaking their fair share of the burden.