

Has U.S. Government Angst over the China Danger Diminished?

By Robert Sutter

The so-called “truce” in the trade war with the signing of the phase one U.S.-China trade agreement on January 15 comes amid indicators that the intense U.S. government consensus pushback against a wide range of perceived challenges posed by China may be subsiding.

The American government’s hardening policies toward China emerged somewhat erratically following publication of the surprisingly tough Trump administration national security and national defense strategies at the turn of 2017-2018. Both strategies identified China as America’s top international danger. At first, the President and some of his senior officials were ambivalent about implementing the tough declaratory strategies against China, especially over economic issues. But the 115th Congress took the lead in advocating an across-the-board hard line, ultimately passing in August with broad bi-partisan support the major international relations legislation of 2018, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019. That law laid out the new “whole of U.S. government” effort against China, giving special attention to restricting investments and exports as part of newly prominent concerns over China’s high technology competition and to defend against Chinese influence operations. There also was prominence devoted to ongoing issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.

President Trump’s concurrent punitive tariffs targeted Chinese economic practices seen as an “existential threat” to the U.S. economy by the U.S. Special Trade Representative. Vice President Pence took the lead in explaining the hard government line in a speech in October in Washington and remarks in Asian multilateral meetings in Asia in November 2018. And the Justice Department and the FBI in November announced their strong efforts against Chinese espionage and influence efforts.

Significant follow through but less urgency in 2019

2019 featured follow through by the administration in countering Chinese challenges, though the publicity to such efforts subsided presumably at least in part because of off-and-on trade negotiations with China. Secretary of State Pompeo made repeated speeches and other efforts to persuade allies and U.S. high technology companies of the wisdom of avoiding interaction with the controversial Chinese high technology company Huawei on grounds of national security. National Security Adviser O’Brien, like Vice President Pence in 2018, strongly criticized Chinese policies and practices during the annual summit meetings in Asia in 2019. Vice President Pence made another major speech in October 2019 reiterating the hard U.S. government approach. A variety of administration efforts went forward to support Taiwan and implement a strong Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China. The Congress remained generally supportive, and was notably active in reaction to China’s egregious violations of human rights involving the interment of one million Muslims and in support of the millions demonstrating in Hong Kong against Beijing’s control.

Nevertheless, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, while it had scattered provisions dealing with China, had little of the priority and substance given to China in the previous year. China issues were

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addressed in many other proposed bills, but the vast majority of such legislation garnered little congressional support. On the campaign trail, the leading Democratic candidates and the American media covering the campaign registered little urgency over the China danger. Beijing's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and control in Hong Kong were uniformly and frequently criticized, usually without calls for strong U.S. countermeasures to punish China. China as a foreign policy issue, when treated at all, received low priority treatment in the Democratic candidates' debates. Media interviews with the candidates saw issues with China, if they came up at all, addressed toward the end of the discussion, not in the beginning.

Of the leading candidates in early 2020, Vice President Biden backed away from his remarks earlier in the campaign about the insignificance of China's challenge, but he repeatedly emphasized Chinese weaknesses in comparison to U.S. strengths, asserting that China was in a much worse position than and no match for America. Newcomer candidate Michael Bloomberg kept a low profile on China against the background of his deep business relations and strong advocacy for American free trade and economic engagement with China. Prior to his announced candidacy, when questioned about China's crack down on dissent in a PBS interview in September, Mr. Bloomberg argued in defense of Xi Jinping that the Chinese president was representing his constituency and was not a dictator.

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There was little hostility toward China in Bernie Sanders' rhetoric that, like Elizabeth Warren's, blamed big business for the trade agreements that China exploited to the disadvantage of U.S. workers and average Americans. When asked directly, Sanders said China was not an existential threat to America and he urged stronger U.S. efforts to establish a positive cooperative relationship with Beijing on climate change and other issues. Pete Buttigieg saw a real danger in China as a dominating high tech power spreading its influence in the world through the Belt and Road Initiative and other efforts, yet his remedy was not to confront China through punitive tariffs and restrictions. He saw the main answer as strengthening American competitive assets at home, and he also averred that cooperation with China was needed on climate change and other issues. Meanwhile, Senator Amy Klobuchar saw utility in well managed US-allied pressures to get China to stop its trade and economic practices harming America, but she seemed to graphically illustrate the campaign's limited interest in China when among the 100 steps she proposed to take in the first 100 days of her presidency only one, against Chinese steel dumping, was about China and it came far down the list.

Short-term Outlook

Despite the difficulty in forecasting American politics during an impeachment trial of an avowedly unpredictable president in an election year, China's behavior will remain a key determinant of the level of U.S. attention China issues receive going forward. Beijing appears for now to favor a low posture, avoiding confrontation, suggesting that the recent trend of diminished U.S. attention to China issues will continue in the months ahead.

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