

US Turn against China, 2020 Elections, Implications for South Korea

Abstract

The American government's broad ranging efforts targeting an array of challenges to US interests posed by the policies and behavior of the Chinese government developed through close collaboration between the Trump administration and both Democrats and Republicans in the Congress. Emerging erratically in the first year of the Trump administration in late 2017, the US government's hardening against China later demonstrated momentum in gaining greater support in the United States. It reached a high point during the heat of the 2020 presidential election campaign as the most important foreign policy issue in the campaign. South Korea has shown more angst over its vulnerability to negative fallout from the growing US-China rivalry than any other regional power. South Korea is very exposed and has few good options for dealing with the intensifying US-China rivalry. Prevailing assumptions are that a tough US policy toward China will continue in 2021 and strong Chinese retaliation will follow South Korean moves to align with the United States in the rivalry with China.

Introduction

Understanding how and why the sharply negative turn in American China policy came about during the Trump administration and the impact this turn had on the 2020 US elections has great importance for Americans and concerned foreigners, including US allies in South Korea. This assessment offers an explanation of the determinants and methods of the hardening of US policy and their implications regarding the US 2020 election. Following the results of the November election, the tough American opposition to Chinese challenges continues to have strong momentum and robust support from bipartisan majorities in Congress and an aroused American public. This makes the negative turn against

China hard to reverse amid prevailing circumstances impacting the incoming administration of Joseph Biden.

South Korea has been put in a vulnerable position, arguably more vulnerable than any other country, in the deepening Sino-American rivalry. The rivalry forces a South Korean balancing act as Seoul endeavors to sustain and advance close relations with its longstanding strategic ally, the United States, and its most important economic partner and powerful neighbor, China. This assessment concludes with an examination of the key factors that complicate decision making as South Korean leaders endeavor to satisfactorily balance often clashing US-China interests in charting approaches to these powers and regional affairs. The outlook is for more trouble ahead, though the Biden administration

will be more accommodating and responsive to South Korean concerns than the Donald Trump government.

Countering China's challenges with a "whole of government" campaign, 2018

The Trump government's National Security Strategy of December 2017 and its National Defense Strategy of January 2018 employed harsh words about China not seen in official administration documents since before the Nixon administration. Signaling a fundamental shift in US policy toward China, the strategies viewed Beijing as a predatory rival and the top danger to American national security. Added to China's military power and assertive actions in the Asia-Pacific was the danger China posed to the United States as it carried out its plan to be the leading country in various high-technology industries seen as essential for sustaining US international leadership and national security.²

In communications with Congress, administration leaders repeatedly highlighted the latter danger, which represented a newly prominent and important issue in 2018 added to longstanding American grievances against China. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer issued a dire warning against the many covert and overt ways China unfairly took advantage of the United States. He said such practices represented "an existential threat" to the United States. Meanwhile, FBI Director Christopher Wray highlighted for Congress another newly prominent issue, Chinese overt and covert influence operations, including espionage in the United States. He warned repeatedly that America needed a government and society effort to counter Beijing's perceived nefarious intentions.

Congressional Members of both parties agreed with the administration's serious and urgent warnings and began to take action, making 2018 the most active period

of consequential congressional work on China since the tumultuous decade after the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989. However, the broader impact on American politics was diluted for several reasons. First, President Trump did not use and appeared to disagree with the anti-China language seen in the administration strategy documents. And he repeatedly expressed friendship and respect for President Xi. Second, senior administration officials remained seriously divided on economic issues with China. White House economic advisor Gary Cohn's resignation in March 2018 weakened the moderates. Initial punitive tariffs ensued. Third, public opinion generally was unaware of the China danger and stuck to its longstanding view of not liking the Chinese government but also seeking to avoid trouble with China. Fourth, media remained largely unaware of the major shift.

The specific steps Congress used in hardening policy toward China involved:

1. Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University (2011-). He also served as Director of the School's main undergraduate program involving over 2,000 students from 2013-2019. His earlier fulltime position was Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University (2001-2011).

A Ph.D. graduate in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University, Sutter has published 22 books (four with multiple editions), over 300 articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent book is *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force* Fifth Edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

Sutter's government career (1968-2001) saw service as senior specialist and director of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US Government's National Intelligence Council, the China division director at the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

2. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United State* (December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; US Department of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United State* (January 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

- extensive hearings on the challenges Chinese policies and practices pose for American interests
- a variety of individual bills on specific issues, some of which were incorporated into such important legislation seen as requiring congressional approval as the annual National Defense Authorization bill, and
- letters to the administration signed by bipartisan congressional leaders warning of Chinese actions and urging firm responses.

Broad ranging US government action against China's challenges became the law of the land with the passage in August of the National Defense Authorization Act FY-2019, the most important foreign policy legislation in 2018. Harsh language accused Beijing of using military modernization, influence operations, espionage and predatory economic policy to undermine the United States and its interests abroad. In response, the law directed a whole-of-government US strategy. On military issues, it required the Defense Department to submit a 5-year plan to bolster US and allied and partner strength in the Indo-Pacific region; extended the authority and broadened the scope of the Maritime Security Initiative covering Southeast Asia to include the Indo-Pacific region; required a US strategy to strengthen military ties with India; prohibited China's participation in Rim of the Pacific naval exercises; required a public report on China's military and coercive activities in the South China Sea; broadened the scope of the annual report to Congress on Chinese military and security developments to now include "malign activities" including information and influence operations, as well as predatory economic and lending practices; and limited Defense Department funds for Chinese language programs at universities that host Confucius Institutes.³

The Act's provisions on Taiwan reaffirmed various aspects of longstanding American commitments to Taiwan. The Act contained a separate set of provisions

to modernize, strengthen and broaden the scope of the interagency body, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), to more effectively guard against the risk to US national security seen posed by Chinese and other predatory foreign investment. It also included key reforms in US export controls that would better protect emerging technology and intellectual property from Beijing and other potential adversaries.

At this time, Chinese officials responsible for US-China relations continued to reflect the optimistic view that whatever differences President Trump had with China could be dealt with readily through negotiations and making what the US president called "deals" that perhaps would involve some economic or other comparatively minor concessions from China. Thus, they and more senior Chinese leaders were not well prepared for President Trump decisive use of punitive tariffs against China beginning in June 2018.⁴

An administration announcement in June promised steep tariffs on \$50 billion Chinese higher technology imports seen to have benefited from China's abuse of American and international intellectual property rights. An announcement in July said planned punitive tariffs of 10% would be imposed on \$200 billion of Chinese imports. An August 1 announcement increased the rate of those proposed tariffs to 25% at the end of the year. As those tariffs were implemented in September, the United States threatened tariffs on an additional \$267 billion of Chinese imports if Beijing retaliated, which it promptly did with Chinese punitive tariffs covering most of China's imports of American products.

Throughout the fall, administration officials continued to turn up the rhetorical heat on China. In September, President Trump condemned China for influence operations seeking to undermine the Republican Party in U.S. midterm elections. National Security Council (NSC) senior China official Matthew Pottinger at Chinese Embassy National Day

celebrations issued a blunt warning of impending US competition. National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo doubled down in criticism of China in prominent media interviews.

Vice President Michael Pence inaugurated a new public phase of the Trump government's toughening against China in a speech in October 2018 explaining to the American people, media and international audiences the wide extent of the US policy shift and its purported durability. Citing the administration's national security strategy, he detailed key elements in the current wide ranging Trump administration response to China's many challenges.⁵

A negative atmosphere prevailed at the Trump-Xi summit at the G-20 meeting in Argentina on December 1. The summit resulted in a temporary halt to escalating US punitive trade tariffs against China, pending agreement involving extensive US demands by March 2019. Substantially adding to the negative atmosphere was the arrest on December 1 of the chief financial officer and daughter of the president of China's leading telecommunications firm, Huawei, by Canadian authorities in Vancouver for extradition to the United States. The US charges involved Huawei's involvement in subverting US sanctions against Iran. Beijing reacted strongly, arresting and detaining Canadians in China; but it avoided actions against the United States. More negatives followed with National Security Advisor John Bolton's strong attack on China's policies in Africa in a speech on December 13 and with President Trump's signing on December 31 of the Asia Assurance Initiative Act which provided \$1.5 billion in funding to support Asian allies and partners against China.

Countering China in 2019-- implementation and uncertain resolve

Implementation

As trade negotiations dragged on in 2019, administration spokespersons were publicly more restrained in criticizing China. But evidence of the whole-of-government pushback against Chinese practices continued. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Assistant Secretary of State for Asian affairs David Stilwell delivering a series of speeches in Washington and elsewhere endeavoring to build understanding and support in the United States and abroad for the harder Trump administration approach to China. Pompeo made special efforts to persuade allies, US high technology companies, and US governors of the wisdom in avoiding interaction with the controversial Chinese high technology company Huawei on grounds of national security. The US government led efforts to create a growing united front of like-minded governments targeting Chinese predatory investment practices and industrial espionage seeking dominance in high technology industries and covert and overt influence operations among developed countries. There was closer collaboration among the United States and its allies and partners to share intelligence and other information and adopt mutually supportive countermeasures thwarting Chinese adverse practices. Notable results were tightening export controls and investment approvals, statements condemning Chinese

3. US Congress, House Armed Services Committee *Reform and Rebuild: The Next Steps—National Defense Authorization Act FY-2019* (July 2018), https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/FY19%20NDAA%20Conference%20Summary%20.pdf; Robert Sutter, "The 115th Congress Aligns with the Trump Administration in Targeting China," *PacNet Newsletter* No. 62, August 30, 2018. Available at <https://sigur.elliott.gwu.edu/2018/09/05/robert-sutter-pacific-forum-insight/>.
4. Evan Medeiros, "China Reacts: Assessing Beijing's Response to Trump's New China Strategy," *The China Leadership Monitor* (March 1, 2019), <https://www.prcleader.org/medeiros>
5. "Special Report: China and America," *The Economist* (May 16, 2019), <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2019/05/16/trade-can-no-longer-anchor-americas-relationship-with-china>

economic espionage, and strengthening surveillance of Chinese influence operations and espionage in a wide range of developed countries. US efforts to mobilize government and private sector investment in the Asia-Pacific to compete with China enjoyed strong support from allies and partners, Australia and Japan in particular.⁶

With increased funding from Congress, the US military increased the frequency of its freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea by warships and B-52 bombers challenging the massive Chinese territorial claim deemed illegal by a UN Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal in 2016. The American military operations were supported or complemented by military operations of allies Australia, France, Great Britain, Japan, and South Korea. Allied leaders along with India called on China to conform to the UNCLOS tribunal ruling and to refrain from militarization of Chinese holdings in the South China Sea.

The collapse of the protracted US-China trade negotiations amid considerable mutual acrimony in May 2019 saw President Trump and his government move swiftly to raise the tariff rate on \$200 billion of Chinese imports from 10 percent to 25 percent, and to begin consideration of tariffs on the remaining Chinese imports valued at \$250 billion a year. Amid intense US pressure on allies, partners and other countries to avoid allowing the controversial Chinese firm Huawei access to their communications and other sensitive information networks, the US issued an executive order imposed restrictions on exports to the firm that endeavored to cut it off from supplies of advanced computer chips the Chinese company relied on for substantial portions of its production. Departments in the government also were working on broader export controls as part of the pushback against China's challenges.

For its part, Congress sustained an anti-China drum beat with legislation, hearings, letters and other public bi-partisan demonstration to reassure Asia of US support in the face of China, to criticize China-Russia

cooperation, to condemn acute suppression in China's Xinjiang, to support demonstrators opposed to Chinese rule in Hong Kong, and to spotlight dangers posed by Confucius Institutes.

By this time, mainstream America media were no longer so distracted by President Trump's antics and they focused on the Chinese challenges to America. Showing some negative change in public opinion on China, a widely respected annual Gallup poll in early February 2019 found 21% of Americans now considered China the country's greatest enemy, compared to 11% at the same time in 2018. The level of American popular disapproval of the Chinese government also grew from the previous year.

American popular opposition to Chinese challenges grew especially among groups of disgruntled Americans now more focused on the China danger. Those groups, seen as key elements of President Trump's so-called political base, included 1) people afraid of being displaced by immigrants and perceived pernicious foreign influence; 2) workers concerned about being sold out to China and angry about the complicity of US business and government elites in the betrayal; 3) manufacturers worried about having their technology stolen and market access blocked; and 4) Christians frustrated with obstacles to proclaiming the Gospel with China as the largest malefactor. Meanwhile, Politico reported that China was "the global menace" featured above any other international danger at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference that President Trump addressed at length in March 2019.

One consequence of growing tensions between the US and Chinese governments was the atrophy of the scores of official dialogues used in the past to manage tensions and build positive interchange in Chinese-American relations. A similar atrophy impacted the wide variety of cooperative US-China programs fostered by many US government departments and agencies with Chinese counterparts.

China remained on the defensive, seeking to protect

its rights and interests but avoiding initiatives that might worsen the situation. Avoiding confrontation, Beijing focused on limiting risks while it pursued some opportunities for gains in the turmoil created by American policy and practice. Xi Jinping took personal responsibility to carefully manage U.S. demands. Xi and his colleagues also reassured the international community that China would be a source of stability and prosperity. They took some measures to stabilize China's immediate Asian periphery to limit its exposure to confrontation with Washington; looked for opportunities to expand its presence and influence; and advanced relations with Russia and others seeking to oppose and weaken U.S. power.

Countercurrents showing uncertain resolve

US public opinion of China continued to reflect little of the urgency and danger seen in Trump administration and congressional deliberations. In light of this political reality, the Democratic Party candidates seeking the nomination for the presidential race in 2020 and the media covering their campaigns showed little attention to China during 2019. Beijing's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and control in Hong Kong were uniformly and frequently criticized, usually without calling for strong US countermeasures to punish China. 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.

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 US strengths, asserting that China was in a much worse position than and no match for America. Senator Amy Klobuchar 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

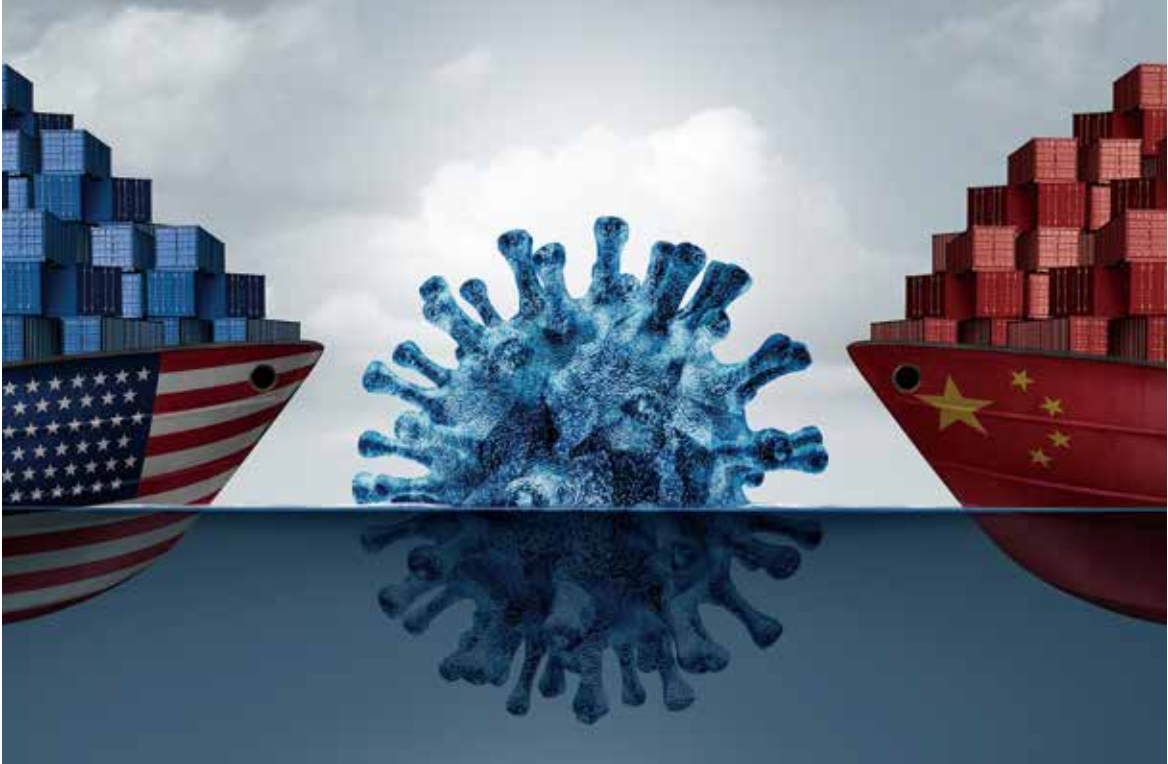
only one, against Chinese steel dumping, was about China and it came far down the list. Using recent polling data on US public opinion on China, Jake Sullivan, who served as Vice President Biden's National Security advisor, strongly endorsed in an interview in June 2019 a much more moderate American approach to China than seen in Trump administration-congressional deliberations.⁷

Congress seemed to add to ambivalence in US resolve to counter China's challenges in 2019. The most important foreign policy legislation of the year, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, had scattered provisions dealing with China, but showed little of the priority and substance given to China in the previous year. China issues were addressed in many other proposed bills, but the vast majority of such legislation garnered little congressional support.

Meanwhile, President Trump remained avowedly unpredictable, capable of switching from a hard to soft policy or the reverse, depending on his assessment of the pros and cons. Seemingly underlining this reality were the contested claims by former National Security Adviser John Bolton in a book publicly available in June 2020 that the president during the summit meetings with Xi Jinping in December 2018 starting the US-China trade negotiations pleaded with Xi for China to buy more American products in order to help the US president get reelected.

6. For a review of relevant developments in 2019-2020, see Robert Sutter and Satu Limaye, *A Hardening of US-China Competition: Asia Policy in America's 2020 Elections and Regional Responses* Honolulu: East-West Center November 2020, p. 8-22.

7. "Episode 135: How might a Democratic president deal with China?" Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy: China in the World podcast cast transcript (June 25, 2019), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Episode_-_How_Might_a_Democratic_President_Deal_with_China_1.pdf; Robert Sutter, "Has US government angst over the China danger diminished?" East-West Center Washington, *Asia-Pacific Bulletin* No. 497 (January 2020).



2020 Election Campaign, Pandemic, and Public Opinion Solidify US Against China

The plans of both the Republican and Democratic election campaigns were upended with the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic hitting the United States with devastating consequences involving over 200,000 dead by September 2020 and the deepest dive in economic growth and employment since the Great Depression ninety years earlier. The Trump campaign plan was overtaken by events. Self-isolation required to curb the virus' lethal impact not only reinforced economic decline but curbed the president's tools to mobilize electoral support through mass rallies held in key battleground states. For a time, Mr. Trump and his political advisors employed the president's personal leadership in daily White House media briefings on the "war" against the virus as a means to portray him as a "wartime president" before the public. But the president's performance was erratic, showed lapses of judgment and poor knowledge, and coincided with widespread complaints by state and local officials of the ineffective US government responses

to the crisis. One result was a decline in approval ratings of the president's leadership.

The need for campaign messages that would help reelect the president coincided with an increase in leadership invective in US-China relations. With the phase one trade deal concluded in January 2020, the whole of government counters to Chinese challenges resumed with greater prominence. The Attorney General and the FBI came out strongly in February against Chinese theft of US high technology information and the negative enormous consequences of China's quest for high technology leadership at American expense. Secretary Pompeo made speeches critical of China at home and abroad; Pompeo, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pressed anti-China warnings at the annual Munich Security Conference in February. The Defense Department for the first time in April deployed US warships to counter Chinese harassment using Coast Guard and maritime militia of other South China Sea claimants surveying for oil and gas in areas within China's broad territorial claim. The State Department was much more public in rebuking Chinese "bullying" and supporting the other South China Sea claimants, viewing

Beijing's claims as illegal.

As the coronavirus hit the United States with a vengeance beginning in March, Beijing sought the global leadership spotlight as a benefactor supplying needed protective equipment abroad and providing a model of efficient methods in checking the spread of the virus in China. The Chinese narrative ignored China as the source of the virus and the poor initial Chinese handling of the virus leading to devastating consequences for other countries including the United States. A tipping point came when the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman and other Chinese diplomats abroad suggested in March that the virus was clandestinely planted in Wuhan by visiting US military delegates. The very strong US reaction saw President Trump emphatically call the virus the "Chinese" virus for several days, even though American opinion leaders judged the term racist. Secretary Pompeo pressed international bodies to examine the source of what he called the "Wuhan" virus. Chinese leaders responded negatively to the "smear" campaign.

The acrimonious charges and countercharges undoubtedly influenced American opinion of the Chinese government. A wide variety of polls showed unprecedented levels of disapproval of the Chinese government, even more than following the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Chinese leader Xi Jinping was viewed with no confidence by over 70 percent of Americans. China was seen as a threat by 9 in 10 Americans. Republicans were more supportive than Democrats in calling for tougher US measures in response to Chinese responsibility for the crisis, but all registered broad antipathy for the Chinese government and its leadership.⁸

By April the Trump administration and associated political action committees set an agenda for the campaign that featured President Trump standing up firmly to Chinese challenges and depicting Vice President Biden as a holdover from the failed China

policies of the past. The president stopped publicized communications with Xi Jinping as he pursued a tougher posture toward China. In April he said he was "tired of China." In May, he threatened to "cut off the whole relationship" and advised in regard to negotiations with Xi Jinping that "right now I don't want to speak to him." He was ambivalent about the phase one trade deal with China, advising that "I feel differently about that than I did three months ago."⁹

Concurrently, the administration went forward with what one administration official labeled an explosion of administration initiatives countering Chinese challenges. The US government added restrictions impeding advanced chip exports to Huawei. It blocked visas for Chinese students with affiliation with Chinese military institutes who were involved with US university research on advanced science and technology. Administration officials announced success curbing the tendency of US companies to "off shore" manufacturing to China and other locales and sought further decoupling of the US and Chinese economies. President Trump blocked substantial US government pension funds investments in China.¹⁰

The Trump administration conducted major shows of naval and airpower in the South China Sea married with strong advances in American diplomatic support for Vietnam, the Philippines and other claimants against what the US government emphasized as China's illegal territorial claims. There followed a remarkable series of

8. Kat Devlin, Laura Silver and Christine Huang, "US views of China increasingly negative amid coronavirus outbreak," *Pew Research Center* (April 21, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/21/u-s-views-of-china-increasingly-negative-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/>; Marc Caputo, "Anti-China sentiment is on the rise," *Politico* (May 20, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/20/anti-china-sentiment-coronavirus-poll-269373>

9. Morgan Phillips, "Trump on China trade deal," *Fox News* (May 19, 2020), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-china-trade-deal-i-feel-differently>.

10. Josh Rogin, "Trump's China hawks are on the loose," *Washington Post* (June 26, 2020), A 23.

affronts against China involving coordinated speeches by administration leaders depicting the escalating competition with China in stark Cold War terms. Sanctions against top level Chinese leaders and many companies involved in the crackdown on Xinjiang were imposed. The US revoked Hong Kong special status in US government regulations, furthered efforts to cut Huawei's access to high level computer chips, further restricted visas for Chinese journalists, and cancelled visas for 3,000 Chinese graduate students with ties to the Chinese military. It abruptly ordered the closing of the Chinese consulate in Houston. With the president no longer interested in contact with China and Republicans seeking to use harshness toward Beijing against the Democrats in the election, the whole of government effort reached new heights, with future actions including the possible refusal of visas for Chinese Communist Party members, sanctions on banks in Hong Kong, and blocking Chinese firms from US stock exchanges.¹¹

The administration's hard line against China provided the backdrop for President Trump and his supporting campaign apparatus to target Vice President Biden as weak on China, and Biden returned in kind. As Beijing moved to impose a national security law on Hong Kong despite US and other international opposition, Biden said on May 23 that Trump has given China "a pass on human rights"; he added, "it's no surprise China's government believes it can act with impunity to violate its commitments. The administration's protests are too little, too late—and Donald Trump has conspicuously had little to say." In response, Trump signaled he was willing to scrap his trade progress with China in order to punish China over the coronavirus and Hong Kong, adding in a tweet on May 26 that "Nobody in 50 years has been WEAKER on China than Sleepy Joe Biden. He was asleep at the wheel. He gave them EVERYTHING they wanted, including rip-off trade deals. I am getting it all back!"¹²

Though some commentators in the United States, China and elsewhere warned of a new Cold War,

Americans broadly agreed with the hawkish policy toward China. Foreign Policy concluded on the basis of recent polling published by the Pew Research Center that "American public attitudes toward China have hardened for good, which indicates that the Trump administration's aggressive approach could become the new norm burying 50 years of engagement" with China.¹³

Election Results and Outlook

The impressive recent momentum of domestic forces supporting strong American opposition to the broad range of challenges posed by Xi Jinping's China will be hard to stop. For its part, the Chinese government continues its offensive challenges with little sign of meaningful compromise and Xi Jinping promises to stay in power for a long time to come.

The incoming Biden administration won a narrow victory amid an acutely divided electorate. It faces runoff in two Senate races in Georgia in early January which are likely to result in continued Republican control of the Senate, precluding Democratic control of the national policy agenda in the coming two years. President elect Biden has avowed interest in a nuanced approach to China, seeking cooperation with China on common interests while staying firm on areas of difference. Nevertheless, significant easing of US pressures on China without substantiated concessions from Beijing will almost certainly face strong Republican criticism in the Congress and perhaps some Democratic criticism given the continued bipartisan support in Congress for an across the board hardening targeting China. American media and public opinion also generally favor a resolute US approach against an untrustworthy Chinese leadership. Against this background, wisdom may argue against the Biden government initiating such a contested debate over China when domestic support is needed for higher priority concerns including dealing



with the pandemic, its negative economic consequences, and protracted racial injustice.

Of course, circumstances influencing the recent negative dynamic in US-China relations could change. For instance, the Chinese government could see the advantage of accommodating some to the American concerns about Chinese government policies and practices. A US-China military confrontation might cause one or both sides to seek negotiations in the interest of avoiding war. Americans' willingness to counter Chinese practices could be deemed as too costly amid economic and budget crises now facing the United States. For now, none of these possible changes seems likely.

Implications for South Korea

South Korea shows more angst over its vulnerability to negative fallout from the growing US-China rivalry than any other regional power. South Korea is very exposed and has few good options for dealing with the intensifying US-China rivalry. Prevailing assumptions are that a tough US policy toward China will continue in 2021 and strong Chinese retaliation will follow

South Korean moves to align with the United States in the rivalry with China. South Korea joining US efforts to restrict Huawei and other Chinese high technology companies, and South Korea working more closely with US security measures such as purported deployment of longer-range US missile systems in South Korea, are salient examples of actions that are seen likely to prompt harsh Chinese countermeasures against South Korea.¹⁴

Adding to this dilemma is the fact that escalating US pressure on China recently involves extreme rhetoric

11. Edward Wong and Steven Lee Myers, "Hawks set China and US on path to lasting divide." *New York Times* (July 26, 2020) A1.

12. Sabrina Rodriguez, "Trump increasingly cornered on China," *Politico* (May 26, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-trade/2020/05/26/trump-increasingly-cornered-on-china-787870>

13. Dan Haverly and Augusta Saraiva, "When it comes to China, Americans think like Trump," *Foreign Policy* (July 30, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/30/pew-research-trump-china-american-public/>; Laura Silver, Kat Delvin and Christine Huang, "Americans Fault China for its role in the spread of COVID-19," Pew Research Center (July 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/30/americans-fault-china-for-its-role-in-the-spread-of-covid-19/>.

14. The judgments in this section are based heavily on the author's extensive interviews with 20 Korean specialists in October 2020 and summarized in Sutter and Limaye *A Hardening of US-China Competition: Asia Policy in America's 2020 Elections and Regional Responses* p. 35-38

including ideological attacks against China's ruling communist party which implies US goals of containment and possibly regime change which South Korea cannot support. The absence of a clearly defined US goal in its tougher posture toward China is a major problem for South Korean decision makers trying to find a suitable path forward between pressures from the US and China. The difficulty in finding such a path was compounded by the possibility that President Trump's interest in making deals could have resulted in a surprising US-China breakthrough. The difficulty remains as President Biden seeking cooperation on important issues such as climate change could prompt a substantial thaw with China. Such developments were seen by South Korean specialists as likely to jeopardize US allies that have joined American-led efforts to counter China's challenges.

Other factors also complicate South Korean decision-making on the US-China rivalry. First, North Korea's nuclear weapons development and threatening posture toward South Korea, which enhances the importance of close alliance with the United States, requires Seoul to work constructively with both Washington and Beijing. Second, the high priority that the current, progressive South Korean president continues to give to improving relations with North Korea despite profound obstacles enhances the importance of working cooperatively with China as well as the United States to influence North Korea. Third, the unprecedented pressures from the Trump administration for major increases in South Korean host nation support for US forces deployed in South Korea and repeated disparaging remarks by President Trump about South Korea alienate South Korean public opinion and add to difficulties in the South Korean government's management of relations with both the United States and China. The latter complication is forecast to moderate with the Biden administration's emphasis on cooperation and coordination with allies, including South Korea.

Meanwhile, South Korean specialists see no

substantial positive advantage for South Korea in the US-China rivalry. The perceived economic costs of the US-China competition are particularly salient. South Korean businesses are deeply interconnected with the Chinese market and production chains involving China. Thus, South Koreans worry over where and how South Korea fits into evolving US efforts to diversify supply chains away from China and how it can align with US objectives on pushing back on China's economic statecraft, especially China's legal and illegal efforts to acquire technology, without punishing Chinese retaliation. Korean specialists note that their country's industries are very concerned that they will be forced into a situation where they may be isolated or marginalized by a US economy decoupled from China; and be subject to harsh reprisals from China for any acquiescence to US demands for pushing back against China's economic statecraft and decoupling. There is a deep sense that Korea has benefited economically from thirty years of dual-engagement with both the United States and China, which has made Korea a top ten global economy, but that the outlook for such positive achievements is challenged. A key Korean judgment was that "the United States cannot simultaneously pursue a China containment policy and a broader economic decoupling and protectionist policy."

In sum, American domestic politics have led to legal mandates for a whole of government campaign to counter China's challenges that has broad congressional, media and public support. The momentum supporting this broad US effort is strong and the acute American rivalry with China is forecast to continue into 2021. The consequences of the sharp negative turn in US China policy are particularly complicated and hard to balance for South Korea. The incoming Biden government promises a more accommodating US posture toward allies, including South Korea, but the continuation of the overriding US competition with China will continue to vex South Korean policymakers in the days ahead.