

The China Syndrome—A Bipartisan Ailment

By Tom Barry | December 5, 2006

What does Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) have in common with national security hawks at the country's leading right-wing think tanks?

Since the late 1980s, Pelosi—the Democratic minority leader who will become Speaker of the House in January—has vigorously opposed plans to normalize trade relations with China. Following the Tiananmen repression in 1989, Pelosi called for the U.S. government to sanction “the butchers of Beijing” and has subsequently mounted fierce opposition in Congress to the executive branch’s “constructive engagement” policies.

Like Pelosi, hawks in Congress and right-wing think tanks have also objected to the politics of constructive engagement, advocating instead a strategy of containment and, if need be, confrontation. Their concerns have focused more on China’s “military modernization” and its Taiwan reunification policy, rather than on human rights or trade issues.

In her new leadership position, Pelosi is likely to join with conservatives and economic populists to challenge China’s trade, labor, and currency practices. At this new political juncture, as public concerns rise about economic insecurity and as preoccupation with the war on terror diminishes, the recommendations of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (commonly known as the U.S.-China Commission) are likely to receive more attention from policymakers, which is why it’s important to listen closely to what the China watchers are saying.

During the Clinton presidency, the Republican-led Congress and the right-wing policy institutes and think tanks—notably the Center for Security Policy (CSP), Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—hounded the administration with charges that it was weak on China. Perhaps the most prominent attack on the adminis-

tration came from the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China. Convened by a leading congressional China basher, Rep. Christopher Cox (R-CA), the Cox Commission, as it was informally known, produced a three-volume report in 1999 that indicted the Clinton administration for supposedly falling asleep on the China watch.

Following the release of unclassified portions of the report, the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation issued a report declaring that it was “time to heed the Cox Commission’s wake-up call” on China. According to Heritage, the commission’s report presented “a comprehensive and disturbing picture of China’s efforts to build modern nuclear missiles and other weapons that could threaten U.S. security and challenge U.S. interests in Asia. The Clinton administration’s failure to warn Congress and the American people of these dangers constitutes a stunning lapse of leadership” (Heritage Executive Memo No. 602, June 3, 1999).

China bashers of both political stripes have been marginalized by the dominant forces in both parties who favor free trade and engagement with the rising giant of Asia—and who would be reluctant to challenge Corporate America and its vast interests in China. The exaggerated threat assessments and many misleading conclusions of the Cox Commission and other China alarmists have also contributed to the marginalization of the anti-China faction.

At the same time that the China bashers in and outside government were increasing their criticism of Beijing and of the Clinton administration’s China

policy, the proponents of constructive engagement were advancing their agenda. In 2000, at the behest of the Clinton administration, Congress approved permanent normal trading relations with China, facilitating China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

As part of the negotiations over congressional approval of China's trading status, in 2000 Congress established the U.S.-China Commission under the 2001 Defense Authorization Act.

The legislatively mandated mission of the commission is to "monitor, investigate, and submit to Congress an annual report on the national security implications of the bilateral and economic relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China, and to provide recommendations, where appropriate, to Congress for legislative and administration action." The commission typically publishes every year or every other year a lengthy report with scathing criticisms of China and long lists of recommendations for Congress and the executive branch. In large part, the commission's recommendations are routinely ignored, although other China critics frequently cite the commission's findings to bolster their own conclusions about security and economic threats from China.

Before September 11, 2001, many in the U.S. foreign policy community, particularly the neoconservatives and the national security hawks, regarded China as a "strategic competitor" that needed to be contained before it challenged U.S. dominance, not only in Asia but throughout the world. But the U.S. preoccupation with the war on terror and the Iraq War, along with China's declared support for the Bush administration's war on Islamic terrorism, resulted in diminished criticism of China from the administration, as well as diminished attention to China critics.

In mid-November, the commission released its 2006 report, which was unanimously approved by its 12 members—six appointed by Republicans, six by Democrats. Although bipartisan, the commission is composed almost exclusively of fierce China critics.

In contrast to past reports, the 2006 USCC report has taken a new tack. Rather than simply berating China, the report condemns it with faint praise: While acknowledging that China is now "a global actor," the commission chairman sniffs that China's "sense of responsibility has not kept up with its expanded power."

Although the 2006 report avoided the slash-and-burn attack on China of the 2005 report, which contained many errors, it nonetheless contained alarmist assessments of China's threat to U.S. national security and well-being. Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists concluded: "The challenge for the United States and its allies in the region is not, as the commission seems to believe, to continue to deploy more and better weapons to counter China's military modernization, but to figure out how to create a foreign policy that ends the mistrust" (Strategic Security Blog, November 27, 2006)

What's more, Kristensen charges that the commission not only gets some of its facts wrong but also fails to put the facts in their proper context. The commission, for example, expresses alarm that China is "modernizing" its military forces but fails to note that so are all China's neighbors—as well as the United States. "All these players," wrote Kristensen, "are engaged in a dangerous game of deterrence that creates fear and suspicion and triggers requirements for better weapons and bolder war plans."

In its apparent attempt to elevate the purported threat of China, the commission claims that China is expanding its submarine fleet—which it is not—and is continuing "to improve its older intercontinental ballistic missiles"—which, while true, has been under way since 1985.

What is striking about the report is that many of the charges leveled against China could just as easily be made against the United States, including the failure to use the United Nations to address global security concerns, violation of WTO regulations, failure to exercise leadership in the Darfur crisis,

nuclear proliferation, military buildup and modernization, and attempts to control foreign energy sources. At the same time the commission urges China to exercise global responsibility (though it never encourages China to translate power into global leadership), it urges Congress to facilitate Taiwan's enlistment in multilateral organizations that are outside the United Nations and under U.S. leadership, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (a project of former arms control chief and recently resigned UN ambassador John Bolton) and the Community of Democracy (which is favorite of U.S. neoconservatives).

Much to the consternation of the U.S.-China Commission, the U.S. military maintains military-to-military contacts with the People's Liberation Army. The commission warns the unsuspecting Pentagon that these military contacts "may disproportionately benefit" China by expanding its knowledge of U.S. military strength.

One of the factors that led to the creation of the U.S.-China Commission was the allegation, made by the Cox Commission and others, of Chinese spying in the United States. These charges led to a witch-hunt aimed at Asians working at U.S. military and nuclear facilities. Ironically, the U.S.-China Commission is now calling for increased U.S. spying in China. One of the commission's principal recommendations is that Congress instruct the "Director of National Intelligence, working with the Department of Defense, to formulate and establish a more effective program for assessing the nature, extent, and strategic and tactical implications of China's military modernization and development."

Another striking addition to the commission's 2006 report is the warning that China is becoming a threat to U.S. space dominance. (The commission's report follows the August 2006 release of the Bush administration's National Space Policy, which stresses the importance of "unhindered U.S. operations in and through space to defend our interests there.")

The provenance of the commission's analysis is Chairman Larry Wortzel, who in addition to his

position as vice president for policy at the Heritage Foundation was the former director of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. In 2003, Wortzel wrote a Heritage Foundation paper in which he predicted that "the newest battlefield for China will be in space" and declared that "from a defensive standpoint China is seeking to block the United States from developing its own anti-satellite weapons and space-based missile defense systems" (Heritage Foundation, Web Memo No. 346, October 15, 2003). Wortzel also charged that China and Russia are backing a UN treaty that would ban conventional and non-nuclear weapons in space, while at the same time "China is developing its own weapons"—a claim he failed to substantiate.

Misinformation and alarmist gossip abounds about Chinese military modernization and its global ambitions. The *Christian Science Monitor* interviewed Gregory Kulacki, who specializes in China issues for the Union of Concerned Scientists, about the Chinese space threat. As an example of the kind of misinformation that drives hyped-up threat assessments like those regularly issued by the U.S.-China Commission, Kulacki noted that some Pentagon claims were based on speculation from a non-credible blog, including the claim that China is developing a "parasitic" satellite that could jam or damage other satellites.

Hawks in the United States tend to use such reports as leverage to encourage U.S. spending on space weapons, other observers say. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, in some cases the alleged Chinese space programs are simply the writings of imaginative young Chinese military officers writing for military journals.

Whether existing or imaginative proposals, commission chairman Wortzel warns that "we should view this very seriously." Wortzel recommends dialogue with the Chinese as a way of determining the seriousness of the space threat, although the U.S. government has no plans to back down from its goal of U.S. space supremacy.

While the United States insists that China be more transparent about its military modernization, U.S. national space policy opposes any treaty that would limit U.S. space research or operations—an explicit rejection of an initiative supported by most UN members, including Russia and China, that mandates a global ban on weapons in space. The U.S.-China Commission urges Congress to emphasize the merits of space-based “strategic warning and verification measures” without acknowledging that other nations, including China, may have valid security concerns that global U.S. military domination depends largely on its array of early warning and spy satellites.

Although the Middle East remains at the center of the U.S. foreign policy focus, concern about China looms large within the Bush administration. Following the release of the U.S.-China Commission’s report, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cautiously responded to a media question about China’s military buildup, saying that it “sometimes seemed oversized for China’s regional role.”

Echoing the commission’s own terminology about the need for China to play a responsible role in

international affairs, Rice, referring to the commission’s report, said: “U.S. policy is aimed at having China be a responsible stakeholder in international politics. That means that Chinese energy, Chinese growth, Chinese incredible innovation and entrepreneurship would be channeled into an international economy in which everybody can compete and compete equally.”

Clearly, China should be a central concern for U.S. foreign policy. But it should not be targeted simply because some policymakers and think-tankers feel they need a post-Cold War enemy. In the alarmist tradition of the Cox Commission and the U.S.-China Commission, there seems to be a tendency to view international relations through the narrow lens of U.S. supremacy, rather than acknowledge that the United States too, needs to act responsibly as a global stakeholder.

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Recommended citation:

Tom Barry, “The China Syndrome-A Bipartisan Ailment,” Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, December 5, 2006).

Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/3762>

Production Information:

Writer: Tom Barry, IRC

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC