

The Approaching Crunch in US Policy Towards China

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Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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The Republican and Democrat leaders of the US Senate Intelligence Committee have issued a joint statement of intense hostility towards China. This posture is a threat to Australia's national security... and the world. An attempt to tear China down will be unsuccessful. To follow paths to antagonise China will eventually reap hostile responses and darken global affairs at a time when global cooperation is essential.

As I write on 7 December, there seems to have been no mention in Australian media of a joint statement by the acting chairman Rubio and deputy chairman Warner (Republican and Democrat) of the Intelligence Committee of the US Senate on 4 December, attacking China. It is couched in terms of support for an opinion piece in the (Murdoch) [Wall Street Journal](#) on 3 December by the Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe was nominated to that position in 2019 and his nomination was swiftly withdrawn because as a little known rural Texas Trumpist congressman his slender bio was padded and because even among many Republicans he was seen as too conservative. Trump nominated him again and secured approval in May 2020. Ratcliffe's opinion piece was accompanied by an anticommunist video. The WSJ article is partly paywalled. A summary was published by [The Hill](#). Ratcliffe's opinion piece reads like a personal opinion. He will not be intelligence chief after Biden is sworn in.

The statement by Senators Rubio and Warner is remarkable in several ways. There is no acknowledgment that there is an incoming Democrat Administration. There is no divergence between the Republican and the Democrat. Is Warner talking for Biden or shaping confrontation in the Democratic Party? Is it a price for nominations to new cabinet posts to be approved by the Senate. The language is extravagant, and religious in its fervid hostility to communism and China. Ideological is hardly an adequate attribute.

[This is the joint statement](#) as released by Senator Rubio. Because it is important I quote in full.

"Dec 04 2020

"Washington, D.C.

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Acting Chairman Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Vice Chairman Mark Warner (D-VA) released the following joint statement regarding the challenge posed to the United States by the Chinese government and Communist Party:

"We agree with DNI Ratcliffe that China poses the greatest national security threat to the United States. Our intelligence is clear: the Chinese Communist Party will stop at nothing to exert its global dominance.

“Beijing’s infiltration of U.S. society has been deliberate and insidious as they use every instrument of influence available to accelerate their rise at America’s expense.

“Our democratic values are threatened by China’s attempts to supplant American leadership and remake the international community in their image. The Chinese Communist Party’s authoritarian leaders seek to threaten our free speech, politics, technology, economy, military, and even our drive to counter the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Unfortunately, the United States’ challenge with China is not unique as Beijing seeks to infiltrate and subvert other nations around the world, including our allies.

“This is our watershed moment and we must stand our ground. The United States must not and cannot accept Beijing’s quest to exert dominance, while dismissing international legal norms and committing egregious human rights abuses to further their goals.

“We have made considerable progress in rebalancing the U.S.-China relationship and laying a clear marker for U.S. policy going forward, and we will not stand idly by as the Chinese Communist Party attempts to undermine our economic and national security.

“The message to Beijing and the world is that China’s behavior will not be tolerated and will be contested by democratic values, in close partnership with our allies and partners.”

China could probably write a declaration reading much the same, about the United States, should it wish to do so. But there is no sign that China wants war with the United States. What do these American gentlemen mean when they bluster: “*This is our watershed moment and we must stand our ground.*” Australia must make clear, especially to those two Senators, that we will not support aggressive activity directed at China. (To which the reader here might reasonably comment “aren’t we already doing that ourselves?”)

It would be normal for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade now to be drafting, in collaboration with the Washington embassy, a high level message to the incoming US Administration, a message of warmth and support, also expressing the view that Australia has its views to advance especially on regional affairs. This is an opportunity to influence not just agree with US policy... The role of a really helpful ally.

Australia cannot support a view of us-or-them as regards China. Nor can we deny the reality of China’s growth and power. We see that in parity purchasing power China is now the biggest economy. China (or Japan, or India) will be different in character and power expression and expectations. These are realities to recognise. An attempt to tear China down will be unsuccessful. To follow paths to antagonise China will eventually reap hostile responses and darken global affairs at a time when global cooperation is essential.

It is important that we restore ruptured multilateralism. It is particularly important that the US and China collaborate on public health, environment, climate, arms control and war avoidance. That is the only way in which the United States might regain leadership—by engagement and collaboration. Without the US and China working together there will be no solutions to the global climate crisis. Without US-China collaboration, the COVID-19 pandemic will not only continue to kill and kill, it will destabilise developed and developing countries and create more wars.

We need to end wars that have ceased to have strategic value and are not being won. We have to avoid 'waiting for the right moment'.

Australia has entered into a quadrilateral understanding for security consultation with the US, Japan, and India. It is not clear how this will proceed given the diverse views and interests of the participants. As framed it appears to be anti-China. It would be sensible also to engage with China. Japan and South Korea will inevitably and separately lean towards China. So should Australia... and there is nothing to be gained from military clashes between China and India.

Nothing in the business of building friendship, understanding and commerce need diminish national security. In all our countries there are piles of angry people ready to shout at China, shout about China. We should not be pushed by the loudest and most angry.

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***Dennis Argall's** degrees were in anthropology and defence studies. his governmental work in foreign, defence and domestic departments and for the Australian parliament. His overseas postings included Beijing as ambassador, and Washington. He regrets the extent of his personal experience with disability but it has perhaps sharpened his desire that the future be a better country.*

Featured image: Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump in a file image. Image: Youtube

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