

Q & A

Ami Bera on How the U.S. Should Compete with China

The congressman talks about Beijing's changing calculus on Taiwan, the difference between Democrats and the Republicans on China, and the power of Biden's coalitions.

BY KATRINA NORTHROP — FEBRUARY 27, 2022

Congressman [Ami Bera](#) is a Democrat who represents California's 7th Congressional district. In office since 2013, Representative Bera is chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation within the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He is also a senior member on the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology. Prior to serving in Congress, Bera was a medical doctor in California. Over the last year, he has sponsored legislation to bolster support for Taiwan and counter what he sees as China's economic coercion. In this lightly edited Q&A, we discussed China-related legislation in Congress, the Biden administration's record on China policy, and how to reduce the risk of conflict over Taiwan.



Ami Bera.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Let's start with the [America Competes Act](#), which just passed Congress. What impact will this bill have on the U.S.-China competition and, in your view, what are the most significant provisions in it?

A: It was important for us to pass it out of the House, and then [we will] go to conference to bring together the America Competes Act along with what the Senate passed in a bipartisan way — [the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act](#). From my end, I don't see it as a China bill, I see it as an American bill and the best way for us to compete with China is to invest in ourselves. So it's bringing semiconductor manufacturing back to the United States. It's investing in R&D so we can lead the way in artificial intelligence and in the next wave of technology. It's looking at battery technology. It's an investment in the United States. But yes, that will help us compete with China as well as the rest of the world.

Why do you think it's been characterized as a China bill?

There are a lot of people that use different rhetoric. And, again, it is part of this global competition, and China is one of our main competitors. But this is investment in the United States to allow us to compete with China. China doesn't want us to do this. I've heard from the Ambassador and other public statements coming out of China, saying, 'Why do this?' Because they know it'll make us much more competitive.

Why do you think so few Republicans supported the bill and how do you envision negotiations on the bill going forward?

It had pretty strong support coming out of the Senate. Obviously, within the Republican Party, issues around climate change sometimes become a bit touchy. [Congressman Adam] Kinzinger did vote for it, so it came out of the House in a bipartisan way. It'll come together pretty quickly, because everyone recognizes we want to get something done. And it's not just the America Competes Act — it's the bipartisan [infrastructure bill](#) that we passed in the fall. That's the largest investment in U.S. infrastructure in our history. That's also going to help us compete. It'll modernize our infrastructure, and bring broadband access to many more Americans, modernize our airports and our ports. So that also is an investment in the United States, but it will help us compete with the rest of the world. And that certainly includes competing with China.

You sponsored the [Countering China Economic Coercion Act](#) this fall, which would set up an interagency task force to study and develop countermeasures to China's economic coercion. It has now been included in the America Competes Act. Why should responding to China's economic coercion be a priority? And what do you hope it will achieve?

I'm glad that it was taken up as an amendment and included in America Competes, and I hope it's in the final piece of legislation that gets sent to the President's desk. We have to understand how China uses its economy and trading position in leveraging and coercing other countries. So an example is [what China is doing to Lithuania](#), because of Lithuania's increasing recognition of the people of Taiwan. You saw it a few years ago when the United States, in defense of our ally, [deployed defensive missiles](#) to South Korea when tensions were high with North Korea. China responded with [economic retaliation](#) towards South Korea. You've seen it with the Australians. When Australia was asking legitimate questions about the viral origins, China didn't like it so they reacted with [economic retaliation](#).

The U.S. has to understand how China uses economic coercion, and then start thinking about what are our countermeasures? I'm happy to see the administration looking to [increase](#) economic ties with Lithuania. Obviously, the United States and Australia are deepening our ties. So again, [the bill aims] to understand how China uses economic coercion, and then to come up with our best countermeasures.

What are the U.S.'s best countermeasures?

Some of those kinds of measures are what we're doing with Lithuania, in terms of increasing our economic framework and trade with Lithuania, [and] also encouraging U.S. companies to make direct foreign investments in Lithuania. Some of it is what you're seeing between the [Quad coalition](#) [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue] — Japan, the U.S., Australia and India. China's aggression, not just in an economic sense, but also aggression in the South China Sea is pushing these democracies closer together. The Quad is being elevated not just from a geopolitical strategic perspective, but also hopefully this could be a strong economic coalition. So I think those types of alliances certainly help counter China's economic coercion.

You're seeing the [financial crisis in Sri Lanka](#) right now, part of that is because of the [port](#) that was built that the Chinese financed at really high rates. We should — we being the Western world — be ready to offer financing at better rates in some countries in Southeast Asia and throughout the region as a counter to what China is doing in the terms of the Belt and Road.

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	56
BIRTHPLACE	Los Angeles, California
CURRENT POSITION	U.S. Representative for California's 7th Congressional District
EDUCATION	University of California, Irvine (B.S. and M.D.)

Let's talk about Taiwan. What do you think the risk of conflict between the U.S. and China is over Taiwan? And what could the U.S. do on their side to reduce that risk?

The United States has not changed how we view Taiwan. We still adhere to the [One China policy](#), and we've always stated that Taiwan's future is in the hands of the people of Taiwan. What's changed is Beijing's saber rattling and aggressive acts in the straits of Taiwan and in Taiwan's air defense identification zone. Beijing and Xi Jinping are being much more aggressive towards Taiwan. That's why you're seeing democracies around the world becoming concerned, and increasing their relationship with Taiwan. So it is absolutely false when Beijing says, "Well, the United States is causing this." We're not. We're being forced to react to an increased level of aggression out of Beijing. But we've not changed our policy. It's still the One China policy.

Is there anything the U.S. could do to reduce the risk of conflict? Or do you see the onus falling completely on China?

We should always be open to dialogue, we should always be ready to talk. It's certainly up to the people of Taiwan to choose their path forward. You've seen the people of Taiwan as well as the administration in Taiwan starting to look at their ability to defend themselves, their ability to invest in defensive capabilities to protect their islands and their economy. Much as you're seeing aggression from Vladimir Putin around Ukraine, Ukraine's path forward is up to the people of Ukraine. I think democracies have to stand for that value. So, again, we've not changed the calculus, we still adhere to the One China policy. It's Beijing that's changing the calculus. They have to rethink their level of aggression. In the 21st century, this isn't a good path forward. We can all thrive together and prosper together, much as Taiwan has prospered but also mainland China has prospered.

What's your assessment of the Biden administration's approach to China so far? What have you seen as the biggest successes and the biggest failures in their China policy?



Bera is the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation within the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Credit: Michael Brochstein/Sipa USA/AP Images

The initial steps of re-establishing multilateral coalitions very early on [were a success]. You saw meetings with Japan and South Korea — those were the first two White House meetings. That was an important reestablishment of that trilateral relationship, not just vis-à-vis North Korea, but also because of China's increased level of aggression in the region. Elevating the Quad coalition — U.S., Japan, India and Australia — to the leaders level really solidified that coalition. The [AUKUS deal](#), while not about China, is about maritime security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. So that was also an important

agreement. Those steps of these multilateral coalitions are important. You're also seeing increased dialogue between the United States and the European Union, as well as the G7, and potentially the G20, in terms of how we combat some of the human rights issues in China and how we work together.

You've also seen increased engagement with the Southeast Asian nations. The point there is not to make them choose the United States or China, it's to say that the Southeast Asian nations, in and of themselves, have huge economic potential, huge diversity, and we ought to be working closely. So they're doing quite a bit to be engaged in the Indo-Pacific.

China sees everything that we do through a lens that, this is about China. [But] it's in the interest of countries that value democracy, a rules based order, freedom of navigation, movement of goods and services. We all have to work together in the 21st century to maintain that framework that has led to a thriving Indo-Pacific region.

Is there anything that you would identify as an area where the administration could be doing better?

I would like to see more dialogue between the United States and China. It has to be a two-way street, so Beijing has to be willing to engage in that dialogue, and meet folks openly and honestly. I would hope there are places where we could cooperate, perhaps in global health — we'll have to work together to defeat Covid-19. And hopefully, we can all work together to prepare and avoid the next pandemic. Climate change is also another area where I haven't seen a lot of movement forward. And certainly, we'd love to see more movement on climate change, and China has to be a participant. On climate, some of that falls to Beijing.

“ The Biden administration has kept in place many of the policies that started out in the Trump administration. And even in the Trump administration, I never said that the ideas that they were advancing were the wrong ideas. It was some of the inflammatory rhetoric and the like. ”

Some have argued that the Biden administration's China policies are just a continuation of the Trump administration's policies. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

The Biden administration has kept in place many of the policies that started out in the Trump administration. And even in the Trump administration, I never said that the ideas that they were advancing were the wrong ideas. It was some of the inflammatory rhetoric and the like. I still believe we should be open to trade negotiations. We should be looking for ways to ratchet down the rhetoric. Places that we should be having dialogue around are nuclear non-proliferation — certainly we don't want to see a nuclear arms race in the region. So there are many areas that we could be talking to China about that the Trump administration didn't talk as much about.

Over the past few years, members of the Republican Party have become some of the most outspoken politicians about China related issues. Why do you think it's become such a big issue area for the Republican Party? And how should the Democratic Party respond to that?

Republican members of Congress use very different rhetoric, but on the issues of the U.S. - China global competition, there's not that much difference between where the Democrats and the Republicans are. With Taiwan, we think about it in a very bipartisan way. Certainly with economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, we think about it in a very bipartisan way. When we think about the economic coercion bill that we were talking about, that's a bipartisan bill. We may use different language.

Certainly with Covid and how Beijing handled the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, by not being transparent, by not allowing the world's best scientists in there to understand it, really did have a negative impact on the entire planet. And there are some hard feelings around how secretive China is and what happened [in] those [first days](#).

So you think Covid was an inflection point in how U.S. politicians view China?

There's some anger towards China's lack of transparency and lack of working with the world to try to assess Covid. There was an agreement made around the transfer of Hong Kong; China just totally tossed that out and decided to do what they wanted it to do. We're seeing that in the aggressiveness of China towards Taiwan, and what China has done or been allowed to do in the South China Sea — just flaunting the norms and rules that most countries are abiding by. If China's biggest fear is a coalition of countries that are very wary of where Beijing is going, they're the best ally in terms of pushing this coalition together,

because they are creating a lot of concern in the world.

Since you were elected in 2013, how has policymaking and attention to China changed? And have you, yourself, shifted your own approach to China policy?

A decade ago, the hope would have been, as China's economy continued to grow and as it grew a middle class, that we would create a rules based trading order and movement of goods and services, much as we saw in Japan, in Korea, in Vietnam and other places. China can continue to have its own form of political governance, but in the 21st century, we can all thrive together. So many people have been lifted out of poverty in this global economy. China's going in a very different direction today than many of us thought it would be going ten years ago.

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We don't have to guess at this because Xi Jinping says this very directly — Xi is taking China in a very autocratic, non-democratic, non-free market direction. And he's cracking down on Chinese entrepreneurs, [cracking down on] Hong Kong, his aggressiveness towards Taiwan, the economic coercion with other countries in the region, as well as in Africa and the Western Hemisphere. So China has these ambitions, but they're executing those ambitions in a very autocratic way that I don't believe is beneficial to the rest of the world.

In December, President Biden signed the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#), which bans imports from Xinjiang due to forced labor concerns. Why do you think that was important legislation and how do you think it will impact American companies as they approach their Chinese supply chains?

It was important for us as Congress to step up and recognize some of the processes that are happening in Xinjiang with the Uyghur population. Again, this is the 21st century and we have to be aware and speak out about the human rights issues that are happening around the world. We're sensitive to the impact that might have on U.S. companies and supply chains. But we also, at some point, have to value humanity and have to recognize some of these atrocities that are taking place and take a stance on it. Again, our companies are not alone because the European Union also is starting to recognize some of the human rights abuses that are happening in Xinjiang.

Do you think the U.S. decision to engage in a diplomatic boycott for the Beijing Olympics was an effective tool for drawing attention to China's human rights abuses?

It was necessary for any number of reasons. And again, you see a lot of European Union countries, Australia, Japan doing that. It raises the spotlight on those issues. But it's not just that — it's the lack of freedoms that people in China have at this point. That puts the spotlight on it, [and] the legislation that we passed is doing something.

If you had to choose one policy priority related to China for the U.S. government to focus on over the next year, what would it be?

It's important for us to have open lines of communication with the Chinese. And while that might not be a policy piece, that's where I would emphasize. The United States and China [should] come together in places where we have a mutual interest. I'd like to see us work together on global health, to both vaccinate the world against COVID-19 but then also work together to prevent the next pandemic. It's in both of our interests. I'd like to see us work together on climate change. We're going to be economic competitors with China. I

think that's perfectly okay. But how do we put systems in place to avoid a direct confrontation? And what I mean by that is a kinetic confrontation, a war. I don't think that's good for the Chinese people. And certainly, it's not good for the Western world. And how do we take steps to avoid that?

The relationship is at a very low point right now. I mean, it's not where it was ten years ago in terms of dialogue and trust. The low points are the level of aggression across the Taiwan Strait, Chinese aggression on India's northern border, [there are] reports of encroachment on the Nepalese border. So there's this Chinese expansionist sense that's coming out of Beijing and I think that could be dangerous.



Katrina Northrop is a journalist based in Washington D.C. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Providence Journal*, and *SupChina*.
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