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## China Bashing: A U.S. Political Tradition

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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In every U.S. presidential election, the major party candidates vie to see who can appear tougher on China. Once the election is over, however, the substance of U.S. policy toward China usually changes little and is far more pragmatic than the campaign rhetoric. There are ominous signs, though, that things could be different this time.

The accusations have been among the most caustic ever. Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney has denounced the Obama administration for being "a near-suppliant to Beijing" on trade matters, human rights and security issues. An Obama ad accuses Romney of shipping U.S. jobs to China through his activities at the Bain Capital financier group, and Democrats charge that Romney as president would not protect U.S. firms from China's depredations.

In large measure these jabs resemble a quadrennial political ritual. Ronald Reagan repeatedly criticized President Jimmy Carter for establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing. Bill Clinton excoriated the "butchers of Beijing" in the 1992 campaign and promised to stand up to the Chinese government on both trade and human rights issues. Candidate Barack Obama labeled

President George W. Bush "a patsy" in dealing with China and promised to go "to the mat" over Beijing's "unfair" trade practices.

Obama highlighted his decision to impose tariffs on Chinese tires in a recent campaign speech. The administration, he said, had decided to file two complaints with the World Trade Organization over Beijing's allegedly illegal subsidies to China's automobile industries. It was no coincidence that Obama announced this in Ohio, a battleground state where the auto parts industry is a major component of the economy.

Chinese leaders have learned to regard this quadrennial anti-China rhetoric with a mixture of patience and bemusement. They note that despite Clinton's fiery comments, U.S.-China trade soared during his administration, and after the first year or so, criticism about Beijing's human rights policies virtually disappeared. Bilateral relations during the Reagan administration were exceptionally good, as the two governments cooperated to contain the Soviet Union's power.

There are indications, though, that the current campaign hostility toward China may be more than the usual political posturing. Romney's advisers include several prominent anti-China hawks – including former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton and Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg. And the Obama administration has already taken a number of actions that suggest a change in the substance as well as the tone of U.S. policy. The imposition of tariffs and the WTO suits are examples in the economic realm, but shifts in Washington's security policies are even more evident.

The much-cited U.S. "strategic pivot" to East Asia is clearly motivated by worries about China's growing power. Washington has also become far more involved in the territorial disputes between China and several Southeast Asian nations over the South China Sea, and between China and Japan over islands in the East China Sea. In both cases, the Obama administration has taken positions hostile to Beijing's interests. This appears to be a bipartisan development: The GOP platform includes a provision explicitly condemning Beijing's "destabilizing claims in the South China Sea."

Bipartisan hostility toward China is also evident in the new report from the House intelligence committee that accuses China's giant global telecommunications company, Huawei, of cyber-espionage and generally posing a threat to U.S. security. That report is likely to lead to significant restrictions on Huawei's business in the U.S.

Such attitudes provoke China's leaders and public. Washington's implicit tilt toward Japan in the East China Sea controversy led to anti-U.S. demonstrations in several Chinese cities last month — including an attack on the U.S. ambassador's car as it sought to re-enter the embassy compound in Beijing.

China bashing may have become something other than a periodic political sport. Persistent U.S. economic woes, combined with China's breathtaking economic achievements, have made China a convenient scapegoat for numerous American political constituencies.

The need to borrow vast sums of money from China to fund the U.S. budget deficit adds to the sense of vulnerability and resentment. Beijing's growing regional and global clout strengthens U.S. worries about China displacing the U.S. as the world's leading power.

Those factors are very real, and are far stronger than in previous decades. They're also unlikely to fade once the election is over. So bilateral relations may be in for a very rough period — no matter who is president come January.