

US/CHINA: Uighur, Tibet human rights bills reflect rising anti-China sentiment

US President Donald Trump is likely to sign the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act in the coming days, and similar legislation focused on Tibet is also moving through the US Congress. Progress on both bills is an illustration of how rapidly anti-China sentiment has escalated over just the last several months.

The House of Representatives passed the Uighur (this note uses an alternate spelling) bill by a 413-1 margin, after the Senate passed it two weeks earlier by unanimous consent, a process used for uncontroversial legislation. The House passed the Tibet Policy and Support Act by a vote of 392-22 on 28 January. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was scheduled to hold a hearing on the Tibet bill on 14 May, but the hearing was postponed due to Covid-19.

As recently as a few months ago, both bills had appeared to stall. The House passed a version of the Uighur bill in December, but the Senate declined to act on it. But this month Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell explicitly linked the Senate's action on the Uighur bill to the pandemic, saying that the US "is going to be asking tough questions about our relationship with the Chinese Communist Party." In fall 2018, the Trump administration was reportedly on the verge of imposing sanctions related to repression of Uighurs through executive action but shelved the plan out of concerns about disrupting trade negotiations.

Since then, support for both bills has increased significantly amid a changed US domestic and international environment. The Uighur bill passed both chambers with veto-proof majorities, and Trump, despite being publicly non-committal on signing the bill, is likely to sign it, given his desire to project toughness against China as the November presidential election approaches. Trump has shown reluctance to criticize China on human rights issues and did not appear to support the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act that [passed congress in November](#). But ultimately Trump was unwilling to veto that bill – especially given the likelihood that congress would have overridden his veto.

Both the Uighur and Tibet bills would require the president to identify Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses, though both leave the final decision on whether to apply sanctions to the president. If one or both bills pass, China would likely respond by applying reciprocal sanctions to US officials – perhaps by identifying officials allegedly responsible for police brutality or other abuses against African-Americans.

For foreign businesses and investors, neither bill is likely to directly threaten their operations in China. But we have previously warned about [ethical and reputational risks](#) to foreign companies arising from these issues. The risks include: factories in Xinjiang and Tibet; use of suppliers who operate there; and relationships with companies involved in developing surveillance technology (such as facial recognition) or manufacturing equipment used to build and operate prison-like internment camps in Xinjiang. In recent months, reports have also emerged about forced labor involving Uighurs previously interned in Xinjiang camps who were forcibly transferred to work in factories elsewhere in China.

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