

Permanent Normal Appeasement

This week the Senate will vote on granting China permanent most-favored-nation trade status. The vote comes a lot later than the Clinton administration and China's friends in the Senate wanted. Too close to the elections, you see, and therefore too likely to be infected by election-year "politics," i.e., the actual views of the American people. In poll after poll, Americans express keen distrust of China and skepticism about the benefits of extending permanent normal trade relations.

There was also the fear, expressed in mid-July by China's leading Senate defender, Max Baucus, that "the more the issue is delayed, the more likely it is that some untoward . . . event might occur that would deteriorate relations between our two countries." You know, something "untoward" like a Chinese attack on Taiwan, or some particularly brutal crackdown on political or religious groups. A majority of senators in both parties, in other words, wanted to get this vote out of the way before the next, entirely inevitable, Chinese outrage.

There has, in fact, been no shortage of outrages already. This past week the State Department reported that the Chinese government's treatment of religious groups had "deteriorated markedly" over the past year. Indeed, in recent days alone, three Falun Gong members, two of them elderly, have died after being arrested by the police. One mysteriously "fell" from a fourth-floor window. One died of apparent suffocation in prison. The third, a 60-year-old woman, appeared to have been beaten to death. But Falun Gong members are not the only victims of religious repression. The State Department reports that the "unremitting nationwide campaigns against 'cults' and superstition" have also had a predictable "spillover effect on other faiths." Protestant and Catholic groups not registered with the central authorities have suffered severe harassment, including "threats, demolition of unregistered property, extortion of 'fines,' interrogation, detention, and at times beatings and torture." The Vatican recently reported the arrest of an auxiliary bishop as part of a general crackdown on Catholics in central China.

Last week, too, the Beijing government stepped up its

pressure on Taiwan, once again hinting of armed conflict and announcing that it will not begin cross-strait negotiations until Taiwan preemptively surrenders and accepts Beijing's definition of "One China." Beijing has also said it will use its pending membership in the World Trade Organization to block Taiwan's long-overdue entry into the WTO. China insists that Taiwan can enter only as a part of China. Under pressure from Congress, President Clinton has announced his opposition to Beijing's stance. But there is no guarantee that Clinton, or Al Gore, or for that matter George W. Bush will hold out against Chinese pressure when the time comes to take care of Taiwan's membership later this year or next.

None of these "untoward events" will have any effect on the thinking of Senator Baucus and his like-minded colleagues, of course. Even if China invaded Taiwan tomorrow, they would no doubt still argue the benefits of trading with Beijing. Corporate America wants to make money in China, and senators in both parties want money from corporate America. End of story. Senate majority leader Trent Lott says he intends to get the bill through no matter what. "It's not a question of if. It's a question of when." Those who raise concerns about giving China a free pass have been squashed. Jesse Helms and Paul Wellstone, for instance, offered an amendment to the trade bill requiring the president to certify whether or not there is religious freedom in China. This was very inconvenient, coming as it did at the same time as the State Department's damning report, so the amendment was defeated, 69-28. The fix is in. The Senate is on autopilot. All deliberation on this matter has ceased.

Well, almost all. Lott, Baucus, and company will have to figure out what to do about Senator Fred Thompson's amendment. For months Thompson has been pushing a measure that would punish China with sanctions if it were found to be in violation of international nuclear nonproliferation agreements. This is hardly a controversial proposal: Does anyone think it *shouldn't* be American policy to punish China for such violations? Nevertheless, the China lobby has raised a ruckus. Now the legislation targets other countries as well as China and, more signifi-

cantly, gives the president a lot of flexibility to impose sanctions or not as he sees fit. This dilution of Thompson's proposal is unfortunate, but at least it has won broader support among Thompson's colleagues. Lott now says the Thompson measure is "right on the substance" and he would vote for it. Probably a number of other Republicans would, too, and so would many Democrats. Neither party wants to look soft on nuclear proliferation in an election year.

And that's precisely why Baucus and others are trying to derail Thompson's measure. If it comes up for a vote, it might just pass. China's backers in the Senate insist that would be a catastrophe, and not only because it would annoy Beijing. If the Senate bill is amended, the trade measure must go back to the House for another vote. Supporters of permanent trade status for China fear there might not be enough time left to complete work on the legislation before Congress leaves town this year. Final passage would have to wait until—gasp!—next year.

So what? Baucus and others say that if Congress fails to act this year, American companies won't benefit from the lower tariffs that will come with China's entry into the WTO. This is nonsense. China still has several hurdles to clear before it can join the trade organization. It first has to complete negotiations with the other member states,

negotiations that may drag on for months. Then Beijing must reach agreement with the WTO on implementation of its trade pacts. That will take time, too. Probably China won't be able to join the WTO until the end of this year, at the earliest. So American companies won't lose a blessed dollar if Congress waits until next year to complete work on the trade bill.

Let's be honest. The real reason the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its servants in the Senate don't want to wait is the reason Baucus put forth in July: They're worried about those "untoward events." The longer they wait, the greater the chance that the Chinese government will do something horrible that might imperil passage of the trade bill.

Senators in both parties have been putting the squeeze on Thompson, trying to get him to back off and introduce his measure as a vacuous "sense of the Congress" resolution. We hope Thompson will hold steady on his course. Being inconvenient can be a lonely occupation; in the late 1970s, Scoop Jackson had the inconvenient habit of making everybody uncomfortable, too. But now as then, somebody needs to stand firm. When it comes to dealing with China, there's not much guts or integrity left in either party.

—Robert Kagan, for the Editors

