



WTH is going on with Congress and China? Sen. Cory Gardner on the right way to counter China in the Asia Pacific

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Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, "What the Hell Is Going On?," Marc, what the hell?

Marc Thiessen: We got a great interview today with Senator Cory Gardner. He's been a leader in Congress on Asia policy, which is something that used to be sort of esoteric and no one really thought about, except for us people at think tanks, but suddenly everybody's affected by Asia policy because we got a virus that originated in Wuhan and has spread across this country and caused massive problems for our country and for our economy and for American workers, 40 million of whom have lost their jobs. So, Asia policy is a really, really big deal for a lot of people these days.

Danielle Pletka: What I like about what Gardner has been doing, this is going to sound trite, but what I like about what Gardner has been doing is that he's been doing it with Democrats. That in fact, he has... For folks who don't understand, introducing a bill on Capitol Hill is nothing. You got staff. You got a legislative council. You write it out. You throw it on the floor and then you send out a press release and voila. And for a really big number of members, that's it. It's never going to go anywhere. They don't actually know what the bill does and they don't really care. They've got their pro-

Marc Thiessen: Messaging.

Danielle Pletka: Right. They've got their propaganda moment when they go for their reelect commercial. "I introduced blah, blah, blah, blah, blah bill." But Gardner didn't. Cory Gardner is the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Ed Markey, who is no conservative Democrat, Senator from Massachusetts, was the cosponsor of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in 2018. And it passed. And it's the law of the land. It is being implemented by the Trump administration. And it focuses a lot on two things that I think are really important that we haven't talked as much about even as we have talked almost incessantly about China. And that is about how to support our allies in Asia and about the Chinese military threat.

Marc Thiessen: So one of the things that we've talked a lot about, Dany, is our concern about how China is being politicized. This is an opportunity for us to do something in a bipartisan fashion because Republicans and Democrats in Washington and in the heartland all agree that China's to blame for what we're going through right now,

and that we need to be more aggressive when it comes to China. So there's rarely a moment in history where things align in such a way where you really have intense public interest in China and holding China accountable for its misdeeds, intense agreement across party lines, and then people on both sides on Capitol Hill willing to do it and a president willing to sign it. That is a huge opportunity for this country to really pivot and do something important about reassessing our relationship with China. And Cory Gardner has been leading that effort up on Capitol Hill.

Danielle Pletka: So for folks who don't know him, he's the Senator from Colorado. He's up for reelect this year in a state that is, let's just say, not as solidly in the Republican camp as he and many others might hope. As I said, he's the Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Asia at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He's a lawyer. He's a good friend to many of our friends at AEI. And that alone is fine qualification to be on a podcast with Marc and Dany as far as I'm concerned.

Marc Thiessen: Well, Senator Gardener, welcome to the podcast.

Cory Gardner: Hey, thanks for having me.

Marc Thiessen: It's good to have you on. So, let's start with the big awful that everyone's seeing going on all around us. There are protests all over the country and there are riots all over the country. People burning down businesses, attacking police. In Denver, 284 people have been arrested by last count for assaulting police officers, burglary, arson. It seems like we're in the middle of chaos. What is going on?

Cory Gardner: Well, look, I think that the murder of George Floyd, clearly, it scorched our souls and made everybody realize that there are things in this country that we've talked about or whispered about, thought we addressed, but clearly more needs to be done. And the cries that have been rightfully heard as a result of George Floyd need to be met with real resolve for answers on justice, equality, to make sure that we are rooting out racism. The protestors, the peaceful protest, which is the definition of a protester, right? Violence, I don't think defines a protest or violence turns into somebody who is not a protester. They've turned a different page. So keep the protesters' voice being heard and answered and the responses that need to stem from that. But the violence has to stop. And mayors, governors, the President need to work together to do that.

Danielle Pletka: It's interesting Senator, you focus a lot in your work, on the Hill on US foreign policy and on Asia. And one of the things that we've seen is our adversaries in Beijing exploiting the dissension, exploiting the national tragedy that we are in the midst of to exacerbate tensions. We see troll farms on Twitter. We see social media being manipulated by anonymous accounts that are trying to deepen the wedges between Americans and stop us from coming together as a country. How do we begin to protect ourselves against this sort of manipulation by outside enemies?

Cory Gardner: If you go back and you think about the long memo by Kennan, and you think about what he said, and he talked about how the Soviet Union was trying to, sort of, feed on diseased tissue. And if you look at what China and Russia have tried to do over the past many years in this country, including the 2016 election, they would try to approach the divisions in this country to amplify them, to create division, to pit American against American, to create a lessening of trust in our institutions. That's all they were trying to do before this year of COVID-19 response and riot response and social unrest as a result of the murder of George Floyd. And they continue to do that.

And the experts that I've talked to, from our leading military experts, our leading military commanders, have all said that they're seeing China do things now that they thought they wouldn't see, or that maybe they thought would come 10 years or 15 years down the road.

Cory Gardner: I think there is a belief by China that they see America down on its knees. That is wrong, but we have to prove it's wrong. And what we have to do is make sure that we are strong in our response to global pandemics, that we are strong in our response to the cause of George Floyd's murder and how we are going to assure the American people that we won't let that continue to happen without answers and responses. And so I think they are looking at the United States and writing cartoons about a fracturing Statue of Liberty. They're wagging their fingers back at us on what they perceived as moral lectures from the United States and saying, "See?"

Marc Thiessen: So Senator, you bring up the Mr. X article that George Kennan and the Soviet example. In the '80s, the Soviets were actively spreading propaganda about how the United States was an irredeemably racist country, homeless people all over the streets, trying to distract from the flaws of their system. China's doing it today, but they're doing it in a completely different environment where they have so many social media tools and other technologies that allow them to infiltrate our society with these messages and also with their own society. How do we combat that?

Cory Gardner: Well, a couple of things. We early on met with the White House and talked about creating — early on in this COVID-19 epidemic — talked about how we can create a national security advisory, an NSC team at the White House that is going to be dealing with the misinformation coming from China. And they did that. Matt Pottinger stood up a group at the White House to counter the misinformation coming from China on COVID-19 and beyond. When we passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, we were very conscientious about making sure that we were working on ways to help the economy, ways to bolster our national security, but also how do we put funding and efforts together on rule of law, democracy, countering China's misinformation, making sure that we had a way to talk about our system.

Cory Gardner: One of the things that the United States doesn't do enough of, and that is talking about the importance of our system and being proud of our system and how we can push back against China's system of governance, against the Chinese Communist Party and what they are doing, and use that and show that to other nations who are being influenced by China, or who may fear the influence of China, to underscore the reasons why they shouldn't go hook, line, and sinker with China.

Cory Gardner: So, Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, the TAIPEI Act. We've now funded I think two and a half billion dollars' worth of ARIA and ARIA-related programs to push back from a security standpoint, security cooperation, build security cooperation, bolster our allies in Asia and beyond. And so it's the White House to push back on misinformation. It's our efforts at the State Department to track China's economic bullying and diplomatic bullying. It's our efforts to make sure that we provide a rapid response on social media. And it's about building allies.

Danielle Pletka: So Senator, you're talking about the Asia Reassurance Act, ARIA, one of the more attractively named pieces of legislation. And I got to say, one of the things that's worried me in this post-COVID moment on Capitol Hill is that there's so much legislation on Asia, on COVID, on what to do about the Chinese threat, on what to

do about trade, on what to do about everything. The list of legislation that's been introduced since COVID broke out is overwhelming. Not all of that is going to happen. Capitol Hill should have a coherent strategy. So what is going to be the most important added value to the ARIA legislation coming out of Capitol Hill this year?

Cory Gardner: Man, it's a really good question, because we kind of live in a world today where page views and clickbait trump everything else. And so, if you can put a headline that gets the most clicks or gets the most page views, you become this influencer, or you get paid on ad revenue, or you can get more people on your mailing list. And we can't approach policy from that same point of view. But we have to have methodical approach that builds allies, alliances, and cooperation long-term. And that's not jumping from issue to issue, from bill to bill. It is seeking and grounding that strategy. And that's what the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act does.

Cory Gardner: When I first got elected in the Senate and became Chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Asia, I met with this whipper snapper at the White House who was just doing Asia policy, named Matt Pottinger, who has elevated very quickly into the key positions and influence on Asia. We talked about what we needed to deal with when it came to a US policy toward Asia. I traveled extensively through the region meeting with leaders and prime ministers and presidents of countries to talk about their view of the United States.

Cory Gardner: And there's a conversation that really stuck out in my mind. And it was a conversation I had with a foreign minister in Southeast Asia, who said, "Where are the Daniel Inouyes and the Bob Doles? We don't know the United States anymore." And it was about relationships. And it was realizing, at that moment, that we have spent so much time, and rightfully so, focusing on the Middle East. But it's come at the expense of an area of the world that represents 50% of global population, 50% of global GDP, the largest standing armies in the world, a huge portion of our mutual defense agreements and treaties and alliances in Asia.

Cory Gardner: And so the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act was about creating that large strategic framework based on economic security, based on national security with \$1.5 billion in security cooperation, based on rule of law, democracy and human rights, those three things, then we could use as a focus of Congress to fill out how we get back into a permanent presence, permanent engagement, long-term allied cooperation building in Asia.

Marc Thiessen: You mentioned Senator Daniel Inouye, who was a Democrat, and Bob Dole, who was a Republican, and worked in a bipartisan way to promote US interest in Asia. One of the big concerns that we've had on this podcast and discussing China since the COVID outbreak is that there's both an advantage and a danger. The advantage is I think that the COVID crisis has brought Chinese malevolence to the forefront of American people's attention in a way that it hadn't and the threat China poses. And there's really, if you look at the polls, bipartisan support for confronting China and being more aggressive in dealing with China's malfeasance in the world. But partisan politics seems to be getting in the way of that. You've managed to pass a bill that was bipartisan. Your partner was Ed Markey in the Senate. How can we seize this moment, avoid it getting dragged into politics, and seize this moment to have a truly bipartisan policy towards China?

Cory Gardner: Well, look, I think every single person on the Hill, Republican or Democrat, has a

deep and keen interest in containing and deterring the malign influence of the Chinese Communist Party. And early on, I recognized in the Senate that you don't get things out of the Senate that make a difference unless you have strong support from Republicans and Democrats. And so, at the very early stages, we began working with Ed Markey, my ranking member on the Foreign Relations Committee, to lay out this plan, the three pillars: national security, economic security, rule of law, democracy, human rights, and what we could be doing to get a major strategy piece passed. And so we engaged with think tanks around Washington, around the country, quite frankly, with military leaders, with trade leaders, with my Democratic colleagues, Chris Coons, Ed Markey, Tim Kaine, really with this vision about what ARIA was and could be. And then of course, the White House and talking about the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy that we can flesh out and have in Congress, in law, in statute. And that's exactly what we did.

Cory Gardner: So, it came out of committee unanimously. We took a lot of advice, feedback, and input from other members to make this something that everybody could agree on. And then let this be that thing that 40 years from now Congress says, "Under the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, we were able to proceed with a free trade agreement with ASEAN countries. Under the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, we fleshed out the Pacific Defense Initiative that really builds on our presence in countering China and what we did..." It's critically important we do this. We've learned from the European Defense Initiative. We know we need presence in Asia. This is the tool, the key objective, to make it happen.

Danielle Pletka: So, all of that is music to our ears. Both Marc and I spent a long time at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and agree that when you really want to win, it needs to be bipartisan. And there shouldn't be anything partisan on the question of how we deal, both with our friends in Asia, but also with our enemies. One of the things that's made me really nervous is watching our relationship with South Korea. A lot of that has to do with the nature of the government in Seoul right now.

Danielle Pletka: There's a very left wing government that is focused on warming up more with Kim Jong Un than warming up with Donald Trump. We have been in a standoff with our South Korean allies about who's going to pay for US Forces Korea for more than a year. We just cut a deal in the last 24 hours to start paying our Korean employees. They haven't been paid since January. That's obviously a big intelligence opportunity for the North Koreans. When people need money, they need money. Are you nervous about the future of that relationship? What do you feel about Donald Trump's demand for \$5 billion in order for our troops to stay in South Korea?

Cory Gardner: I think the US people-to-people relationship is stronger than ever. Between South Korea and the people of this country, that relationship forged in blood is stronger than ever. And so we need to build on that. We've passed, of course, the updates to the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. In my home state of Colorado, that's created thousands and thousands of jobs, and it will continue to, and much of it based on agriculture. So there's opportunities that we have that I think are unparalleled from a trade standpoint, and particularly from a security standpoint. South Korea is so incredibly important to Asia, to the United States. And it's a shining example of what a country can be. I mean, just decades ago that South Korea, perhaps, was even behind North Korea development-wise and look at it today. So it is what can become of a country when they make the right steps toward openness, democracy, toward freedoms, and the right to economic market base.

- Cory Gardner: What the United States cannot do, and this is what I worry that is happening, we saw what China is willing to do to impact dramatically, by the tune of 11, 12, or more billion dollars South Korea's economy when South Korea doesn't do what China wants it to do. I'm talking about THAAD and the deployment of the THAAD, the defense system in South Korea. China put about a \$12 billion plus economic hit on South Korea's economy. So they're willing to squeeze them. They know the United States is that bulwark against China doing that and our ability to push back on China and help South Korea.
- Cory Gardner: But what we can't do, and this is what I worry about, the current negotiations on our forces in South Korea, is we can't push South Korea toward Beijing. Yes, I'm concerned about some of the decisions that the government has made in South Korea. I'm certainly concerned about an over-warming of relationship with North Korea that could hurt our ability to denuclearize North Korea. But we cannot also push them into a relationship closer and closer with Beijing where they already have to be because they're neighbors. So that's why our SMA needs to be worked out, why we need to make sure that we are coming to an agreement sooner rather than later, why we need to treat this as one of our most important foreign policy objectives. To get an agreement, not embarrass South Korea, work with Seoul to make it happen and reengage with this government in a way that helps achieve the mutual benefits of economic partnerships and security partnerships.
- Marc Thiessen: One of the things that we've all been concerned about is watching how China is using COVID as a pretext or cover or the distraction, end of the world by COVID to crack down, for example, on democracy in Hong Kong. There are other ways that they're doing this as well. You put out a statement condemning something that I hadn't even realized, that China sunk a Vietnamese ship in the South China Sea. Talk to us a little bit about some of the things that we're not seeing, that we're not paying attention to about the way that China is exploiting this COVID pandemic — against Taiwan, more belligerence towards Taiwan, other areas — and what we need to do to counter it.
- Cory Gardner: Yeah. I mean, look. China has now been very forthright in terms of what they're willing to do — using force against Taiwan, incursions into Japanese waters, sinking of the Vietnamese vessel, this absolute devastation of a law in Hong Kong. Look, I remember meeting in Hong Kong several years back with Anson Chan and Martin Lee, talking about some of the great leaders, civil society leaders, in Hong Kong, talking about what they viewed would come from President Xi. And I remember at the time they said, "Well," this was I think right around the time of the corruption crackdown that Xi was leading in China. And a lot of people were going to jail. Their response was, "Well, maybe he's a reformer, and maybe these things are happening because he's setting the stage to be a reformer." And it became clear within a matter of months his intentions.
- Cory Gardner: And we talked about the thing that was keeping Hong Kong together was the independent judiciary. And then we see the extradition law that China tried to force down Hong Kong, which basically would have wiped out the independence of the judiciary in Hong Kong. We've seen what's in the Philippines, obviously what China has done. President Xi came to the Rose Garden at the White House and lied to the American people about his intentions in the South China Sea. And we can't, we cannot allow that to happen in other places and we have to push back in South China Sea. And we need allies. That's why ARIA is important. We need allies in the region to push back and stand up to China. We need Europe to engage with what is

happening in China and how China is behaving.

Cory Gardner: But we now see them doing things like multilateral engagements and agreements. China has kind of avoided those in the past, but now they're starting. We see them putting a significant amount of new dollars into their military in the middle of COVID. We see their language and rhetoric they're using. Their ambassador in France, what they said about the French response to COVID-19, what they've said about Australia, seeing them reply in ways that we haven't seen them act before. Their response in Italy. Sort of the windowing of supplies out of China to other countries in response to COVID-19. So they are very much on the move, aggressively so, because they were embarrassed by their COVID-19 response, because of their culpability in the COVID-19 response, and because of their perception that the United States is weak and they have an opportunity to use this to their advantage.

Danielle Pletka: We would be remiss if we didn't try and close out with a little bit of American politics. We've got a big election this year, a presidential obviously. And one of the things that's really interesting is to watch as Colorado has been part of the sort of the transition in American states. I used to think about Colorado as a really Republican redoubt. And now there are only two statewide elected offices held by Republicans. The state is really, really changing. We're not going to get you in trouble and talk dirty party politics in your Senate office because there are rules about that. But tell us about what's ahead for you and the race this year.

Cory Gardner: Yeah. Look, I think there's a couple of things about Colorado that a lot of people either forget or perhaps didn't know. Colorado is a state that's only had one Republican governor in almost 50 years. And so — that was Bill Owens. It sent Tim Wirth and Bill Armstrong to the United States Senate at the same time. You couldn't really get much more opposite in terms of their philosophies or political beliefs than those two. And so, this is a state that does its own thing. It votes for people who are going to fight for it, who are going to do those things that it believes are right for it. So I think that's Colorado in a nutshell.

Cory Gardner: I also think that people, when they say, "Oh, Colorado has gone blue, or this state is voted for Hillary Clinton," what they don't recognize is that in 2008, John McCain lost by about nine points to Barack Obama in Colorado. In 2012, Mitt Romney lost Colorado by about six points to Barack Obama. And in 2016, President Trump lost to Hillary Clinton in Colorado by about four points. So, that is not the general direction that people seem to be casting Colorado to be heading to. That's a state that's actually gone more right in a presidential election. So, I think there's just a lot of things that Colorado has that keep people guessing about it. And that people think they know Colorado or can count on Colorado, they're going to be surprised because Colorado doesn't care what Washington DC is trying to predict. Colorado is going to do what Colorado wants to do based on what it needs and how it thinks the future should be determined.

Marc Thiessen: So exit question from me. Republicans are defending a lot more seats than Democrats are this year in the Senate. Your race could ultimately determine who controls the Senate next year. There's a lot of concern among conservatives that if Democrats get control of the Senate and get rid of the filibuster and have a narrow Senate majority, they could use the COVID pandemic as a pretext to ram through a lot of stuff that otherwise would never possibly get passed. What are the stakes in terms of control of the Senate next year?

- Cory Gardner: Oh gosh, you don't even have to wonder about it because they've said it. Just look at the very initial ideas that the House of Representatives put forward to pass a Green New Deal in response, the emissions controls on cows and airlines and everything else. They want to ban cars, cows, and straws. And that's what they've said that they would do. You listen to the people around the country talking about what they want. They talk about packing the court because they can't win at the ballot box. So they try to cheat at the courts. They talk about reversing the tax cuts and more regulations.
- Cory Gardner: The economic recipe to get this country back on its feet after COVID-19's economic crisis is not making it more difficult to create jobs in this country. It's opening up our economy like it's never been opened up before, to unparalleled economic growth and opportunity. That's how we get this country moving again. That's how we pay for what we have just spent on COVID-19. But they want to undo that. They want an energy industry that is out of this country. They want to make us reliant on the Middle East again on OPEC, for our oil supplies and natural gas. In Colorado alone, that would result in 250,000 people losing their jobs. And so those are the stakes that we have to face to the consequences of the future of this country.
- Danielle Pletka: Senator, you've been hugely generous with your time. It's always great to talk to you; everybody at AEI really enjoys the time we are able to spend with you. So thanks for taking just a couple minutes out of your day to talk to Marc and me at a really difficult time in the country.
- Cory Gardner: Well, Dany, Marc, thank you very much for having me. Thanks for the great work that AEI continues to do. And please know you're making a difference in the ideas around the country.
- Marc Thiessen: Thank you, Senator.
- Danielle Pletka: So I have to confess one thing to you. We had an entire interview with a Senator from Colorado and we not once talked about pot. Which is absolutely incredible because when most people say Colorado, that's almost the first thing I think about. It was pretty interesting hearing his take on whether Colorado actually is becoming more of a blue state or is secretly becoming more of a red state. I mean, what do you think?
- Marc Thiessen: I'm not an expert on Colorado politics, so I don't know. It's truly a purple state that could go either way. Senator Gardner's seat is one of the most hotly contested in this election. It's going to be a nail-biter on election day. Even if everything goes perfectly for him and he runs a perfect campaign and his opponent stumbles, it's going to be tight because of the politics in Colorado.
- Marc Thiessen: But it is pivotal, because if Gardner loses, that could be the seat that tips the Senate over into Democratic hands. And I fear for our country if we get to the point where we have Democratic House, Democratic Senate, and a Democratic president with a Democratic party, that's been so radicalized. They will get rid of the filibuster in two seconds flat, and they will pass through a radical agenda on 51 votes. And Joe Biden there, as you know, "Weekend at Bernie's" with the string on his arm, signing whatever the heck Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi send his way. So that's a terrifying prospect.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. We talked about that, actually, when we interviewed Ted Cruz as well, about

what it would really mean legislatively if we had a Democratic House, a Democratic Senate. I confess to you, I mean, everybody knows I'm a conservative, although obviously not as conservative as Marc, but everybody knows that I am. But I like that checks and balances in the House and Senate and in the White House. I like the fact that we can have different parties in control because I think, first of all, it makes us stronger. It makes us better, but it also ensures that only things that really people can get together on will pass. We do not want to have another government where we get an Obamacare rammed down our throats by a sliver and then spend the next years contesting. Whether biting away at it, one legal bite at a time, it's just... I'm not looking forward to this election.

Marc Thiessen: Well, no one's looking forward to it.

Danielle Pletka: I think Donald Trump is looking forward to it. He loves this fight.

Marc Thiessen: Well, I'll tell you. The thing that worries me most about our politics, and it's related to what you just said, is that everything has become about base maximization these days. It used to be that the candidates would secure their nominations and then try and appeal to the center and win over independents and people who were swing voters. And basically the new mode of that is, "We're just going to fire up our bases and make those suckers in the middle choose between the two worst options that they have from their perspective and no make no appeal to them." And what that translates to in governance is, we can't get together on anything. And it's really, really hard to do anything in a bipartisan way. And to his credit, Cory Gardner has managed, on this topic that we've been talking about, on China and Asia policy to do that, to reach across lines and come together in a bipartisan way. And it would be a shame if we lost that in Washington.

Danielle Pletka: Anyway, as always, folks, thanks so much for listening. Thanks for being with us. We look forward to not seeing you, but having you.

Marc Thiessen: Are you sure you're not smoking pot, Dany?

Danielle Pletka: I know. I sound like I'm high.

Marc Thiessen: Dany is high. That's okay.

Danielle Pletka: I'm talking about-

Marc Thiessen: High on life.

Danielle Pletka: That's a first. Thanks for being with us. As always, send ideas, send suggestions, and take care.