

# The COUNTER Act

## Can Washington Counter Beijing Without Repeating Cold War Mistakes?

By Andrew Friedman

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The bipartisan Combating PRC Overseas and Unlawful Networked Threats through Enhanced Resilience Act of 2025 (**COUNTER Act**) requires the secretaries of state and defense to develop a strategy to counter the global basing ambitions of the PRC.
- According to the act, “the PRC is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure...to project and sustain military power at greater distances” and “a global PLA logistics network could disrupt United States military operations as the PRC’s global military objectives evolve.”
- Civil society has a deep and robust knowledge of how to counter these basing ambitions, and these may be vastly different than those of authoritarian leaders. Consultation with them should be required by law.
- The majority of countries noted as targets for potential PRC basing in the act do not have representative governments. 16 of 22 countries mentioned are either electoral authoritarian or closed authoritarian per V-Dem.
- Consultation with civil society will serve to improve and deepen long-term relations between populations and the United States, a battle that is currently being lost to the PRC.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The COUNTER Act, a bipartisan bill sponsored by Senators Coons, Ricketts, Kaine, Cornyn, and Slotkin, puts forth the findings that “the PRC is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the . . . [People’s Liberation Army] to project and sustain military power at greater distances” and “a global PLA logistics network could disrupt United States military operations as the PRC’s global military objectives evolve.” In addition to efforts to establish new military bases, Beijing is expanding its influence in much of the Global South, including significant efforts in **Africa**, through ever greater security cooperation. Taken together, the facts demonstrate the importance of a coordinated, strategic policy to combat Beijing’s military adventurism.

The bill would further require the executive branch to “proceed with the urgency required to address the strategic implications of the PRC’s actions” as well as “reflect sufficient interagency coordination with respect to a problem that necessitates a whole-of-government approach” and “identify a comprehensive menu of actions that would be influential in shaping a partner’s decision making regarding giving the PRC military access to its sovereign territory.”

The bill is the first of its kind in directly requiring a response to overseas military basing ambitions from Beijing; however, it is in a long line of efforts to counter both the country’s military and non-military international influence. Previous legislation has aimed to **grant sanctions authority** against the Chinese Maritime Militia, **prohibit** certain types of foreign assistance if countries host Chinese military assets, and **prohibit** the entry of goods made with forced labor in Western China into the U.S. market, among many other actions.

### LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The COUNTER Act requires the secretary of state and the secretary of defense to develop a strategy in response to the global basing ambitions of the PRC. This strategy will require the development of a menu of options for countering said basing ambitions.

Endeavors to influence a partner country’s decisionmaking should not be limited to accommodating the worst impulses of governments. They must also involve civil society and individuals whose partnership is far more robust and long term but may be at odds with the interests of governments, particularly those that are not responsive to the demands of their people.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mandate Consultation with Civil Society Alongside Government Stakeholders.** Government stakeholders who will ultimately make basing decisions should be a primary point of consultation to develop a menu of options for countering Beijing's basing ambitions, but civil society consultations should be mandatory in order to ensure a more robust and sustainable partnership.
- **Include Foreign Assistance for Civil Society Advocacy in the "Whole-of-Government Approach."** Support for civil society allows individuals to advocate for their positions and makes for a more responsive government. This, alongside efforts at consultation, will further contribute to a sustainable partnership that keeps PRC bases out of partner countries rather than one that is determined by dictatorial regimes.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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Furthermore, robust relationships with a country's population are far more sustainable and less subject to the whims of an elite. Recent polling demonstrates a growth in how much of the Global South **sees** Beijing as a more positive influence than Washington. A civil society that was consulted and included in efforts to deter broad partnerships with Beijing will remember those efforts.

For this reason, the act should be amended to require consultation with civil society in the development of a menu of potential responses. Without this requirement, the Departments of State and Defense could work directly with military and government stakeholders, limiting the input they receive and putting partnerships at the whim of fickle dictators.

## CHALLENGES AND RISKS

While some government stakeholders may see mandated consultation with civil society as a threat to their rule or a violation of sovereignty, it is not a new element of American foreign policy. Embassies regularly interact with non-government actors in pursuit of intelligence and context for state decisionmaking.

Do-no-harm considerations are vital in order to ensure that civil society interlocutors are not threatened due to their discussions with the U.S. government; however, this is an ordinary part of interactions between U.S. embassies and civil society. Further, the classified nature of the strategy and accompanied briefings allows for additional protections.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Andrew Friedman, "Can Washington Counter Beijing Without Repeating Cold War Mistakes?," CSIS, *Commentary*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-washington-counter-beijing-without-repeating-cold-war-mistakes>.