

Policy Brief

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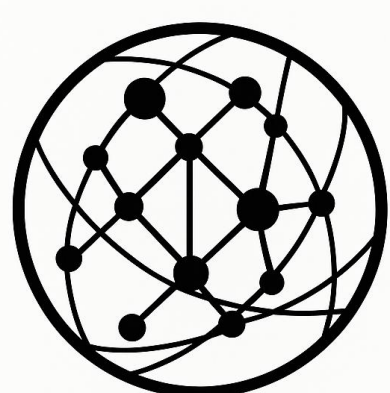
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From War Powers to Loyalty Politics:

Trump's Iran Response and the Government–Nation Distinction

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Core Judgment

Trump's response to the House Iran war-powers vote converts a constitutional dispute over presidential war authority into a loyalty test. By labeling lawmakers who supported congressional limits as “unpatriotic,” Trump weakens a long-standing U.S. narrative that dissent from government policy can remain compatible with patriotism. This creates a strategic communications vulnerability: Chinese political discourse can argue that Washington separates government from nation when criticizing China, but fuses government, leader, war policy, and patriotism when U.S. executive power is challenged.

Key Judgments

- **Constitutional oversight is being reframed as loyalty politics.** The House vote concerned whether continued military action against Iran required congressional authorization; Trump's response reframed that institutional question as a test of patriotic loyalty.
- **The U.S. government–nation distinction is weakened.** A discourse often used in China-related messaging—that criticism of government policy is not hostility toward the nation—becomes harder to sustain when domestic dissent over U.S. war policy is labeled unpatriotic.
- **China gains a usable counter-narrative.** Chinese political discourse can argue that Washington separates government from nation when criticizing China, but fuses leader, state, war policy, and patriotism when U.S. executive authority is challenged.
- **U.S. institutions still function, but their legitimacy is being rhetorically contested.** The House vote demonstrates that constitutional checks remain active; the deeper problem is that presidential rhetoric can delegitimize those checks by portraying institutional restraint as disloyalty.
- **The main cost is strategic credibility.** The episode may not immediately alter the Iran campaign, but it erodes the consistency of U.S. democracy and human-rights messaging by exposing tension between external liberal discourse and domestic loyalty politics.

Policy Brief**Executive Summary**

The House passage of a war-powers resolution limiting President Trump's authority to continue military action against Iran marks an important moment in the domestic politics of U.S. foreign policy. Passed by a narrow bipartisan vote of 215–208, the resolution challenged the administration's ability to sustain military operations without congressional authorization. Four Republican lawmakers joined Democrats in supporting the measure, making it the first successful House vote to curb U.S. military involvement in Iran after earlier efforts failed or were postponed (Reuters, 2026a; Grisales, 2026; New York Post, 2026b).

Trump's response transformed the dispute from a question of constitutional authorization into a question of patriotic loyalty. By attacking the vote as meaningless and characterizing its supporters as unpatriotic, driven by partisan hostility, and willing to see the United States fail, Trump blurred the line between the nation, the state, the presidency, and a specific military policy (New York Post, 2026a). The result was not simply a defense of executive war authority, but a rhetorical recoding of congressional restraint as disloyalty.

This recoding matters beyond the Iran conflict. U.S. China policy messaging often relies on distinguishing the Chinese people, the Chinese nation, the Chinese state, and the Chinese Communist Party. Trump's framing creates a reverse image at home: when U.S. executive authority is challenged, opposition to government policy can be portrayed as opposition to the nation itself. This gives Chinese political discourse a usable counterexample against Washington's government–nation distinction.

The central finding of this brief is not that U.S. institutions have failed. The House vote demonstrates that constitutional checks remain active. The deeper problem is that presidential rhetoric can delegitimize those checks by portraying institutional restraint as partisan sabotage or national disloyalty. For U.S. strategic communication, the long-term cost is credibility: Washington will find it harder to defend the legitimacy of dissent abroad if constitutional dissent at home is framed as unpatriotic.

Why This Matters

This episode matters because adversarial narratives do not need to disprove U.S. constitutional procedure. They only need to show that U.S. political leaders can delegitimize dissent when executive authority is challenged. The House vote demonstrates that Congress retains formal capacity to constrain the president; Trump's response shows how that constraint can be rhetorically reframed as disloyalty.

For U.S. strategic communication, this creates a credibility problem. Washington often argues, especially in China-related discourse, that criticism of government policy is not hostility toward the nation. Yet when domestic opposition to U.S. war policy is labeled unpatriotic, the government–nation distinction becomes harder to sustain as a general principle rather than a selective instrument.

For China-related political discourse, the episode is useful because it is simple and portable. Chinese official, semi-official, or nationalist narratives could argue that the United States separates government from nation when criticizing China, but fuses leader, state, war policy, and patriotism when U.S. executive authority is challenged. This does not invalidate U.S. constitutional checks, but it weakens the persuasive consistency of U.S. democracy and human-rights messaging abroad.

Policy Brief**Methodological and Source Note**

This brief is based on publicly available reporting, congressional records, U.S. legal sources, and official or publicly reported statements. It distinguishes between documented events, such as the House vote and Trump’s public response, and analytical projections about how the episode may be used in China-related political discourse.

The brief does not rely on classified information, private communications, or independent verification of closed-door congressional, executive-branch, or diplomatic deliberations. Claims about Chinese narrative use should therefore be read as assessments of strategic communications vulnerability, not as evidence of a coordinated or already-adopted official Chinese response.

1. The Immediate Context: Iran, War Powers, and Presidential Authority

The June 2026 House vote took place in the context of a prolonged U.S.–Iran military crisis. The resolution sought to restrict the president’s ability to continue military operations against Iran without congressional approval, requiring either congressional authorization or withdrawal of U.S. forces from the conflict (Reuters, 2026a; Grisales, 2026).

The vote was narrow but politically significant because it represented a bipartisan rebuke of the administration’s war authority. Four Republican lawmakers joined Democrats in supporting the measure, suggesting that concern over presidential war-making power had moved beyond partisan opposition alone (Reuters, 2026a; New York Post, 2026b).

The vote also followed a sequence of earlier congressional attempts. On May 14, the House narrowly rejected a similar effort by a 212–212 tie, meaning the resolution failed because it did not receive a majority (Reuters, 2026b). A later House vote was canceled after the Senate advanced a similar measure, indicating that the war-powers challenge was becoming more difficult for Republican leadership to manage (Reuters, 2026c). On May 20, the Senate advanced a parallel war-powers resolution by 50–47, with four Republicans joining most Democrats in support (Reuters, 2026d). The June House vote therefore did not emerge in isolation. It reflected a gradual erosion of congressional tolerance for the Iran campaign.

Trump’s response was direct and confrontational. He portrayed the vote as meaningless, accused Democrats of seeking American failure, and criticized the Republican defectors as political showboats or “grandstanders” (New York Post, 2026a). The rhetorical structure of the response was clear: support for limiting the president’s war power was framed not as constitutional oversight, but as disloyalty to the country.

This distinction is crucial. The constitutional question is whether Congress should authorize war. The loyalty question is whether political actors support the nation. By merging the two, Trump transformed institutional oversight into a symbolic test of patriotism.

2. The War Powers Resolution and the Logic of Collective Judgment

The War Powers Resolution was designed to prevent unilateral presidential war-making from becoming the normal basis of U.S. military action. Its stated purpose is to ensure that the “collective judgment” of both Congress and the president applies to the introduction and continued use of U.S. armed forces in hostilities or situations of imminent hostilities (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, n.d.-a). This does not eliminate presidential authority, but it embeds presidential action within a broader constitutional framework.

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The constitutional foundation of this framework lies partly in Congress's Article I power to declare war. The Constitution Annotated describes the Declare War Clause as a central component of congressional war powers and one of the most heavily debated areas of constitutional war authority (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Iran case therefore raises not only a policy question, but also an institutional question: whether continued military operations can be sustained through executive interpretation alone, or whether Congress must formally authorize them.

The administration's position, according to public reporting, has been that the measure would interfere with the president's foreign-affairs authority and potentially weaken negotiations with Iran (New York Post, 2026b; Reuters, 2026e). That argument is not unusual. U.S. presidents from both parties have historically resisted congressional limits on military flexibility. What makes this case distinctive is the explicit conversion of constitutional disagreement into accusations of insufficient patriotism.

The War Powers Resolution is not merely a procedural statute. It reflects a political theory of shared responsibility. When Congress invokes it, legislators are not necessarily attempting to undermine the nation's position; they may be attempting to restore the constitutional balance through which national military commitments are supposed to be legitimated. The political danger of Trump's response lies in its de-legitimation of this balancing function.

3. The Government–Nation Distinction in U.S. External Messaging

U.S. China policy messaging has repeatedly invoked a distinction among the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese state, the Chinese people, and China as a civilization or nation. This distinction became especially visible in late Trump-era China policy messaging. In his 2020 Nixon Library speech, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo framed the Chinese Communist Party as the central object of U.S. criticism while distinguishing that criticism from hostility toward the Chinese people (Pompeo, 2020). Later reporting on State Department guidance under Secretary Marco Rubio suggests that this distinction continued to shape U.S. diplomatic language, including guidance that emphasized the party character of Xi Jinping's authority and distinguished the CCP from the Chinese people (Ching, 2025).

This distinction serves several strategic purposes. First, it allows Washington to criticize Chinese governance without appearing to attack Chinese identity. Second, it helps frame dissidents, rights defenders, civil society actors, and alternative political voices as citizens rather than traitors. Third, it supports the liberal-democratic claim that patriotism can include opposition to government policy.

The underlying logic is straightforward: the government is not identical to the nation; the ruling party is not identical to the people; dissent from state policy is not necessarily disloyalty. In U.S. China policy discourse, this logic is politically useful because it allows Washington to oppose Communist Party rule or Chinese state conduct while claiming not to oppose China's people, society, or civilization.

Trump's Iran war-powers response moves in the opposite direction. If lawmakers who oppose or restrict presidential military action can be described as unpatriotic, then the distinction between government policy and national loyalty is narrowed. The president becomes positioned as the interpreter of national interest, support for his war policy becomes a test of patriotism, and constitutional dissent becomes more vulnerable to de-legitimation.

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This does not mean the United States and China operate under identical political systems. The House vote itself demonstrates that U.S. institutional checks remain active. But strategic communication does not operate only through institutional facts; it also operates through symbolic examples. A U.S. president calling war-powers dissent unpatriotic gives Chinese political discourse a simple and powerful counterexample: the United States separates government and nation when criticizing others, but can merge them when defending executive power at home.

4. From Constitutional Dissent to Loyalty Politics

The central transformation in Trump's response is the movement from constitutional dissent to loyalty politics.

Constitutional dissent refers to disagreement grounded in institutional authority. In the war-powers context, Congress has a constitutional role in authorizing war, overseeing military commitments, and controlling funding. Legislators who vote to limit presidential military action may be motivated by legal, strategic, fiscal, or political concerns. Their dissent does not necessarily imply hostility to the nation; it may reflect a different judgment about how national interest should be protected.

Loyalty politics operates differently. It asks whether political actors are sufficiently aligned with the leader, the executive, or a particular national-security policy. Once a policy dispute is translated into a loyalty dispute, institutional checks become harder to defend. The question is no longer "Who has constitutional authority?" but "Who supports America?"

This rhetorical move has three consequences.

First, it raises the political cost of oversight. Lawmakers may hesitate to challenge executive action if doing so exposes them to accusations of disloyalty. This is particularly relevant in a party environment where presidential criticism can have electoral consequences for dissenting members.

Second, it reduces policy complexity. Questions about legality, military necessity, alliance commitments, escalation risk, economic cost, energy disruption, congressional authorization, and exit strategy are compressed into a binary choice between patriotism and betrayal.

Third, it personalizes national interest. The president's policy becomes the nation's policy; opposition to the policy becomes opposition to the nation. In this sense, Trump's response does not merely defend executive war powers. It attempts to monopolize patriotic meaning.

This shift is especially consequential because the Iran conflict is still embedded in negotiation. Public reporting indicates that lawmakers have pressed the administration on whether it would trade sanctions relief for freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that the United States would not exchange sanctions relief for strait access (Reuters, 2026e). In such a setting, Trump's claim is politically useful: it presents congressional restraint as weakening the U.S. bargaining position. Yet that claim also changes the domestic meaning of oversight. Congressional authorization becomes not an institutional requirement, but a potential act of sabotage.

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5. The China-Relevant Narrative Problem

The China-related significance of the episode lies in its narrative portability. Trump's response to the Iran war-powers vote can be converted into a counter-narrative about American double standards: the United States separates government from nation when criticizing China, but can merge leader, state, war policy, and patriotism when U.S. executive authority is challenged.

This section should be read as an analytical projection of narrative vulnerability, not as evidence that Chinese official discourse has already adopted a unified response to the episode. The argument is not that Beijing has necessarily operationalized this line, but that the episode creates a politically usable example for Chinese official, semi-official, or nationalist commentary.

The likely Chinese framing would be straightforward. Washington often tells Chinese audiences that opposing the Chinese government does not mean betraying China. Yet when U.S. lawmakers oppose the U.S. president's war policy or seek to limit military action through congressional authorization, the president characterizes them as unpatriotic (New York Post, 2026a). The contrast is simple, easily translatable, and rhetorically effective.

This argument does not require Chinese commentators to deny that U.S. institutions still function. The House vote itself demonstrates that Congress retains formal capacity to constrain the executive (Reuters, 2026a; Grisales, 2026). The more precise counter-argument would be that formal dissent may exist in the United States, but U.S. political rhetoric can still brand dissenters as disloyal when core executive policies are challenged. The vulnerability lies less in institutional failure than in rhetorical inconsistency.

Chinese political discourse could use the episode in at least four ways.

First, it could frame U.S. liberal values as selective. The government–nation distinction is promoted when it weakens strategic competitors, but becomes less visible when it constrains U.S. executive authority.

Second, it could portray U.S. democracy as internally contradictory. The House vote shows that congressional oversight still functions, but Trump's response shows that such oversight can also be branded unpatriotic in political rhetoric.

Third, it could reinforce China's own government–nation fusion. Chinese official discourse often treats attacks on the party-state as attacks on China. Trump's rhetoric provides a U.S. example that can be used to argue that even Washington links national loyalty to support for state authority under crisis conditions.

Fourth, it could weaken U.S. influence over Chinese public opinion. Chinese audiences already skeptical of U.S. intentions may interpret the episode as evidence that Washington's support for dissent abroad is selective, geopolitical, and conditional rather than consistently principled.

The most damaging effect is not that Chinese audiences will suddenly reject all U.S. discourse. Many already approach U.S. messaging with skepticism. The more important effect is that the episode supplies a compact rhetorical weapon: it is quotable, translatable, and easily integrated into existing Chinese narratives about U.S. double standards. For U.S. strategic communication, the issue is not analytical validity but persuasive consistency.

Policy Brief**6. Domestic Implications for U.S. Political Order**

The domestic implications are equally important. The United States has long contained a tension between constitutional patriotism and nationalist loyalty politics. Constitutional patriotism emphasizes institutions, laws, rights, and procedural limits. Nationalist loyalty politics emphasizes unity, executive strength, and opposition to perceived internal enemies.

War intensifies this tension. During external conflict, executive leaders often claim that domestic opposition weakens national bargaining power. Trump's Iran response follows this pattern, but with sharper personalization. The charge is not merely that the vote was strategically unwise; it is that the voters were unpatriotic (New York Post, 2026a).

This matters because the Iran conflict is not a conventional declared war. It is a contested military campaign conducted under disputed authorization, ongoing negotiation, and heightened regional risk. In such a context, congressional scrutiny is not an obstacle to constitutional governance; it is part of constitutional governance. The War Powers Resolution explicitly frames the use of U.S. armed forces in hostilities as requiring the collective judgment of Congress and the president, not unilateral executive discretion alone (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, n.d.-a).

If congressional war-powers oversight is successfully recoded as disloyalty, the practical effect is to narrow the space for lawful restraint. The president may still face formal institutional constraints, but the political legitimacy of those constraints becomes weaker. The result is a dual structure: institutions continue to operate, but rhetoric delegitimizes their operation.

The June vote should therefore not be understood only as a procedural episode. It is a stress test of whether constitutional disagreement can remain legitimate during wartime. The fact that the House passed the resolution shows that institutional resistance is still possible. The fact that the president responded by attacking supporters as unpatriotic shows that the meaning of institutional resistance is being politically contested.

7. Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy Credibility

The foreign-policy damage is not immediate collapse but credibility erosion. U.S. strategic communication depends heavily on normative consistency. When the United States criticizes authoritarian governments for equating dissent with disloyalty, it benefits from appearing to uphold the opposite principle at home.

Trump's statement weakens that contrast. It allows adversaries and competitors to argue that the United States also treats dissent as betrayal when core executive policies are challenged.

This is especially damaging in information environments where selective examples matter more than institutional nuance. A Chinese media narrative does not need to explain the full complexity of U.S. constitutional law. It only needs to show that the U.S. president labeled war-powers dissent unpatriotic. That example is simple, repeatable, and politically useful.

For U.S. diplomats and analysts, the problem is therefore not only how to defend the war-powers system. It is how to defend the distinction between the behavior of a political leader and the principles of a constitutional order. That distinction is analytically valid, but it becomes harder to communicate when the leader himself collapses policy disagreement into national disloyalty.

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The United States can still argue that its system allows dissent, because the House vote occurred and because Republican lawmakers were able to break with the president (Reuters, 2026a; Grisales, 2026). But Chinese discourse can respond that formal dissent may exist while political rhetoric still brands dissenters as disloyal. This creates a more subtle and difficult challenge: not the disappearance of democratic procedure, but the erosion of democratic language.

8. Policy Implications**8.1 For U.S. policymakers**

U.S. officials should preserve the distinction between opposition to government policy and hostility toward the nation, especially in matters of war and peace. The administration can defend strong executive action without portraying congressional oversight as disloyal. Maintaining this distinction is essential if Washington wants its democracy messaging abroad to remain credible.

8.2 For Congress

Congress should frame war-powers oversight as constitutional patriotism, not partisan obstruction. The strongest response to loyalty-based attacks is not merely to deny disloyalty, but to affirm that limiting unauthorized war is part of Congress's constitutional responsibility. The statutory language of the War Powers Resolution supports this framing because it emphasizes the collective judgment of Congress and the president, rather than unilateral executive discretion (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, n.d.-a).

8.3 For U.S. strategic communication

U.S. strategic communication should treat the government–nation distinction as a general principle, not as a tool applied only to competitors. Washington should avoid defending foreign dissent as legitimate while tolerating domestic rhetoric that casts constitutional dissent as betrayal. If the United States argues that criticism of the Chinese government is not hostility toward China, it must also demonstrate that criticism of U.S. government policy is not hostility toward the United States.

8.4 For China analysts

China analysts should monitor how Chinese official media, semi-official commentators, and nationalist influencers use the episode in broader narratives about U.S. double standards. The key issue is not whether Chinese discourse claims that U.S. institutions have collapsed, but whether it uses the episode to argue that U.S. liberal principles are selectively applied.

8.5 For allied governments

Allied governments should watch whether U.S. war-powers disputes remain within the language of constitutional procedure or move further into loyalty politics. The issue is not only whether the president can sustain military action against Iran, but whether congressional oversight is treated as legitimate. This affects alliance confidence, crisis coordination, and the perceived reliability of U.S. commitments.

Policy Brief**9. Watchpoints**

Several indicators should be monitored in the coming weeks.

First, whether the Senate advances, delays, or blocks a final parallel war-powers measure. The Senate's earlier 50–47 procedural vote suggests that congressional resistance is not confined to the House (Reuters, 2026d).

Second, whether additional Republican lawmakers publicly distance themselves from the Iran campaign. The June House vote already showed limited but meaningful Republican defection (Reuters, 2026a; New York Post, 2026b).

Third, whether the White House continues to describe congressional oversight in loyalty-based language. Continued use of “unpatriotic” or similar terms would indicate that the administration is institutionalizing a loyalty-politics frame (New York Post, 2026a).

Fourth, whether Chinese official media, party-linked commentators, or nationalist influencers amplify the episode as evidence of U.S. hypocrisy.

Fifth, whether U.S. diplomats adjust their China-facing messaging to preserve the government–nation distinction while acknowledging domestic controversy.

Sixth, whether the Iran negotiation track is affected by perceptions that Trump's domestic authority is weakening. If Iran interprets the congressional vote as evidence of declining U.S. political stamina, it may be more likely to delay, raise demands, or insist on sequencing that prioritizes ceasefire and sanctions relief.

10. Limitations

This brief focuses on the rhetorical and strategic communications implications of Trump's response to the Iran war-powers vote. It does not claim that the episode alone proves institutional breakdown, determines U.S. Iran policy, or fundamentally changes U.S.–China ideological competition.

The House vote itself demonstrates that congressional constraint remains active. The concern is not the disappearance of U.S. institutions, but the possibility that presidential rhetoric can recode institutional restraint as disloyalty.

The China-related implications are also probabilistic. The episode creates a usable counter-narrative for Chinese political discourse, but Chinese official media, policy analysts, nationalist commentators, and public audiences may deploy or interpret it differently. Further assessment would require monitoring Chinese official statements, state media coverage, and social media amplification over time.

Finally, the U.S. government–nation distinction remains analytically valid even when political rhetoric contradicts it. The issue is not that one presidential statement erases the U.S. constitutional tradition of dissent, but that it weakens the credibility of U.S. external messaging when Washington asks others to separate criticism of government from hostility toward the nation.

Policy Brief**Conclusion**

Trump's attack on supporters of the Iran war-powers resolution illustrates a broader problem in contemporary U.S. politics: the conversion of constitutional disagreement into loyalty conflict. The immediate issue is presidential war authority; the deeper issue is whether patriotism remains compatible with institutional restraint.

For China-related discourse, the episode is especially consequential. U.S. external messaging has often depended on separating government from nation and policy criticism from anti-national sentiment. Trump's rhetoric moves in the opposite direction: it fuses support for presidential war policy with patriotism and treats constitutional dissent as national disloyalty. If constitutional checks are repeatedly portrayed as betrayal, the United States will find it harder to defend abroad the distinction it asks others to accept—that a nation is larger than its government, and patriotism is not the same as obedience to power.

The most precise judgment is not that U.S. democracy has failed. It is that U.S. democracy is producing institutional restraint while presidential rhetoric makes that restraint easier for adversaries to portray as hypocrisy, fragmentation, or disloyalty. The distinction is therefore not only a domestic constitutional issue, but also a strategic communications liability in China-related political discourse.

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