

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

China's grip on pharmaceutical drugs is a national security issue

By **Anna G. Eshoo** and **Adam B. Schiff**

September 10, 2019 at 6:10 p.m. EDT

Anna G. Eshoo, a Democrat, represents California in the House. She chairs the subcommittee on health and is a member of the Energy and Commerce Committee. Adam B. Schiff, a Democrat, also represents California in the House. He chairs the House Intelligence Committee.

If you take a pill every day to treat high blood pressure or high cholesterol, you probably don't spend much time thinking about where those drugs come from or what you would do if your pharmacy suddenly couldn't fill your prescription. But when it comes to the sources of their prescription drugs, what Americans don't know can hurt them.

Most of the drugs Americans take — as much as 90 percent — are generics. But before such drugs arrive at pharmacies in pill form, they start as active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). China now dominates that market globally. And though India is a large manufacturer of the finished product along with China, Indian companies get 80 percent of their ingredients from China.

AD

President Trump's trade war with China shows no signs of abating, and tensions with China over human rights abuses in Xinjiang province, Hong Kong and elsewhere are increasing. Additional flash points, such as China's aggressive and illegal actions in the South China Sea and its belligerent posture toward Taiwan, could further sour the relationship. We need to plan for the possibility of a sustained period of antagonistic relations with the world's second-largest economy.

If relations decline further, the Chinese government could look for "pressure points" where it can wield outside leverage or force a change of U.S. policy. Pharmaceutical ingredients could be such a vulnerability: By cutting back their supply or manipulating prices, China could cause pharmaceutical costs to surge. Or worse, we could experience shortages.

In the coming weeks, we are planning to hold joint committee hearings on these issues to shine a light on the problem and to develop bipartisan solutions. We need to think of pharmaceuticals as what they are for millions of Americans: a critical good that we literally can't live without. It's unacceptable to become fully dependent on any single foreign country for those goods — all the more so when it's China.

Read more:

AD

[Robert J. Samuelson: Political pressures rolled back globalization before. It can happen again.](#)

[The Post's View: We're finally getting some accountability for the opioid crisis — long after victims are dead](#)

[Adam B. Schiff: An open letter to my Republican colleagues](#)

[Letters to the Editor: The truth about prescription drug prices](#)

[The Post's View: Americans need to know the whole truth about the opioid crisis](#)