



Charting China's plummeting popularity around the world

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There's simply no denying it any longer: Beijing has an image problem. Half a year into the coronavirus pandemic, traditional views of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a constructive global actor have plummeted precipitously around the world, while suspicions about China's strategic intentions are on the rise.

That's the main finding of a new poll just released by the prestigious Pew Research Center. The study, which surveyed global attitudes about China in 14 separate nations between June and August of this year, paints a picture of an international environment that is increasingly opposed to Chinese government policies and hostile to Beijing's global overtures.

In Australia, unfavorable views of China have risen by double digits since last year, and are now shared by a staggering 81% of the population. That is perhaps understandable, given the island nation's geographic proximity to the PRC and the extent to which China has expanded its political and economic footprint there in recent years. Yet, Australia's attitudes are far from unique.

The study notes that in the United Kingdom, where China's national tech giant, Huawei, had previously made major inroads, "around three-quarters now see the country in a negative light." Roughly the same percentage of the public in the United States (73%), South Korea (75%), France (70%), Germany (71%), the Netherlands (73%) and Canada (73%) are now deeply suspicious of — or express negative views about — the PRC.

The reversal is nothing short of stunning. For the better part of the past two decades, the prevailing view among policymakers in Washington and assorted European capitals was that it was possible to transform the Chinese Communist Party into a "responsible stakeholder" through sustained economic and political engagement. That idea, however, increasingly appears to be falling by the wayside, as more and more nations gravitate to the conclusion that the Chinese government isn't simply seeking a seat at the international table, but wants to overturn it altogether.

The global coronavirus pandemic has accelerated this perception dramatically. In line with the principle that "the best defense is a good offense," China responded to the outbreak of the health crisis this spring with a massive disinformation campaign designed to obscure the origin of the virus and its own culpability in its spread. At the same time, Beijing revived its concept of a "health silk road," using it to peddle personal protective equipment and associated goods to countries struggling with the pandemic.

Neither strategy, however, appears to have had the success that Chinese President Xi Jinping and other leaders were hoping for. The aggressive, confrontational diplomatic style increasingly adopted by Chinese officials (colloquially known as "wolf warrior diplomacy") has ruffled more than a few foreign feathers, while the PRC's health policy offensive has been viewed with deep suspicion by officials abroad who have concluded that the Chinese government is simultaneously playing the role of arsonist and firefighter — providing remedies to a pandemic of its own making.

The new Pew findings are a resounding confirmation of these trends. "A median of 78%" of publics surveyed, the study notes, have little to no confidence that Mr. Xi and his government will "do the right thing regarding world affairs." "This lack of confidence ... is at historic highs in every country for which trend data is available except Japan and Spain," and in most "has grown by double digits since last year," it details.

That effectively debunks the notion that Beijing enjoys the upper hand in its unfolding "great power competition" with the West. The outstanding question now is whether Washington can parlay the negative views of China that now predominate in a growing number of global capitals into a truly competitive strategy by which to balance and contain Beijing on the world stage. On that score, at least, the jury is still out.