



Biden has a Mandate to Compete with China

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Will he or won't he? Since the very start of President Biden's term in office, speculation has swirled about whether his administration — which is now busy reshaping U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Europe — will stay the course when it comes to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The indicators are mixed. During its tenure, the Trump administration made the idea of “great power competition” with the PRC a central tenet of its foreign policy, codifying it in multiple national level documents and strategic directives. President Biden, in turn, has declared publicly that the United States needs to pursue “long-term strategic competition” with China. But lingering worries remain that the White House, faced with competing strategic priorities, will back away from such a commitment in order to secure Beijing's cooperation on issues such as climate change or a new nuclear deal with Iran.

Notably, however, such horse-trading would run counter to the will of the American people, who are now more inclined than ever to view China as an adversary and competitor. That's the main takeaway from a new poll examining American attitudes toward China just released by Gallup.

The survey of over 1,000 adults, which took place in February 2021, found massive declines in positive perceptions of the PRC on both sides of the American political aisle. Among Republicans, who tend to view China with more suspicion, just 10 percent had favorable views of China — a 13 percent drop over 2020 figures. But China has declined in popularity among Democrats as well; the Gallup survey found that only 27 percent of Democrats now view the PRC favorably, as compared to 35 percent last year.

Overall, the trend line is pronounced — and striking. With just 20 percent expressing favorability, Americans have the lowest opinion of China since the two countries normalized relations in 1979.

The reasons for the decline are not hard to discern. Over the past year, revelations regarding a host of Chinese misdeeds — from massive disinformation relating to the origins of the coronavirus to mounting evidence of horrific abuses of its Uyghur Muslim minority and draconian crackdown on political freedoms in Hong Kong — have served to profoundly sour global audiences on the PRC. Americans are no outliers in this regard, as the latest Gallup figures serve to confirm.

But is China truly a priority, as many now contend? Another poll of American public opinion, this one from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, provides at least some of the answers to this question. That study, released in early 2021, found that Republicans view China as an overriding geopolitical concern by a wide margin (63 percent), as do more than half (53 percent) of independents. For Democrats, by contrast, geopolitical concerns about China are superceded by issues like racial and economic inequality. Nevertheless, even here, the trend line is apparent. Overall, China ranked third on a list of the “top seven critical threats” confronting the United States today, ahead of international terrorism and global economic problems.

These polling figures should propel administration officials to reevaluate their working assumptions about how Americans see China. Prior to joining the Biden administration as National Security Advisor, for instance, Jake Sullivan co-authored a report for the Carnegie Endowment in which he posited that great power competition with China “was not at the forefront of the minds of most Coloradans, Nebraskans, Ohioans, or Americans in general.” Sullivan and his co-authors went on to speculate that, when China comes to mind, most voters think of unfair trade and investment practices, and “are not inclined to view the geopolitical rivalry as an organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy.”

Perhaps they were correct at the time. But more recent polling suggests that a fundamental shift in thinking is occurring among the American electorate. Public perceptions of China have plummeted over the past year not primarily because of economic exploitation, but because of a global health catastrophe — and, significantly, Americans seem to be drawing their own conclusions about Beijing's trustworthiness. That's why, back in October, a Pew Research Center survey found that 77 percent of Americans have no confidence that Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping will do the right thing in world affairs, up a staggering 50 percent from the year prior.

As President Biden and his foreign policy team begin to formulate their approach to China in earnest, these figures should be deeply instructive. They indicate that the White House has a domestic mandate for a serious national strategy to counter and contain China, should the Administration decide to pursue one.

NOTE: This post has been updated from the original to correct the name of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

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