



In the War for Global Opinion, China Is Winning

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These days, to say China isn't popular in Washington is something of an understatement. The past several years have seen our dominant view of that country change dramatically. More and more, U.S. officials and ordinary Americans are gravitating away from the notion that China can be a constructive actor on the world stage, and toward the idea that Beijing has become a serious strategic competitor (and perhaps even an adversary)—not just of the United States, but of the Western liberal order more broadly.

That realization is dawning among key American partners, as well. Britons, Australians, and publics in numerous other developed nations now hold profoundly negative views of China, as a Pew Research Center poll released this summer recently highlighted.

A great deal of this shift can be attributed to China's increasingly aggressive foreign policy maneuvers under the guidance of its current president (and Communist Party secretary), Xi Jinping. Its malfeasance and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed significantly, too. And more and more Western nations have become worried about the risks of extensive dependence on a country that has proven itself to be an intrusive, and manipulative, economic partner.

But this new consensus is far from universal. Throughout what is collectively known as the "Global South" (encompassing developing parts of the world like Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia), China is now more popular than the United States.

Take the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, where China significantly outstrips the United States in terms of positive sentiment, as documented in a recent poll carried out by Princeton University's Arab Barometer. "Across MENA, China remains more popular than the U.S.," the study, published in July, found. "Among the nine countries surveyed, only in Morocco is the U.S. more popular overall than China. In the remainder, China tends to be significantly more favored than the U.S."

Specifically, in seven of the nine countries polled by the survey (Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Libya, and "Palestine," the latter of which Princeton erroneously labels a nation-state), more than half of respondents had either a very or somewhat positive view of China. In Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia, just over half of respondents expressed favorable views of China. In Morocco, Mauritania, and Sudan, the percentages were even higher: 64%, 63%, and 60%, respectively. By contrast, positive views of the U.S. prevailed in only four of the nine—Morocco (69%), Sudan (57%), Jordan (51%), and Mauritania (50%).

Nor is the MENA region an outlier. Across other parts of the developing world (like Africa), China today is more popular than the U.S., surveys by groups like Afrobarometer and the Ichikowitz Family Foundation reveal.

What accounts for this discrepancy? The most immediate answer is presence. "Quite simply, the Chinese are there," says Eric Olander, editor-in-chief of the *China-Global South Project*, an independent multimedia organization that tracks China's activities across the developing world. In places like Africa, "the infrastructure is being built by China, and the private-sector activity is very robust. The benefits are there for everyone to see."

The United States, meanwhile, is markedly absent from the discussion. "The United States has the potential to do all this stuff, but the Americans just aren't showing up," says Olander. "This is what we hear consistently throughout the Global South. Publics there want to see more engagement from the United States. They want that competition. But the Americans just aren't showing up in any meaningful way." And because they are not, countries in the developing world are taking great pains to avoid having to take sides in the unfolding geopolitical competition between Beijing and Washington.

For U.S. policymakers, these data points should matter a great deal. Within the Beltway, officials have come to believe that the intellectual case they are now making about the need to compete with China is ironclad and persuasive. But, as the numbers bear out, that's far from the case.

In other words, for America's perspective to gain resonance, Washington needs to do a much better job of convincing less prosperous nations that partnering with Beijing is, in fact, a bad bet. That, in turn, requires not just talking about the dangers of the Chinese model, but actually providing viable economic, technological, and political alternatives to it.