



Does the World Love America Again?

Doug Bandow

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Joe Biden is president and the world appears to love America again. At least, that's what the residents of 16 nations recently polled told us.

It's been a long four years. Donald Trump's awful reputation dragged down America's image throughout most of the world. There were exceptions, of course, but most people in most countries disliked and distrusted America's 45th president. Both his behavior and policies offended. The election of almost anyone else ensured a popularity rebound, bringing the U.S. back up as well.

Reported the Pew Research Center: "The election of Joe Biden as president has led to a dramatic shift in America's international image. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, publics around the world held the United States in low regard, with most opposed to his foreign policies. This was especially true among key American allies and partners. Now, a new Pew Research Center survey of 16 publics finds a significant uptick in ratings for the US, with strong support for Biden and several of his major policy initiatives."

Overall, the favorable view of America went from 34 percent to 62 percent. Belief that the president "would do the right thing" jumped from 17 percent to 72 percent. Most countries registered similar improvements, though Pew cautioned: "Still, attitudes toward the US vary considerably across the publics surveyed. For instance, only about half in Singapore and Australia have a favorable opinion of the US, and just 42% of New Zealanders hold this view. And while 61% see the US favorably in Taiwan, this is actually down slightly from 68% in a 2019 poll."

Although most countries showed a sharp upsurge from 2020, several of them, including Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, and United Kingdom, remained down from 2000. The numbers obviously ranged widely, reflecting the impact of both personalities and issues. Donald

Trump was not the first US president to suffer foreign abuse. George W. Bush of Iraq War infamy also was unpopular, seen, correctly, as someone who was not quite qualified for office, pushed a disastrous policy, and vilified governments which refused to play sycophant. In contrast, Biden essentially followed in Barack Obama's footsteps.

Explained Pew: "As is the case with views of the United States as a whole, confidence in US presidents has shifted dramatically over the past two decades, especially in Western Europe. In Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and France – four nations Pew Research Center has surveyed consistently – ratings for Bush and Trump were similarly low during their presidencies, while this year confidence in Biden is fairly similar to the ratings Obama received while in office."

If one was talking of, say, Montenegro's or New Zealand's prime minister, personality wouldn't matter. Even an ogre in either position couldn't do much to harm anyone else, at least. Most likely, the rest of the world wouldn't even notice what they were doing. However, as Trump demonstrated, when the most powerful person on earth is, well, "suboptimal" in qualification and temperament, a lot could and likely would go wrong. Consider: today someone who doesn't seem to be entirely there mentally vastly outdistances Trump in reputation.

Observed Pew: "Biden's high ratings are tied in part to positive assessments of his personal characteristics, and here again the contrast with Trump is stark. Looking at 12 countries polled during the first year of both their presidencies, a median of 77% describe Biden as well-qualified to be president, compared with 16% who felt this way about Trump. Few think of Biden as arrogant or dangerous, while large majorities applied those terms to Trump. Assessments of the two leaders are more similar when it comes to being a strong leader, although even on this measure, Biden gets much more positive reviews than his predecessor."

Also important, though, is policy. In this regard, the comparison is a bit more complex. No doubt, Trump lost some foreign support because he often targeted foreigners. For instance, banning travel from some countries. Much worse, he sought to ruin economies and even starve populations in several countries – consider the administration's cruel yet failed "maximum pressure" campaigns against the peoples of Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. This bad idea harmed many while achieving little. On other occasions Trump trashed multilateral policies with widespread support – such as funding the World Health Organization and acting on climate change.

Another important issue is US subsidies for other governments and peoples. Trump enjoyed disproportionate support from the Israeli and Saudi governments in large part because he did their bidding, as well as opened the treasury to the first and armory to the second. For Trump, American interests were secondary – if considered at all.

Moreover, Pew pointed to Europe: "Biden has also made clear that he plans to strengthen America's commitment to the NATO alliance. As the current poll shows, NATO is viewed positively by the member states included in the survey." Alas, the alliance acts as defense welfare for wealthy and populous nations which prefer to have Uncle Sam underwrite their military burdens. For instance, turning the national movie set of Montenegro into a US defense dependent does not help Americans. Biden's willingness to treat Uncle Sam as Uncle Sap naturally strengthens international support for him.

One poll finding offered some unintended hilarity. Explained Pew: "Although Biden's more multilateral approach to foreign policy is welcomed, there is still a widespread perception that the US mainly looks after its own interests in world affairs. More than half in most of the publics surveyed say the US does not take their interests into account when it is making foreign policy decisions, although fewer feel this way in Japan, Greece and Germany."

Washington's lack of concern is obvious, but the notion that America's allies, and particularly the Europeans – think France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, for instance – are selfless guardians of the global public interest should unleash paroxysms of laughter. Which French king, emperor, or president subordinated his nation's interest to that of the undefined and unnamed "international community"? Rome was first in line when lobbying the European Union for extra Euros help to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic: in Europe "solidarity" always seems to mean the responsible bail out the profligate. Helping the global poor and needy does not appear to top British Prime Minister Boris Johnson "to do" list.

Biden would face quite an international challenge even if political antagonisms weren't so high at home. And his attempt to conciliate rather than antagonize redounds to America's benefit. Minimizing conduct which turns people, governments, and nations hostile should be an obvious practice for any administration.

However, good policy should not be sacrificed to curry foreign popularity. And Trump got one critical principle right: wealthy, populous allies should pay their own way. Alliances should enable the US to cooperate with countries to better achieve common objectives. Alliances should not mean America doing for other nations what they should do for themselves. Such as pay for their own defense.

After all, Washington is rather busy. It is defending Europe. Defending Asia. Defending the Middle East. Protecting and rebuilding failed states in the Mideast and, until now, at least, Central Asia as well. Sending troops hither and yon throughout Africa. Threatening states and movements in South America. Generally telling most everyone on earth how to behave. As well as bankrupting itself at home with wild deficit spending.

Now would be a good time to stop making other nations' responsibilities America's own. Of course, expecting other peoples to care for themselves might reduce Biden's popularity abroad.

Joe Biden is taking America's relationships with its allies back in time. He is right to desire positive relations with friendly states and make a decided effort to get along with foreign governments. However, he should not confuse social engineering with good policy or sacrifice fundamental US interests to generate warm foreign feelings. It is more important for him to do what is right than what is popular.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.