

## China's Coronavirus Policy Will Impact the U.S. Presidential Election

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Normally, foreign policy does not play a large role in U.S. presidential elections. The exception is when the country is mired in a major, increasingly unpopular war, as it was in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. Such situations can cost incumbent presidents or their designated successors dearly, greatly strengthening the opposition party's prospects. Otherwise, though, domestic issues are the dominant focus of campaigns.

2020 is shaping-up to be one of the few exceptions. Although the public may regard the U.S. military presence in such places as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria with growing weariness and annoyance, it is not a high-profile grievance. The rest of Washington's foreign policy generates the usual lack of public interest—with one exception: the mounting annoyance with China. The coronavirus pandemic has emerged as a catalyst for greater public suspicions about Beijing's behavior and motives. Increasingly, those suspicions are leading to outright hostility—especially among American conservatives. That development could significantly boost President Trump's re-election bid and create a major disadvantage for (virtually certain) Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

An increasingly prominent narrative in the United States is that not only did the pandemic originate in China, but that Chinese officials withheld key information for weeks that could have enabled other countries to adopt measures that would have greatly impeded the spread of the deadly virus. Key conservative opinion leaders, such as Fox News host Sean Hannity and Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR), harp on that narrative constantly, and it has even gained a sizable presence among mainstream experts and media outlets. Conservatives routinely refer to the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus," or even the "Chinese virus," in an effort to whip-up greater public resentment against Beijing.

President Trump's decision in late January to greatly restrict travel from China places him in an excellent position to tout the importance of that move in preventing the coronavirus outbreak in the United States from being worse than it has been. Leading Democrats now assert that the Trump administration was slow to understand the seriousness of the emerging pandemic and develop adequate countermeasures (such as sufficient testing supplies and procedures). But their own reaction to Trump's imposition of the China travel restrictions undercuts their

argument. Biden and other major Democratic figures condemned Trump's move as a manifestation of hysteria and xenophobia.

As the pandemic exploded, they quickly changed the nature of their criticism, and the generally accommodating news media in the United States downplayed the party's initial position on the issue. However, Trump and his allies are already working to publicize the blunder. Biden is likely to find his early comments coming back to haunt him when Republican campaign ads flood the airways as the election draws closer.

Ill-considered statements from some PRC officials have infuriated a growing number of Americans and make Biden's task even more difficult. Attempting to shift the blame for the global pandemic onto the United States, the Chinese government and state media began to promote the ugly allegation that Washington may have initiated the pandemic as part of a bioweapons program. Stories appeared in China's media citing the attendance of U.S. Army personnel at athletic games in Wuhan in October 2019, shortly before the first signs of the coronavirus began to appear. A furious Secretary of State Mike Pompeo denounced the Chinese government for making such allegations. Beijing's propaganda offensive also highlights China's global leadership in combatting the virus, while asserting or implying that U.S. leadership and assistance has been lacking.

If he criticizes the Trump administration's international leadership, Biden runs the risk of appearing to echo Chinese propaganda. At the very least, adopting that line of argument will be very difficult. Even before the coronavirus outbreak, influential Republicans and pro-GOP journalists sought to cast suspicions about the nature and extent of the Biden family's economic interests in China. Critics argued that Joe Biden's son, Hunter, was not only implicated in dubious connections and practices in Ukraine involving the Burisma energy company, but that his links to China were even more wide-ranging and suspect.

It matters less whether such allegations are true or not than whether they will be effective politically. Trump has repeatedly emphasized that he wants good relations with Beijing, but that he's determined to stand up to PRC leaders regarding what he considers unfair Chinese policies on trade, intellectual property rights, currency issues, and other matters. He has systematically cultivated the image of being a tough negotiator determined to protect American interests. In reality, he has few major achievements to show for his efforts. Even the Phase 1 trade agreement with China was just a modest gain for U.S. objectives.

While the substantive policy achievements may be meager, the image of toughness toward China is likely to prove useful during the presidential campaign. Trump has positioned himself to go on the offensive. Conversely, Biden is not in a good position to portray himself in that way. His lengthy track record is one of favoring robust trade and investment relations with China on terms that critics see as too accommodating to Beijing's preferences. Indeed, Biden may be vulnerable to allegations that his attitudes about relations with China are excessively solicitous and perhaps even corrupt. It remains to be seen just how important the issue of U.S. relations with China will be in the 2020 election, but whatever their importance, Trump certainly appears to the beneficiary.

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