American Public Opinion toward China Turns Hostile

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Two major opinion surveys taken in April reveal the depth of the American public's anger toward the People's Republic of China (PRC). Annoyance with Beijing had been building gradually in recent years because of trade disputes, revulsion at China's human rights record, and other issues. But the perception that PRC authorities had been insufficiently transparent (if not thoroughly deceptive) about the origin and spread of the coronavirus greatly intensified that trend. Americans hold China responsible for the pandemic and deeply resent Beijing's apparent efforts to shift blame onto the United States.

A representative sample of 1,993 American adults the Harris organization polled between April 3 and April 5 showed that only 23 percent believed that Chinese President Xi Jinping was a trustworthy source of information regarding the Covid-19 outbreak. Moreover, there wasn't a great difference in the views of Republicans and Democrats. A stunning 90 percent of Republicans said the Chinese government was responsible for the spread of the virus. Democrats were just modestly less, with 67 percent blaming Beijing. The public's hostility carried over into other issues, thereby generating support for a tough stance against China, especially regarding trade policy.

A Pew Research Center survey of Americans taken in late April produced equally ominous findings. The results showed that 66 percent of people had negative views of China, including 62 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents and 72 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. A mere 26 percent of respondents expressed a favorable attitude toward China. That was the highest percentage of negative views toward China recorded since Pew began asking the question in 2005.

Such public hostility is already having a noticeable impact on politics in the United States, a development that is likely to increase as the November presidential and congressional elections draw closer. Both major parties are vying to see which one can better establish the image of being tough on China and win the battle for that reservoir of public anger at Beijing.

The Trump campaign is running radio and television ads blaming Xi Jinping's regime for the coronavirus pandemic and emphasizing the U.S. administration's tough stance toward the PRC on that issue, trade negotiations, and other matters. President Trump and his supporters also have taken to labeling their opponent as "Beijing Biden", with all that such a nasty slur implies. A pro-Trump political action committee, America First Action, began running ads in three political

"battleground states" contending that the former vice president has had a long, too-cozy relationship with the PRC government. A spokesman for the PAC stated later that Biden is "a swamp dinosaur for nearly a half century. He's been an enabler and appeaser of the Chinese Communist Party for years, the regime that's now infected the world and crashed the global economy." One ad, titled "Stop China, Stop Joe Biden", alleged that Biden has "led the charge" for 47 years to make China "great."

The response of the Biden camp to such ads and the China issue in general is even more revealing about the calculations shrewd political professionals are making regarding the nature of American public opinion toward China. Biden and his associates are adopting a stunningly hard stance—even trying to "out-hawk" Trump and the Republicans. The presumptive Democratic nominee's initial reaction to the ads suggested that he and his campaign advisers knew he was extremely vulnerable to charges of being "soft" on the PRC. In mid-April a pro-Biden super PAC, American Bridge, ran a television spot ad depicting Trump as a stooge for Beijing. "Everyone knew they lied about the virus—China," the narrator declares against the backdrop of a fluttering Chinese flag, "[yet] President Trump gave China his trust." A subsequent official Biden campaign ad explicitly sought to portray Biden as tougher than Trump toward China. It even accused Trump of having "rolled over for the Chinese" during the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak. "Trump praised the Chinese 15 times in January and February as the coronavirus spread across the world," the ad sneeringly emphasized.

The Biden camp has not abandoned that approach, even though some progressive supporters who advocate comprehensive engagement with China express strong criticism of the negativity. A writer in the left-leaning New Republic spoke for many of his progressive ideological compatriots when he accused Biden of running an "incoherent, China-bashing attack on Trump."

But the mere fact that a long-time globalist like Joe Biden feels it necessary to adopt an extremely hardline, anti-China message speaks volumes about the American public's current opinion regarding the PRC. That pervasive animosity is not likely to wane in the foreseeable future. In addition to the very real possibility that the China issue will have a major impact on the results of the U.S. election in November, the hostility may well constrain options for policy toward China regardless of who wins that election. The surge of shrill accusations of "Russia collusion" directed at Donald Trump following the 2016 election appears to have been a factor that pushed him to adopt a surprisingly hardline policy toward Moscow. Even if Biden becomes the next occupant of the Oval Office, he is likely to encounter stiff opposition to efforts to repair the tattered bilateral relationship with Beijing. The prospect of a full-blown cold war between the United States and China, pushed by an angry American populace, can no longer be ruled out.

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