



## Allied Governments May Support US Neo-Cold War Policies, but Allied Populations Don't

Ted Galen Carpenter

July 6, 2021

Joe Biden's administration has made mobilizing an allied "common front" against both Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) a high priority. To a significant extent, Biden has merely continued the policies that Donald Trump put in place. Despite the news media's portrayal of Trump as a "Putin puppet," U.S. policy toward Russia became more, not less, confrontational during his presidency, with general approval from allied governments. Trump also pressured the European and East Asian allies to approve a firm protest and impose some sanctions against Beijing for its crackdown on Hong Kong and continuing domestic human rights violations. That effort largely failed, and Biden has experienced only modestly greater success in enlisting the allies to confront the PRC on such issues as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

The recent G-7 and NATO summit communiqués, especially the latter, did embrace hardline policies toward Russia, a step that clearly pleased the Biden administration. Provisions that the summit participants adopted with respect to the PRC, though, were milder, albeit more confrontational than the language used in previous communiqués.

Even if Washington is able to entice or cajole allied governments eventually to endorse a belligerent stance toward Moscow and a de facto containment policy toward Beijing, substantial evidence exists that the populations in those countries support neutrality. That gap between rulers and ruled could cause major problems for proponents of neo-cold war policies directed against Russia and the PRC.

The latest sign of trouble for the new crop of cold warriors emerges from a recent public opinion survey in Australia by the Lowry Institute. Beijing's mounting human rights abuses and abrasive

international behavior has turned Australian attitudes toward China increasingly negative. Nevertheless, while Australians were highly critical of the PRC on almost every issue they were asked about in the poll, a majority did not want Australia involved in a military conflict between China and the United States. 57% said Australia should remain neutral in such a conflict, well above the 41% who believed that Australia should support the United States, its treaty ally.

Moreover, there was a dramatic age difference based on age with respect to that question: a mere 21% of those age 18-29 said that Australia should support the United States in a conflict. A much more robust 58% of respondents over 60 believed their country should do so. That difference does not bode well for Australian backing as the years go on.

An earlier public opinion poll in Europe found even more worrisome results from the standpoint of US policy. The survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, covered 60,000 people in 14 European Union countries. When asked "Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and China?" the results were lopsided against backing America. Only 24 percent of respondents in Poland favored supporting Washington, while 54 percent chose neutrality. The pro-U.S. position was 19 percent in the Czech Republic, 17 percent in Romania, and 13 percent in Hungary. The outcome in Washington's more venerable NATO security partners in Western Europe was equally bad. Only 18 percent of French respondents, 20 percent of Italians, and 10 percent of Germans chose solidarity with the United States against the PRC.

If the results regarding policy toward China were not enough to dishearten hawks in the United States, the numbers regarding policy toward Russia were even more depressing. When asked "Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and Russia?" the majority of respondents in all 14 E.U. countries said "neither." Percentages expressing pro-U.S. sentiments typically languished in the teens or low twenties. That situation is especially significant, since both Washington and NATO are adopting ever more hardline policies toward Vladimir Putin's government, and NATO military exercises (war games) near the borders of the Russian Federation are increasing in both frequency and size. An armed clash between Russian and NATO forces because of Ukraine or some other flashpoint is no longer a far-fetched notion.

Washington's neo-cold war stance toward Russia and China appears to be increasingly unsustainable. The Biden administration has been able to get most US allies on board for such a policy with respect to Russia, and is obtaining some movement in that direction by many of those same governments (albeit with noticeable reluctance). But the populations in nearly all allied nations seem have no stomach for a confrontation with Russia or China. If an armed conflict erupts between the United States and either the PRC or Russia, allied governments risk repudiation by their own furious publics by backing Washington.

It is predictable that at least some of those governments will decline to commit political suicide, and will instead leave the United States to face its adversary alone. US leaders need to adopt a much more cautious, realistic estimate of sustained allied support in the event of trouble. At the moment, they are very far out on an increasingly shaky policy tree limb.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs.*