



ALLIANCE POLICY COORDINATION BRIEF

JANUARY 2021

# U.S. Perceptions of China in the Pandemic Era and Implications for U.S. Policy

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## China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

How should the risks and opportunities presented by a continually rising, increasingly self-assertive China be addressed? This is a pressing issue for the international community, particularly for the United States and Japan, whose alliance has proactively helped form and maintain the liberal, rules-based international order for the past several decades.

To enhance mutual understanding and encourage effective policymaking, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have convened a small group of U.S. and Japanese scholars to examine the risks and opportunities accompanying China's ascendance. This group includes China specialists, alliance experts, and authorities on trade and security issues in the Asia Pacific.

Led by Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, the group has conducted research and facilitated dialogue since April 2017 through private roundtables and public symposia that seek to further U.S.-Japan cooperation and coordination on China policy. The project examines different perspectives between the alliance members and discusses ways in which Washington and Tokyo can effectively respond to China's rise. An accompanying series of policy briefs explores various China-related risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the areas of regional and international order, trade and technology, security, and foreign relations.

JFIR, together with the project's U.S. team members, wish to thank the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership respectively for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.

—Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, Project Leaders and Co-editors



## Introduction

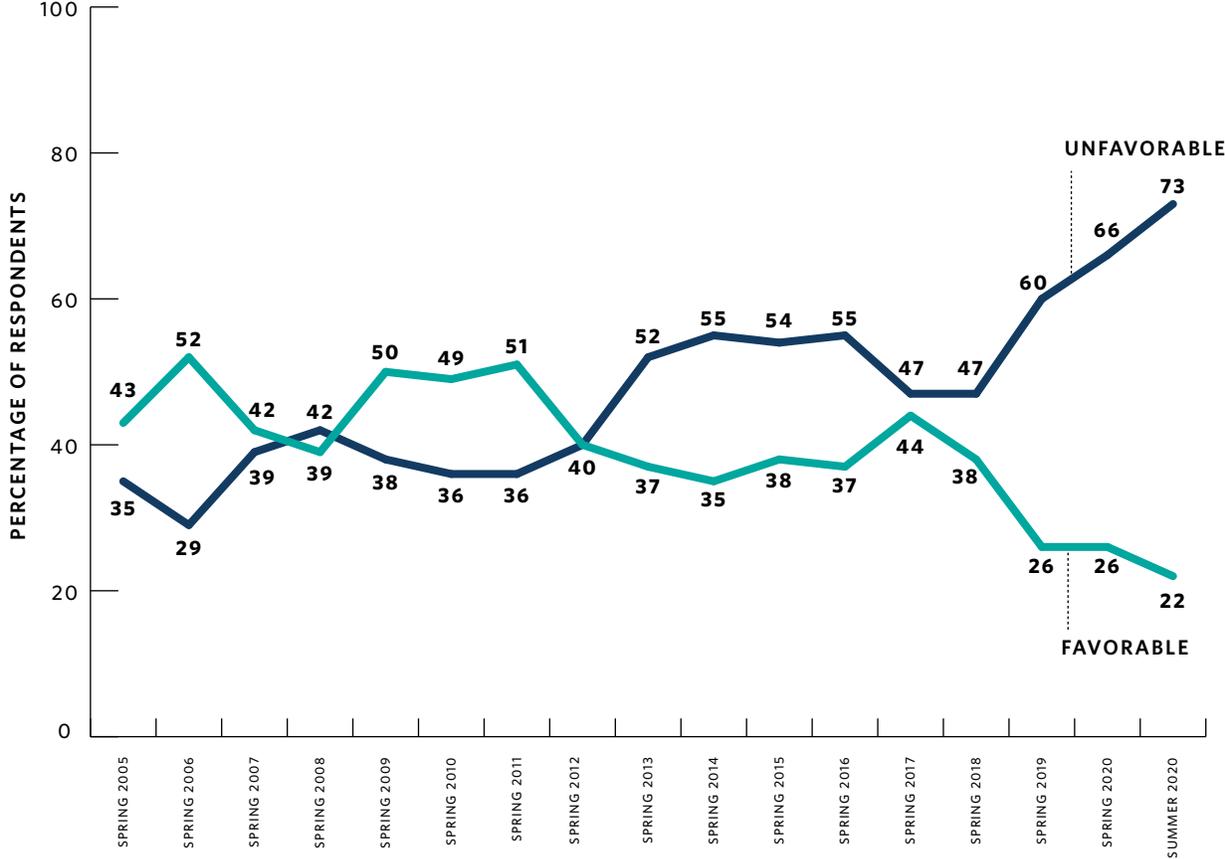
American perceptions of China have plummeted in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, accelerating the steady decline of China's image among ordinary Americans that began around 2018. Public opinion is now more aligned with U.S. elite perceptions of China, which began to deteriorate years earlier due to disappointment with Beijing's growing assertiveness abroad and its authoritarian turn at home. Because the sources of U.S.-China bilateral mistrust are deeply rooted in structural and historical factors beyond the pandemic, American perceptions of China are unlikely to improve significantly in the foreseeable future.

The decline in U.S. sentiments toward China holds significant implications for U.S.-China relations and for U.S. allies. Though President Joe Biden and his administration's China policy will differ strategically and in tone from that of former president Donald Trump, there will not be a complete diplomatic reset or a sweeping reversal of the many hardline China policies enacted by the U.S. Congress and executive branch in recent years. Biden wants to work closely with U.S. allies and partners to shape China's behavior, a position that has sparked both welcome and wariness in some capitals given the diversity of interests and priorities among Washington and even its closest allies. Rallying allies around vital common interests and strengthening comprehensive support for states that face increased pressure from Beijing will be critical for U.S. alliance management and successful policy coordination on China.

## American Views of China

Negative perceptions of China among Americans hit a record high in 2020, with 73 percent of respondents citing unfavorable views of the country in a [survey](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center. Various polls pinpoint 2018, which marked the definitive start of the U.S.-China trade war, as a turning point when views of China began to decline among average Americans. An [annual survey](#) conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, for instance, found that Americans were almost evenly divided on whether they perceived the United States and China as “mostly rivals” or “mostly partners” from the early 2000s until 2018. Just one year later in 2019, the balance shifted starkly with 63 percent of respondents answering that the two countries are “mostly rivals” and only 32 percent responding that the two are “mostly partners” (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1  
**U.S. Public's Declining Views Toward China**



**SOURCE:** "Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19," Pew Research Center, July 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/30/americans-fault-china-for-its-role-in-the-spread-of-covid-19/>

Surveys conducted by Gallup have found a similar pattern with popular opinion of China among U.S. respondents shifting from a slight majority with favorable views (53 percent positive and 45 percent negative) in early 2018 to a more pronounced majority with negative views the following year (57 percent negative and 41 percent positive). The gap widened even more in 2020, with an even stronger majority of respondents (67 percent) expressing negative views of China and only a third of respondents citing a positive view of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Popular American perceptions of China seem to have caught up, so to speak, with U.S. elite perceptions of the country. The views of elites in media, business, and foreign policy circles began souring years earlier, as they grew progressively disenchanted with Beijing’s increasingly authoritarian turn at

home and aggressive behavior abroad, especially since President Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012. Previously, analysts [had puzzled over](#) this apparent [perception gap](#), noting a disconnect between the views of average American citizens and the “establishment elites,” who across partisan lines have been advocating a tougher U.S. approach to China.

In fact, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' annual [foreign policy survey](#), which [polls](#) a wide range of Americans, found that the “development of China as a world power” did not rank among the top five perceived threats to U.S. vital interests until earlier last year. Instead, international terrorism, North Korea and Iran's respective nuclear programs, and cyber attacks consistently have ranked as higher national security concerns in surveys conducted in the previous two years. In 2020, however, China's rise as a world power [was voted](#) the third most critical threat to the United States, coming just behind the coronavirus pandemic and domestic violent extremism. Beijing's mishandling of the pandemic has undoubtedly pushed American perceptions of China to record lows, with a vast majority of those surveyed in the aforementioned [Pew Research Center poll](#)—78 percent to be precise—indicating that the Chinese government's botched initial response to the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan is to be blamed a “great deal” or at least “a fair amount” for the global spread of the virus. Half of respondents stated that the United States “should hold China responsible for the role it played in the outbreak of the coronavirus, even if it means worsening relations with China.”

## Trajectory of U.S.-China Relations

Popular American antipathy toward Beijing is unlikely to moderate anytime soon given that the coronavirus pandemic is projected to disrupt the daily lives of Americans well into 2021 even in the most optimistic of scenarios. More sobering still, the long-term economic, educational, and societal damage associated with the pandemic will continue to challenge the United States and countries around the world for years to come.

Nonetheless, even if one were to set aside the impact of the pandemic, the U.S.-China relationship would remain strained due to long-standing and deeply rooted structural and historical conflicts. For example, the lack of reciprocity in market, diplomatic, and media access to China that has frustrated U.S. business leaders, government officials, and policy experts for years is derivative of China's political and economic systems, which are unlikely to change significantly in the near to mid-term. Similarly, China's aggressive actions in the South and East China Seas; the Taiwan Strait; and within its own borders in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong have alarmed leaders in the United States and elsewhere. In these cases, Beijing's policies are tied to enduring historical disputes and are deemed core interests on which the Chinese Communist Party's legacy and legitimacy rests. China is also

unlikely to stop expanding its military and high-tech capabilities, growing its economic reach, and building critical infrastructure such as 5G networks around the world. In light of such activities, U.S. observers have raised serious concerns about China's growing influence and hard power capabilities and the implications for U.S. national interests and the global balance of power.

## U.S. Actions Under the Trump Administration

A series of U.S. executive and congressional actions have been adopted in recent years to confront the diverse economic, political, and security challenges China poses. In 2018, the Trump administration launched a [trade war](#) with China, citing the need to correct bilateral trade imbalances and Beijing's rampant intellectual property theft. The White House imposed [several sanctions](#) on major Chinese tech companies such as Huawei and ZTE, curbing their access to U.S. markets and technology based on national security concerns and pressuring U.S. allies and friends to do the same. The Trump administration also issued executive orders [banning popular Chinese-owned apps](#) such as WeChat and TikTok from operating in the U.S. market, citing the need to prevent Beijing from potentially exploiting Americans' user data and disseminating propaganda through these platforms.

The Trump administration also aggressively cracked down on Chinese espionage and influence operations within the United States, designating numerous Chinese media outlets and Beijing-funded Confucius Institutes as foreign missions and imposing strict limits on travel and outreach by Chinese diplomats. In July 2020, Trump dramatically closed down the Chinese consulate in Houston, [citing](#) its role in facilitating economic espionage and theft of scientific research. This move came just after the United States banned Chinese graduate students and researchers with ties to China's military from entering and studying in the United States.

Washington has also increased efforts to challenge Beijing's aggressive actions both within China's borders and in its neighborhood through various military and economic measures. For instance, the United States has steadily increased freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea, challenging Beijing's claims to the area's disputed maritime features. Under the Trump administration, dozens of Chinese companies have been added to the U.S. Entity List. This designation restricts their ability to conduct business with U.S. companies for a variety of offenses, including aiding the Chinese military's efforts to construct and [militarize artificial islands](#) in the South China Sea, taking part in [human rights violations in Xinjiang](#), and engaging in [other activities](#) that are "contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States."

The U.S. Congress has also actively passed a number of bills related to China's human rights abuses, including the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in 2019 and the Hong Kong Autonomy Act in 2020. Both of these laws impose sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials and entities responsible for violating Hong Kong's autonomy and committing human rights abuses. While signing the 2020 legislation, Trump issued an executive order revoking Hong Kong's special economic status and banning the export of sensitive technologies to the territory. In 2020, the U.S. Congress also passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, which mandates U.S. government agencies to monitor and report to Congress on China's abuses in Xinjiang and calls for sanctions on Chinese officials involved in the oppression of Uyghurs.

Multiple Taiwan-related bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress over the last two years as well, such as the Taiwan Travel Act, which encourages high-level government exchanges between the United States and Taiwan. Others include the Taiwan International Participation Act and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, which respectively call on the U.S. government to advocate for Taiwan's membership in international organizations and to strengthen Taiwan's diplomatic relations with other partners in the Indo-Pacific region. These pieces of legislation have been accompanied by visits of high-ranking U.S. officials to Taipei in recent months and steady sales of sophisticated weapon systems to Taiwan.

Finally, the United States has rolled out a variety of initiatives like the [Blue Dot Network](#) and the [Clean Network](#) to increase global scrutiny of Chinese infrastructure projects, Chinese firms' access to critical digital networks in other countries, and Beijing's efforts to shape global technology standards. The United States has also elevated multilateral cooperation through mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad, which counts the United States, Japan, India, and Australia as members, and includes high-level dialogues on a range of political, economic, and security-related issues as well as joint military exercises.

### A Changing of the Guards

Despite the transition to the new Biden administration in January 2021, many elements of the policies and initiatives described above are likely to remain in place given the deep mutual distrust and the structurally and historically rooted sources of friction in the U.S.-China relationship. The Biden administration's policy, however, will look different strategically and tactically, with a greater emphasis on placing democratic values front and center in the U.S. approach to foreign policy. The Biden administration has also vowed to work closely with allies and partners and within internation-

al organizations to shape the rules of the road and therefore China's behavior and policy choices. This approach is unlike that of the Trump administration, which largely opted for a go-it-alone approach that was supplemented by select multilateral efforts like the Quad.

Notwithstanding such shifts under the Biden administration, it is quite likely that many of the measures adopted by the previous administration will remain in place for the foreseeable future. This likely will prove true, for instance, of the sanctions imposed on Chinese officials and entities related to human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as well as the restrictions placed on Chinese media companies and diplomats operating in the United States. Biden has not revealed any specifics on how he plans to handle the tariffs imposed on China, and it remains to be seen how his administration will pick up the baton on U.S.-China trade negotiations.

The U.S. Congress is likely to continue a hardline stance toward Beijing, judging by the strong bipartisan support for human rights and Taiwan-related legislation that both houses passed in recent years, often with unanimous or near-unanimous consent. Furthermore, Americans have displayed a robust desire to hold China accountable to its human rights abuses and to support U.S. friends and allies threatened by Beijing.<sup>2</sup> Most Democratic and Republican leaders recognize that some cooperation will be necessary with China, and the Biden administration has highlighted the need to work with Beijing on global issues such as nuclear nonproliferation, climate change, and public health. But operationalizing a relationship that involves simultaneous competition and cooperation will be very difficult in reality, and the default tendency will be to skew toward competition. Naturally, China's response to the next administration and its own policy choices will also be critical for shaping the trajectory of U.S.-China relations.

## Implications for U.S. Allies and Challenges Ahead on Coordination

As unfavorable views of China continue to persist in the United States and bilateral conflicts remain front and center, U.S. allies will be expected to work with Washington to counter the troubling aspects of China's behavior in the years to come. Many of the alliance mechanisms and coordination efforts that came into play in recent years are likely to be strengthened and expanded on. For instance, cooperation among the Quad members and other U.S. partners to help improve oversight and provide alternatives to Chinese infrastructure projects through initiatives like the Blue Dot Network, to coordinate supply chain diversification, and to reduce reliance on the Chinese market will likely remain priorities. There will also be greater calls for U.S. allies and partners to join multilateral efforts to censure China for its human rights abuses; to counter concerning facets of China's diplomatic endeavors at the United Nations; and to check Beijing's efforts to win global endorsements of its policies on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and its other core interests.

Beijing's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic; its shrill, confrontational [wolf warrior diplomacy](#); and its increasingly aggressive actions in Hong Kong, in the East and South China Seas, and along the Sino-Indian border have certainly alarmed and disenchanted many U.S. allies and partners. Yet securing allies' active cooperation on China will require deft U.S. diplomacy given that no state seeks to fully decouple with Beijing. The recently sealed China-EU investment deal is a case in point that [coordination on China policy](#) even with the United States' closest allies who share many of the same democratic values will be neither automatic nor easy.

The challenge for the Biden administration will be to demonstrate to U.S. allies and partners that their cooperation will be sought for critical efforts that serve vital *common* interests and not just to score points in a U.S.-China tit-for-tat. Washington will also need to think seriously about how to comprehensively support and reassure U.S. allies and partners who deepen strategic cooperation with the United States, as they will face greater economic, diplomatic, and military pressure from Beijing.

## About the Author

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## Notes

- 1 Notably, the 2020 survey was conducted in February, before the coronavirus outbreak was designated a global pandemic and before widespread community transmission of the virus in the United States began. A [poll](#) conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in the summer of 2020 also found similar results.
- 2 For U.S. public opinion polling on questions related to defending U.S. allies and partners, see the recently released [survey results](#) from CSIS's Mapping the Future of U.S. China Policy project.



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