

## **Latest Views Around the World of the US**

July 12, 2020

DJ Peterson, PhD, President

Carson Tal, MA, Associate

*Views of Americans about their country tend to be more favorable than views of the US held by elites abroad. To reduce this potential blind spot for US based executives, this brief summarizes views around the world of the rapidly evolving situation in the US. It is based on informal conversations as well as a survey of media and research.*

### Key takeaways

- **Views of the US are often conflated with views of President Donald Trump** and, lately, how he has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and demands for racial justice. Views about the future of the US focus on the outcome of the presidential election in November.
- In early 2017, Longview produced a survey of views on Trump from around the world. Generally speaking, establishment elites in many countries had a low opinion of Trump. They were alarmed at the White House's "America First" stance and snubs of global institutions, countries and leaders, and diplomatic norms. **At the same time, a lot of effort was put into avoiding quarrels with Washington and elites muted their views.**
- Many people originally saw Trump's election as an aberration and thought he would be constrained by the country's highly regarded institutions. This view has changed: Trump is now seen as a reflection of the state of the US and its institutions. **Many hope for a reset should Joe Biden win the presidency**, but there are low expectations that the US will overcome its perceived shortcomings. **Elites want the US to behave, not lead.**
- **Accordingly, elites' views of the US and public opinion polls have become much more derisive and direct**—especially among traditional allies. The US that many outsiders see today is administratively incompetent, financially troubled, politically divided, insular, unpredictable, happy to tear up the rulebook, and—worst of all—foolish.

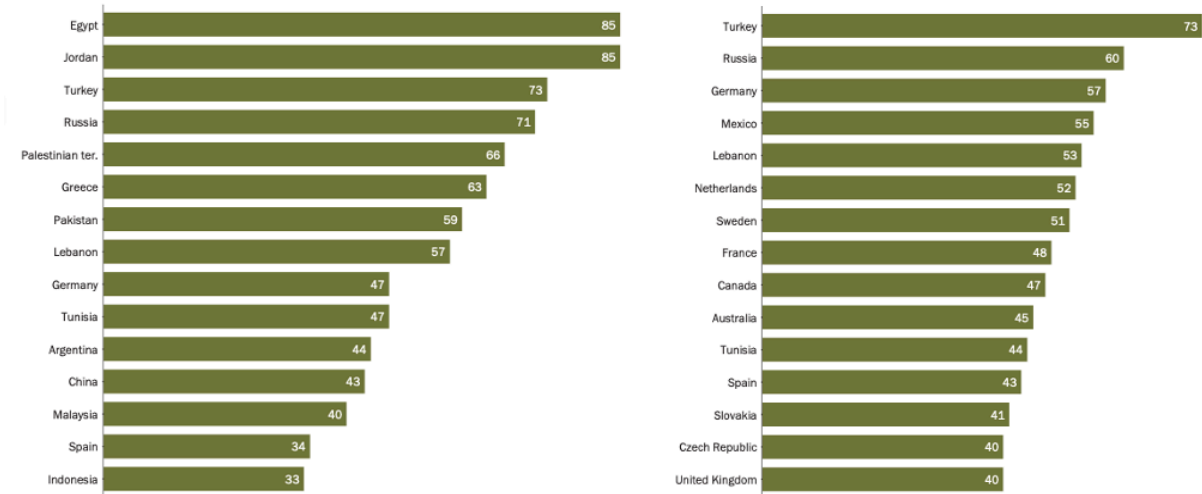
### Implications

- **Negative perceptions of the US impact its businesses in several ways.** First, without a strong US economic engine driving them, the country's businesses will be perceived as economically weaker. Second, people outside the US will assume that US businesses are preoccupied with managing pandemic-related dislocations, addressing racial and ethnic bias, and navigating a turbulent domestic political field. Third, US officials will be less effective at supporting US business interests abroad via diplomacy. Fourth, the US's ability to shape global business standards, norms, and practices is also diminished. In contrast, Beijing is taking advantage of this moment to advance Chinese commercial interests, and China is increasingly seen as an alternative partner or leader. ►

## Macro view

The Pew Research Center’s Global Indicators Database shows a significant shift in attitudes over the last five years. In 2014, countries with the least favorable views of the US were clustered in the Middle East. In 2019, many traditional allies—including Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, France, Canada, and Australia—were among the top ten countries with unfavorable views.

*Top 15 countries with the least favorable view of the US, 2014 and 2019 (% unfavorable)*

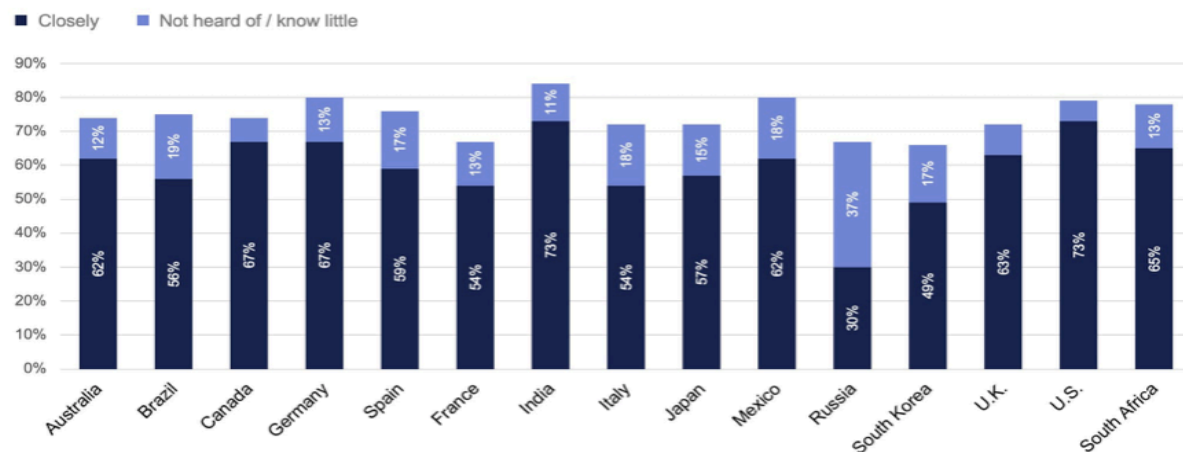


Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2019.

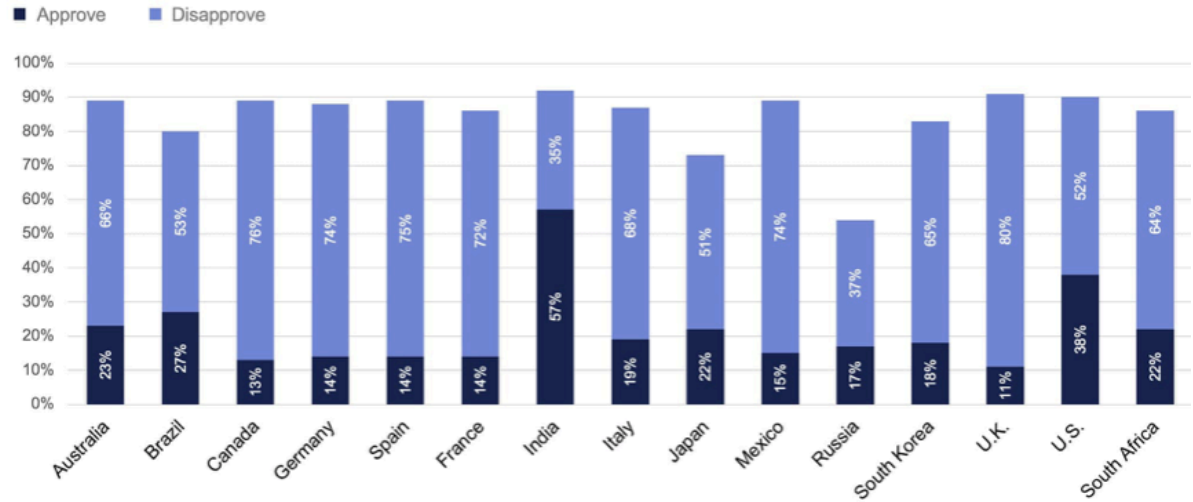
Domestic policies and politics play a big role in perceptions of the US, and the recent years of governance problems have diminished the US’s soft power rating according to Portland, a British strategic communications consultancy. Its 2019 assessment concluded: “It is the US Government—at home and abroad—that has weighed down the US’s overall rank this year.”

To this point, a 15-country IPSOS survey in early June revealed that the Black Lives Matter protests in early June had gathered a lot of attention around the world, with over half of those surveyed in most countries saying they were following developments closely. A majority of people in 13 countries disapproved of how Trump was handling the demonstrations; this sentiment was highest in the UK (80%), Canada (76%), Spain (75%), and Germany and Mexico (74%)—much higher than the level of disapproval voiced by Americans (52%). ▶

## Are you following protests since death of George Floyd?



## Do you approve of how Trump has handled the protests?



Source: IPSOS, June 4-7, 2020.

### Europe

For most of Europe, Trump has accelerated the end of American leadership, which was already in decline with the War on Terror and the pivot to Asia.

Now, the pandemic is weighing heavily on public opinion. In a late April-early May poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations of 11,000 respondents across nine European countries, only 2% of respondents viewed the US as a “helpful” ally in the fight against Covid. Views of the US had worsened for two-thirds of people polled in Denmark, Portugal, France, Germany, and Spain. In France and Germany, 46% and 42% respectively said their opinion had worsened “a lot.” Meanwhile, 25% said China was the most useful ally—suggesting a striking shift in Europe's outlook. The pollsters concluded: “In a frightening world, one looks around for friends. But Europeans are uncertain who they can rely on. Now, Europeans’ trust in Trump’s America is gone.”

In the words of European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni in early July, there was hope in Brussels for a “refounding” of the transatlantic relationship and engagement should Joe Biden win the presidency: “It must go back to what it was.” But there is also no interest in Europe playing a secondary role, and this is evident on issues such as digital taxation and antitrust cases against US technology firms.

Europeans still value the importance of economic cooperation with the US and seek to avoid a trade war. A senior member of a multinational energy company said: “A good indication of the transatlantic business community's long-term [relationship] is the sustained dialogue over financial and regulatory issues between US and EU counterparts. While there is continued disagreement over major policies like security, mid-level government officials are working to sustain the transatlantic business ecosystem.” Nevertheless, elites are warming to the notion of working more with China, regardless of its human rights issues.

### Germany

German leaders often stay quiet during clashes over US policy. However, the recent decision to remove American troops from Germany promoted a rare public, acerbic criticism of the US. The foreign policy spokesman for the ruling CDU/CSU parliamentary group said, “The plans once ►

again show that the Trump administration is neglecting an elementary leadership task: the involvement of alliance partners in decision-making processes.”

This decision, along with the many other impromptu policy reversals by the Trump administration, has infuriated European allies to the point of accepting the potential disintegration of the trans-Atlantic alliance. Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas warned that Europe must be prepared for a vacuum of US leadership regardless of who wins in November: “Everyone who thinks everything in the transatlantic partnership will be as it once was with a Democratic president underestimates the structural changes.”

### *The UK*

British political elites have been shaken more by events in the US during the first half of 2020 than most other US allies have been. This is because they have been fully absorbed by Brexit since 2016. Given this, the UK largely saw Trump as a political aberration and was slow to fully understand the transformative nature of his presidency. Germany and Japan, for example, have been much more clear-eyed.

For the pro-Brexit forces that control the UK government, the US has always been seen as a richer, more competent, and more compatible partner than Brussels according to a British political scientist. Thus, London has observed the vacuum of federal leadership on the pandemic and has been baffled. There have been sharp disagreements between the prime minister and his science advisers, but Downing Street has always been in charge of pandemic response.

The crisis has also opened up a new sense of US vulnerability from the entrenched inequality associated with the lack of a national health service (widely credited in the UK for preventing a bad situation from becoming even worse). The Black Lives Matter protests (which have resonated in the UK far more than political elites were expecting) are a stark reminder of problems with racism and policing. And there is surprise at the extent to which Trump is running against “the enemy within” to get reelected; this is seen as placing the US political system under tremendous strain. Finally, the economic toll of the pandemic combined with isolationism in the US is seen as having serious implications for the rest of the world.


While much affection remains for Americans and the transatlantic relationship, the loss of faith in the US is heavy and undeniable—just when London was looking to reaffirm the special relationship after Brexit.

### *Central and Eastern Europe*

Central and Eastern European countries have been making headlines with their erosion of democratic norms, yet there is little expectation that a Biden or a second-term Trump administration will heavily scrutinize the polices in Hungary, Poland, or neighboring countries in the short or medium term. The director of a Central European think tank said that while the US began prioritizing national security over democracy before Trump, the president is accelerating this trend to unimaginable levels: “The US stance on democracy is confusing: Its closest ally in the region against an autocratic Russia is illiberal Poland.” He also predicted that the erosion of value-based decision making in the US would continue regardless of the November election.

### *Africa and the Middle East*

The US and Trump still receive relatively high approval ratings in Africa, with those surveyed by the Pew Research Center in Kenya and Nigeria last year registering over 65% approval of Trump. However, headlines about police brutality and racism in America sparked outrage. Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo said, “It cannot be right that in the 21st century, the USA, this ►



great bastion of democracy, continues to grapple with the problem of systematic racism.” The CEO of the Ghana Tourism Authority went so far as to encourage African Americans to move back. “Please take advantage, come home, build a life in Ghana. You do not have to stay where you are not wanted forever, you have a choice, and Africa is waiting for you.”

### *Turkey*

Of the 34 countries covered by the Pew Research Center surveys, respondents in Turkey in 2019 expressed, by far, the most unfavorable views of the United States (73%). But this level has been consistent over the past five years. Cuma Calin, a Turkish market and political risk analysis adds a caveat: “You should bear in mind that, Turkish elites (like the society) are polarized. Hence, there is no unified perception.” For government elites in Turkey, the US is seen now as more of a transactional partner than a strategic one, due to fundamental differences over a range of policy issues, such as US support of the Kurds in Syria, Iran-Turkey ties, and Ankara’s purchase of Russian military equipment. Neither the US’s handling of Covid nor racial tensions are a concern for the government elites, adds Calin, except when they would use these issues to highlight how Turkey does well in comparison.

### *Asia*

As China has quickly ramped up its geopolitical presence in the East and South China Seas, Asian nations look to the US as a power balancer and stabilizing force in the region. They also stress the importance of adhering to international law—a rhetorical device they use to try to contain Beijing’s ambitions. However, the region remains hard-pressed to have any degree of confidence in Washington, given its unpredictable nature, lack of a coherent policy thrust, and unwillingness to work closely with regional allies and partners. Beijing’s strong regional presence, and longstanding questions about US commitment is increasing a willingness to work with China.

### *China*

Chinese views—both the official stance and public sentiment—have significantly turned against the Trump administration during the pandemic. China is dismayed at Trump’s multiple remarks on decoupling, and the perceived anti-Chinese racial undertone has sparked open denunciations on state media outlets like Renmin.cn. In the new era of assertive “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, Chinese media reinforce the idea that China is not afraid of economic decoupling, commentators highlight the Trump administration’s alleged incompetency and efforts to shift the blame to China for its failure to contain the pandemic, and they argue that China will prevail in the long term. A *Global Times* editorial from July 7 opined that the US is “destroying itself” and spurring global instability in the process: “Those geopolitical maniacs in the US are ending the good old days since the end of the Cold War.”

While Trump occupies most of the Chinese media’s attention, there are voices in Chinese media cautioning against optimism for US-China relations if Biden is elected, given that the Democratic party will likely compete with Trump on taking a harder line against China. Moreover, [interviews by Bloomberg in June](#) revealed that some high-level Chinese officials favor Trump staying in power for another four years because of the expectation that he will continue to erode US influence globally while Biden might shore up alliances against China. In short, some in China are prioritizing geopolitical risks under Biden while others emphasize economic risks of a continued trade war under Trump. ▶

## India

India and US relations are now mostly neutral. Trump remains popular in India. Ipsos found 57% of the public supporting Trump's handling of the George Floyd protests—the highest level of 14 countries surveyed. However, immigration, especially H-1B visas, are sacrosanct for India, and the Trump administration's halt of the program is causing anger among the business community. Trump's threat to retaliate if India banned exports of the drug hydroxychloroquine has also mildly soured US-India discourse. And, the US's poor performance managing the Covid-19 pandemic—something Indians have witnessed in their country—undermines confidence, said an official at an Indian charitable foundation. On the other hand, Indian reliance on US support is crucial, especially with the recent escalation in border and trade tensions with China. Trump's anti-China rhetoric has been greatly appreciated by Indians, as it is seen to be creating opportunities for global businesses to shift operations from China to India.

A director of an Asia public policy firm believes that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will always be pragmatic and ensure a healthy relationship with the US. Right now, Modi is happy to appease Trump's bellicose diplomacy style while preparing for whatever the results may be in November. Various national media outlets such as the *Hindustan Times* have suggested that Delhi is looking more favorably toward Biden, who has committed to strengthening India-US ties given the shared regional security interests and pledged to reinstate the H-1B program if elected, but elites question whether Trump's immigration policies would be fully reversed. Biden's role in brokering the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement is increasingly appealing to Indians looking for a reliable US president. Elites believe that Biden will present a softer diplomatic face even though US immigration changes are unlikely to reverse fully.

## Japan

Pro-US sentiment remains widespread among both the elites and the general public in Japan. According to Pew Research Center research, over 68% of the Japanese public had a positive view of the US in 2019—result of deep geopolitical, economic, and cultural ties between Washington and Tokyo

The Japanese public is less enthused about Trump, with 57% of the public worried that a second term would bring negative consequences for Japan, according to recent polling by NHK. On the other hand, the same survey showed that over 63% of the public either supports or wants to strengthen the US alliance. This somewhat paradoxical finding speaks to the widespread view in Tokyo that there is no logical replacement globally to US leadership, especially as the Japanese public is deeply wary of Beijing's growing military and economic might, says Cory Baird, a Japanese business and policy analyst.

As a result, many have approved of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assertive approach to building a friendly personal relationship with Trump. Although Abe's critics claim he has produced little to show for his efforts, Japanese elites widely applaud the prime minister's successful management of this tricky relationship to protect Tokyo's key geopolitical and business interests.

When it comes to American social dynamics, elites in Japan are increasingly puzzled. Supply chain integrity, business continuity, and social solidarity are all entrenched in Japanese culture. Thus, it is difficult for many to grasp the bevy of Covid-related risks American policymakers and citizens are prepared to accept. Due to the fact that Japan is ethnically homogenous, with only 2% of residents foreign born, a large majority of the population finds it difficult to grasp the role of race and ethnicity in politics and society and, thus, the fast spread and intensity of Black Lives Matters activism in the US, says Baird. ►



## South America

The 1980s and 1990s were the height of US social and economic leadership in Latin America, but the War on Terror and the 2008–2009 financial crisis precipitated a loss of confidence in the US and its commitment to the region. Most Latin American governments lean right these days; however, conservative political and business elites largely see Trump as an incompetent leader, with former political leaders saying they personally dislike Trump and see him as a distraction. Much of the region is composed of ardent US supporters unaffected by the political orientation of the president.

Compared to the US political spectrum, the political extremes of Latin America mean hard-right governments will retain a positive outlook on a liberal Biden presidency, as it wouldn't be considered extreme given the history of far-left political movements in Latin America.

### *Argentina*

Argentina's financial troubles over the past 20 years turned elites against the US because the government and business community felt abandoned to perceived predatory US-based bondholders. The Obama administration provided a slight reprieve and was extremely popular, but Trump broke all hope for US support to prevent defaults and what have been seen as unfair bailouts.

A former senior aide to former President Mauricio Macri, who left office in 2019, spoke about a general disinterest with the American election in November, saying "Argentinian elites believe that regardless of who leads, the US will not bring stability to the country or region." Instead, elites are increasingly turning to China and disregarding a values-based approach to cross-border relationships. He highlighted the public relations success of China's "face mask diplomacy," while the US was seen as abandoning South America because of its inability to control its health crisis. ■