



Is America Still “First”?

by Shay Attias

BESA Center Soft Power Report #2, October 4, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the third year of Donald Trump’s presidency, the US continues to suffer from a negative global image. The world views Chinese and Russian leadership more favorably than that of the US. This seems to be a continuation of the instant, worldwide negative response – even panic – that followed Trump’s victory in 2016. The most negative attitudes were shown among the “Western democracies” while in non-democratic states the US scored much better.

Forbes’s World’s Most Powerful People Index of 2019

Unlike Obama during his first term in 2009-12, Donald Trump was ranked by the Forbes Index as only third among the world’s most powerful leaders. China got first place with Xi Jinping; second place went to Vladimir Putin. Trump has not made any headway on this index since 2017.

The Index’s global approval rating of US leadership for 2019 showed Trump at the lowest level for any of the past three US presidents. His low rating could have implications for US soft power and cost billions in US trade around the globe. While it’s not yet clear whether Trump’s “America First” foreign policy is a success or a failure, it may have opened the door for China and Russia to increase their global influence. In 2019, the US leadership rating hit a record low of 30%.

The Gallup Rating of World Leaders Index of 2019

Adults across 133 countries rated the “performance of US leadership” at 31%.

More than 130 countries and areas assessed US leadership during Trump's second year in office compared to that of Germany, China, and Russia. The Index shows a continued decline in Trump's global positioning around the world.

The 2019 Global Peace Index: "Confidence in US leadership and US influence"

The 2019 Global Peace Index [showed](#) that confidence in Trump as a leader has dropped and that there is more confidence in Russian, Chinese, and German leadership than in American. In addition, it showed a belief that the "US has become less peaceful over the past year" (it dropped to 128 out of 163). A growing number of people around the world see "US power and influence as a major threat" to their country, which is linked with negative attitudes toward Trump and the US as a whole, according to surveys conducted in 22 nations since 2013. Forty-five percent of surveyed nations "see US power and influence as a major threat," up from 38% (it was 25% in 2013, during Obama's administration). The increase in people who see America as a threat "has occurred alongside declines in the shares of people who say they have confidence in the US." The US is still ranked as less of a global threat than climate change (67%), ISIS (62%), and cyber-attacks (61%).

The US's relative role in the world

[In the Gallup index of 2019](#), respondents were asked to rank seven major countries on whether they are "playing a more important, less important, or as important role in the world compared with 10 years ago." China won: 70% across 25 countries said it "plays a more important global role than it did a decade ago." The US falls in the middle: roughly similar medians say a) it is as important as it was 10 years ago, and b) its importance has grown.

U.S. Global Image Index (2019)

America's global image is moving from "complicated" to "very negative." More countries prefer the US as the world's leading power over China, but at the same time, many people are frustrated about America's role in the world and say "they have little confidence in President Donald Trump to do the right thing in world affairs" (according to a [new Pew Research Center survey](#) of 25 nations.) "Western Europeans states don't accept Trump" and have "strikingly negative views" of him, according to the survey. Britain, Germany, France, and Spain had little confidence in President George W. Bush, but have even less in Trump. More Western Europeans now say the "US government does not respect the personal freedoms of its people" (a median of 57%). According to the Index, the decline began "after the National Security Agency's [spying controversy](#) during the Obama administration."

Pew's America's International Image poll (2018-2019)

The international image of the US remains [very low](#), and more people now say that "bilateral relations with the US have worsened, rather than improved, over the past year." There is a widespread perception that the Trump administration "does not consider the interests of other countries when making foreign policy decisions." Very few respondents agreed that the US is "stepping up more to solve international problems."

Gallup's US's Domestic Image vs. International Image Index

With regard to the US's global positioning, Americans are considered to "see the opposite" of what the rest of the world does. Only fifty-eight percent say the US is rated "very or somewhat favorably in the world's eyes," but most believe that Americans' perception of their country's image in the world is at its "best since 2003."

Portland's Soft Power Index (2019)

President Trump's "America First" foreign policy does not play well abroad. Last year's international polling data for the US showed a serious drop in favorability toward the US among other nations. The US's combined [Soft Power](#) score fell nearly 10% from 2016 to 2017: "Unsurprisingly, sentiment has not recovered this year. Moreover, the US ranks 21st in overall favorability scores in 2018." According to Portland's Index, as long as Trump persists with his "America First" policy, "it's hard to see the rest of the world getting behind US leadership."

Conclusion

In the eyes of much of the rest of the world, America's image has shifted from "sheriff of the world" to "a major threat." There is, moreover, a significant gap between what Americans think others think about their country and the reality. Much of the world appears to believe that several international agreements signed by Obama were mistakes, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, the Paris Climate Accord, and the Iran nuclear deal.

Trump is criticized for his policy regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement and his trade wars with China. He continues to criticize NATO allies and has opened direct, open diplomacy with North Korea – policies he put into practice in full knowledge that they would worsen the US's global image.

Trump's foreign policy is viewed positively in non-democratic countries, which changes the map of diplomatic flexibility and affects the US's room for maneuver in the international arena.