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도쿄재단

Inflamed American Attitudes Interfere in Healthy Competition with China

Relations between the U.S. and China are at a potentially pivotal intersection. Many in Washington want to punish Beijing for its early part in allowing COVID-19 to spread — an outcome that public opinion suggests most Americans might embrace. As the virus continues to imperil American lives and devastate the U.S. economy, mass anger at China will most certainly mount, encouraged not only by rhetoric from Washington but also by the dual threats to America’s national identity of Chinese expansion and relative U.S. decline. Against today's backdrop of geopolitical competition with Beijing, Washington’s range of possible policy choices will become increasingly constrained by the complex interplay of inflamed American public attitudes and malign Chinese government behavior.

 While the pandemic may help to focus American views on why exactly they are competing instead of cooperating with China, the crisis also calls into sharp relief the importance of some measure of healthy coexistence with Beijing. Unfortunately, managing the new balance of “competition without catastrophe” in the U.S.-China relationship — an expression adopted by former U.S. diplomats Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan last year — may prove difficult as relations become increasingly tethered to forces of public perception that are not easily managed in today’s era of easy information manipulation by both domestic and foreign actors. Stateside, these political constraints already are playing out through the predictable, almost politically unavoidable, actions of both Trump and his presumptive Democratic opponent, former vice president Joe Biden.

Public opinion’s increased salience in terms of dictating actual policy is easily apparent through Trump’s push to pin greater responsibility for American deaths and economic losses on China. As political incumbents staring down the double barrel of a prolonged economic downturn and public health crisis, the White House and GOP need someone to blame for the country’s misfortunes. China, rightly under a cloud of suspicion for its disinformation efforts and coercive diplomacy in response to international calls to investigate its early role in spreading COVID-19, presents a useful target.

On the other side of the partisan ledger, Biden has more carefully distinguished between criticizing the Chinese government response and blaming the country, even as many Democrats openly discuss the difficulty in trying to advance legitimate complaints against the CCP while not further amplifying the American public's growing bias against Chinese people. Indeed, despite Biden’s pains to articulate a more careful intent to “get tough” on China, many in his own party appear to worry still that his recent efforts to rebuff claims of softness on Beijing might inadvertently fuel the mainstream rise of anti-Asian sentiments.

Most sensible politicians would advise that public anger about China’s murky response to COVID-19 be aimed at the CCP and not the Chinese people. However, fringe voices across the political spectrum have and will continue to blur this and other distinctions in discourse regarding China, their efforts made easier by domestic partisanship, media spin and CCP information warfare. As the health and economic consequences of the pandemic continue to balloon, and the demand to punish someone for these catastrophic losses becomes louder, it’s easy to see how political entrepreneurs in both major parties might succeed in further mobilizing public opinion against not just the CCP but China, more generally. But if responsible approaches to countering the CCP are crowded out of the public discourse, Washington’s legitimate criticisms of the Chinese government will not be addressed.

1. 미국은 현재의 침체된 경제와, 사회적 혼란에 대해 공격할 적이 필요했고, 초기 대응을 부실하게 한 중국을 비판하고 있음.
2. 현재 민주당, 공화당 가리지 않고 양 당의 대통령 후보는 중국을 견제함과 동시에, 전략적 경쟁을 해야한다는 것에 대한 압박을 받고 있음. 바이든이 중국에 대해 부드러운 제스처를 취했다고 공격받기도 함.
3. 하지만 정보화시대에 통제되지 않은 정보에 의한 대중의 의견을 조작하기가 힘듦
4. 결국 중국에 대한 책임전가의 성공여부가 앞으로의 미국에게 큰 영향을 미칠 것임.