

Anti-Asian attacks erode US image as Biden rebuilds Pacific ties

Trump's China rhetoric cited as source of bias against Asian Americans

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NEW YORK/BANGKOK/SHANGHAI -- When 65-year-old New Yorker Vilma Kari was brutally assaulted on her way to church on March 29, the crime made headlines in her native country of the Philippines.

Politicians there, including Vice President Leni Robredo and boxing icon and Sen. Manny Pacquiao, two prospective presidential contenders, were quick to speak up after closed-circuit footage was picked up by local media. In the video, Brandon Elliot, a 38-year-old homeless man, yells, "You don't belong here!" before kicking and punching Kari in the face. Bystanders watch.

Robredo denounced the attack as "an appalling turn of events." In digital posters released by Pacquiao, the boxing champion is steely, pictured with the caption: "Stop attacking Asians who can't defend themselves. FIGHT ME INSTEAD."

Their reaction was echoed by the Philippine foreign minister, Teodoro Locsin. "The answer to racism has to be police/military; not understanding," Locsin said in a Twitter post on the attack. "Racists understand only force."

The incident was part of a recent spike in anti-Asian violence across America. Even as overall hate crimes declined last year, anti-Asian hate crimes reported to police rose nearly 150% in 16 of the largest U.S. cities in the same period, according to a report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino.

Racism is more than a troubling domestic phenomenon in the U.S. It has become a liability abroad as well: Reflected across Asia, thanks to social media, it represents the most obvious example of the U.S. failure to live up to the lofty ideals it preaches overseas. The surge in anti-Asian violence has elicited waves of sympathy from immigrants' home countries, prompted diplomatic rebuke, and handed Chinese state media a potent set of talking points with which to criticize the U.S.

Many blame former President Donald Trump, who catered openly to white nationalism and stoked anti-China sentiment at home and abroad, frequently referring to COVID-19 as the "China virus" and defending confrontational policies by accusing China of economic "rape."

For Asian Americans, however, the legacy of those comments has not been confined to U.S.-China relations, nor to the Trump era. Under the new leadership of President Joe Biden, the incidence of hate crimes toward the group has not fallen -- rather, they have only become more visible.

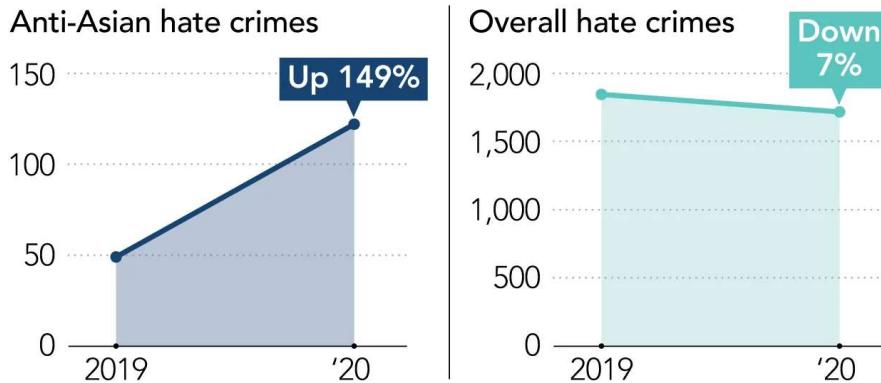
The trend was most tragically underlined by the March 16 killing of six women of Asian descent in and near Atlanta, Georgia. The horrific incident ignited protests in major cities across the country, sending shockwaves through Asia.

The intense focus on anti-Asian violence in America comes as the Biden administration is seeking to rebuild its credibility and popularity in the region, where the U.S. has recently condemned human rights abuses in Myanmar and Xinjiang, China.

"It's a smear on the ability of the U.S. to advocate for human rights globally," said Aynne Kokas, a media studies professor focusing on U.S.-China relations at the University of Virginia.

Anti-Asian hate crimes jump, while overall rate drops

(Police reports for anti-Asian hate crime in 16 of America's largest cities)



Preliminary data as of March 21

Source: The Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino

It also gives political adversaries a convenient excuse to ignore international criticism of their own human rights shortcomings. "The U.S. has always had an enormous problem with racism, which governments in Asia often raise to change the subject from their own abuses," said Brad Adams, executive director of the Asian division of Human Rights Watch. "But that doesn't mean they are wrong."

Changing views

When Jang Ho-kyeong, a 26-year-old fresh out of mandatory military service in his native South Korea, read about the killings in Atlanta, he felt sad and angry -- but not surprised. Jang, who had studied in the U.S., had sensed tensions brewing since last year, when then-President Trump started to blame China for the coronavirus pandemic.

He says the attacks in Atlanta, coming after Trump's divisive tenure and the country's mishandling of the coronavirus crisis, have accelerated a reconsideration of how many South Koreans view their country's main ally. South Korea sent an embassy official to Atlanta after the shootings, though the response by Seoul has been measured.

"I think it's now easier to find people who say that the U.S. is not the advanced country we always admired it to be," said Jang.

In the U.S., he recalled, "I had racist encounters everywhere, like people using slurs or asking me, 'Hey, can you teach me some calculus?'"

"That said, I never felt the threat of physical violence, but that's probably because I'm an adult male. My women friends have all felt racism mixed with physical and sexual aggression."

In the wake of the Atlanta attacks, a March 23 editorial in South Korea's right-of-center Maeil Business Newspaper called into question Washington's role as a global leader, specifically its criticism of human rights conditions in countries such as North Korea, China and Myanmar.

"Before we can recognize U.S. foreign policy as sincere, the U.S. has to make stronger efforts to prevent hate crimes at home," the paper said.

Nor has the argument been missed in China. In an incident earlier in March, the assault of a 76-year-old Chinese woman in San Francisco provoked outrage after a video of the Cantonese-speaking woman, her eye bruised, was widely circulated on Chinese state media. News agency Xinhua seized the moment to argue that, "in fact, devastating racism is only the tip of the iceberg of America's mess in human rights protection."

Xinhua continued by pointing out that the U.S.'s "deplorable track record" could be traced to the country's abusive treatment against native Indians, African slaves and Chinese laborers in the past.

Although racist abuse is seen primarily as a domestic phenomenon, experts who follow hate crimes say that they are strikingly correlated with international events. Spikes in hostility toward specific ethnic groups often appear inspired by incidents abroad.

Over the last decade, according to Brian Levin, director of the research center at CSU, the worst two months for anti-Asian hate crimes as recorded by the FBI were July 2018 -- during the heat of the U.S.-China trade war, when the two countries lashed each other with accusations and imposed billions of dollars' worth of tariffs -- and February 2014, when a damning United Nations report enumerated human rights violations by North Korea.

Many Asian Americans lay the blame for the recent rise in anti-Asian sentiment squarely at Trump's door. He swept to power in 2016 in a "paroxysm of white rage," according to Kaiser Kuo, an editor at U.S.-based digital media agency SupChina and host of podcast Sinica.

Under a president who endorsed both domestic racism at home and a more jingoistic, confrontational foreign policy abroad, the U.S. painted even its allies as free-riders on alliance pacts. The pandemic added further fuel, with Trump frequently referring to COVID-19 as the "China virus" or the "Wuhan virus."

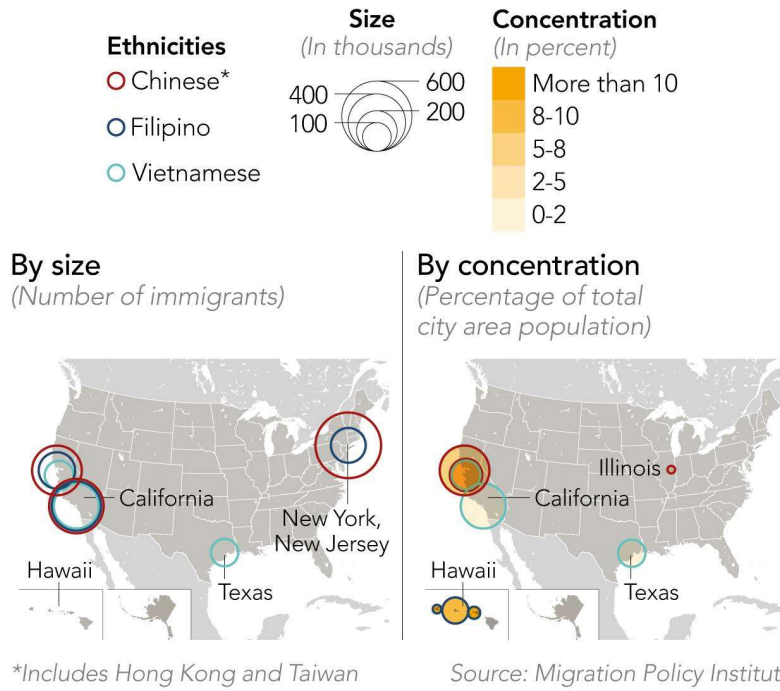
Kuo sees parallels between the U.S.'s anger at facing strategic competition from China and the existential worries of white America.

The U.S. feels that "the day in the sun is coming to an end," he said. "It's no longer going to enjoy this [privilege], just as white America is threatened increasingly by the advent of a majority nonwhite population. ...They're behaving in the same irrational way, with the same blind fury."

Asian diasporas in the U.S.

America's three largest East and Southeast Asian immigrant groups and where they have most commonly settled.

(Immigrant population by both size and concentration)



Andrew Nathan, a professor of Chinese politics at Columbia University, agreed that the rise of China does scare Americans. But some politicians are "exaggerating this, saying that China is threatening our way of life."

He cited examples such as the former president, his secretary of state Mike Pompeo and, more recently, conservative Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri. "They're doing it for domestic political purposes to get support from angry voters, and those are the people who I think are dangerously hyping the issue of China."

"It makes sense to say that the Chinese government mishandled the virus at the beginning and has not been transparent about information," Nathan said. "So we can blame [Chinese President] Xi Jinping for that. We can't blame the Chinese people for that."

"But the fact that we had half a million deaths in the U.S. -- that was Trump's fault, that wasn't Xi Jinping's fault."

A new course?

While the Biden administration has sought to chart a new course on racial issues, the genie of anti-Asian racism is difficult to put back in the bottle. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris spoke out days after the Atlanta shootings, and the president has repeatedly called to stop anti-Asian hate crimes. His administration has announced actions like strengthening hate crime legislation to reverse the rising violence against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

Robert Ross, a politics professor at Boston College, said, "Saying it once or twice will not be enough." But he agreed: "That's the kind of domestic policy we need."

Meanwhile, Biden's Democratic Party is under pressure to be tough on China. "The Republicans are certainly going to focus on China policy as a potential vulnerability to [Biden]."

But it does not mean politicians should step away from China issues, he said.

There is often a false separation in the minds of foreign policy analysts between the Asia region and the experience of Asians in America, said Melissa Newcomb, who manages projects related to Taiwan and U.S.-China relations at the National Bureau of Asian Research. "The truth is, for many of us of Asian descent like myself, the two are inextricably linked."

Kokas of the University of Virginia also emphasized the need to distinguish between people and national policy. "If the U.S.-China relationship is considered to be the greatest strategic rivalry of the 21st century, we need people to actually understand what the stakes are, and the nuance," she said. "I frequently have classes at the university where my students don't know who Xi Jinping is. How can we expect people to make nuanced assessments if they have never heard of Japanese internment?"

Experts say that education includes teaching Asian American history in school curriculums, and, for China academics, speaking and interviewing in Mandarin, using original-language sources and interacting with communities in China.

"There's not enough effort to distinguish between the behaviors and policies of the Chinese government and the Chinese people in China, as well as Chinese Americans in the United States," said Kokas. "By just using the blanket term 'China,' rather than 'the Peoples' Republic of China government,' it conflates Asian Americans and the Chinese people with the policies of the PRC government."

Last spring, American rapper Bohan Phoenix, who left China at the age of 11 for Massachusetts, was reading a book on the New York subway when a man pointed at him and yelled, "Ebola!"

"It stuck with me and made me realize just how much further we, as an ethnicity, have to go," Phoenix told *Nikkei Asia* at the time, when many other Asian Americans began speaking out against harassment and violence targeting the group.

Cultural differences are often summoned to explain the conflict, which can make things worse. "It is common to portray U.S.-China relations as a 'clash of civilizations' -- two cultural opposites with nothing in common. This narrative is unhelpful, even misleading," said Yuen Yuen Ang, author of "China's Gilded Age" and a politics professor at the University of Michigan. "It induces Americans to perceive the Chinese as weird and subsequently threatening, and vice versa is also true."

"While most people avoid overt racism, orientalism creeps in easily and unconsciously. For example, think of stereotypical portrayals of China as the land of red lanterns and dragons, or presumptions that Asians do not know how to speak English," said Ang. "Imagining an entire race of people as strange and exotic dehumanizes [them] -- and once a person ceases to see other people as human, it becomes easy to hate and inflict violence."

Troublingly for the U.S., it comes at a time when American foreign policy has renewed its focus on Asia, stressing shared values of democracy and human rights.

Beijing, for example, has been accused by Western countries including the U.S. of human rights abuses and genocide of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang. But China's government has tried to counter this by reforming the narrative around U.S. hypocrisy.

"The U.S. government, instead of introspecting on its own terrible human rights record, kept making irresponsible remarks on the human rights situation in other countries, exposing its double standards and hypocrisy on human rights," said the government's Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States, published in March.

"To state the obvious, the U.S. has never fully lived up to its stated ideals," said Adams of Human Rights Watch, saying it has made the organization's work more complicated. "Trump just made the gulf much wider and more obvious."

"From then on we had his terrible behavior at home and abroad thrown back in our face, with officials saying we should work on the U.S. before complaining about them. What they didn't acknowledge is that at HRW we have a very large program working on the U.S., in fact -- the biggest program addressing any country in the world."

Misperceptions

Represented as a "model minority" since the 1960s, Asian immigrants to the U.S. have been framed by the European-descended majority as more successful, more hardworking and less politically active than other immigrant groups.

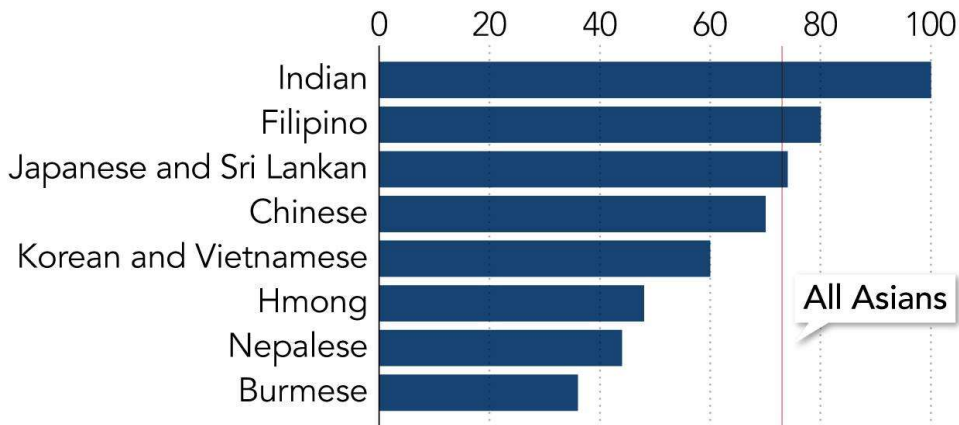
That perception may be part of the problem, said Newcomb of the National Bureau of Asian Research. A slowing economy could also be a contributing factor, something that has continued since the trade war.

"Violence against marginalized communities often happens in times of economic hardship because of resentment toward their perceived success. This has happened countless times to Asian communities, African American communities, and others throughout the United States' history," said Newcomb. "Violence is the tool to enforce white supremacy and violence is deployed when people feel that the current order is at risk."

Economically divided

Asian Americans' median incomes are higher than any other group, including Caucasians. But income inequality is also rising more rapidly, according to the Pew Research Center.

(Median annual household income, in thousands of dollars)



Data as of 2015 in latest U.S. Census

Source: Pew Research Center

In terms of median household income, Asian Americans earn more than even Caucasian-background households. But this also gives ammunition to critics who deny that there is increasing anti-Asian sentiment, and hold that living standards and educational attainment show that they are not discriminated against.

David Denoon, director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations at New York University, said: "I do not believe there is widespread anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. In fact, the competence and industriousness of many ethnic Asians is frequently admired."

He says that claims of racism are fiction hyped by the Chinese Communist Party in an effort to distract from its own abysmal human rights record. "Asian Americans and Asian immigrants earn substantially more than the average American, and do better than average Americans on many standardized tests: PSAT, SAT, ACT and GREs."

"Claims of widespread anti-[Asian] sentiment in the U.S. are either misinformed or attempts to create ethnic friction," Denoon continued. "Just because a small minority of Americans make claims about anti-Asian sentiment, and these are repeated by senior Chinese government leaders, does not make these claims balanced or accurate statements."

But statistics showing Asian Americans' success also belie a real earnings disparity among groups of different origins. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center report, only four Asian-origin groups out of its listed 19 -- Indians, Filipinos, Sri Lankans and Japanese -- had household incomes that exceeded the national median for Asian Americans overall. Most of the other origin groups fell well below.

The report also observed that "income inequality is rising more rapidly among Asian Americans than other racial or ethnic groups, reflecting wide disparities in income" in the community.

For instance, the overall poverty rate for Asians was 3 percentage points below the national average of around 15% in 2015. But Bhutanese and Burmese poverty levels are more than double, both at over 30%.

The types of immigrants each country sends to the U.S. play a role. Many Indians, for example, came on high-skilled employment visas such as the H-1B, whereas groups such as the Hmong primarily immigrated as refugees in the wake of the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, Asian Americans' position in the U.S. have been historically intertwined with Washington's foreign relations agenda. For Chinese, the watershed moment came when China fought against Japan during World War II as a U.S. ally. The Chinese Exclusion Act -- a discriminatory law against Chinese immigrants -- was finally repealed in 1943, the same period over which Japanese Americans were placed into internment camps by way of an executive order.

In the period following World War II, many scholars have linked the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which ended Asian exclusion in U.S. immigration policy in general, to Washington's geopolitical interests in Asia during the Cold War.

But for the large part, it remains to be seen if the current tensions will accumulate to a similar turning point.

"Right now we're so far from producing any results that will change things," said Kaiser Kuo. "It's going to be a very rough ride in the next few years."