

Post-COVID, more in West see China as major power: study

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The coronavirus pandemic has led a growing number of Westerners to see China as a top power, with the lead of the United States slipping, a study said Tuesday.

A survey of French, German and US opinion released by the German Marshall Fund of the United States found significant increases in perceptions of Chinese influence since the outbreak of COVID-19—in which Beijing has alternately been portrayed as a culprit and an aid provider.

The proportion of people who said China was the most influential global player shot up from 13 to 28 percent in France between surveys in January to May, from 12 to 20 percent in Germany and from six to 14 percent in the United States.

"Chinese influence in the world was kind of an abstract idea before the crisis," said Martin Quencez, deputy director of the German Marshall Fund's Paris office.

"When you think about the dependency on China for mask and medical equipment, for instance, this has become very concrete," he said.

Quencez expected a lasting impact, saying that the changes in perceptions were seen across generational and political lines.

"It seems more structural than just a quick response to the crisis," he said.

The public in all three countries still said that the United States was the most influential nation but less overwhelmingly.

In France, 55 percent of people said the United States was the top global player in May, down from 67 percent in January. Similar figures were reported in Germany.

One comparative loser was the European Union, which the French and Germans had put solidly in second place, over China, before the

pandemic.

Despite China's perceived influence, the survey found that majorities in both Germany and France said their countries should get tougher on Beijing over climate change, human rights and cybersecurity.

The figures were lower in the United States, possibly because President Donald Trump's administration has already been championing a hard line and pushing Europe to do likewise.

The Trump administration has blamed COVID-19 on poor management in China, where the virus was first detected late last year.

Critics say Trump is trying to deflect from his own handling of COVID-19 in the United States, which has suffered by far the highest death toll of any country.

The survey also showed a sharp transatlantic divide on the influence of Britain, which left the European Union this year.

Fifty-three percent of Americans said Britain was the most influential country in Europe, an opinion shared by just eight percent of Germans and six percent of French.

The study, conducted with the Bertelsmann Foundation in Germany and Institut Montaigne in Paris, surveyed more than 1,000 different people in each country both from January 9-22 and May 11-19.

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