

Valletta china electric vehicle market

The U.S. blinked, and China built an electric vehicle empire.

"They're taking over the world, except North America," said Lei Xing, a Chinese auto industry expert. "The U.S. will be the last frontier."

In the last 15 years, China has rolled out a public charging network over 10 million strong, convinced billions of drivers to go electric by dangling subsidies and other incentives, and introduced over 100 EV brands with a bevy of pricing options. The push exemplifies "China Speed," a term Xing used to describe the country's hypersonic development.

The speed and scale of the shift has slingshotted China past the U.S. and every other nation in the transition to electric vehicles, while also positioning Chinese automakers near the front of the pack to dominate the market for years to come. In both July and August of 2024, for example, industry data shows that over half of total automotive sales in China were electric or hybrid.

The U.S., quite simply, is playing catch-up. The Biden administration has made the transition to EVs a key priority, saying that by 2030 it wants half of all vehicles sold to be electric, plug-in hybrid or fuel cell EVs. The White House has also sought to throw sand in China's gears by imposing stiff tariffs on Chinese-made EVs, a measure aimed at protecting U.S. automakers.

But with limited supply-chain access, lagging EV infrastructure development and a culture in which American motorists remain partial to gas-powered cars, the jury is still out on whether these goals are attainable. John Bozzella, CEO of the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, a trade group representing U.S. and foreign automakers along with other industry players, has characterized the Biden administration's goals as the "ragged edge of achievable."

The skeptics may have a point: EV adoption, and the nation's buildout of the required energy infrastructure, has been glacial compared to China. According to the Federal Highway Administration, as of August 29, 192,500 public chargers were in place across the U.S. — a number that doubled under the Biden-Harris administration — with 1,000 new ones activated each week. Biden has committed to building 500,000 charging stations nationwide by 2030.

To reach that goal, his administration has thrown \$7.5 billion in funding behind electric charging infrastructure. Of that amount, \$5 billion is being funneled toward expanding a fast-charging network along highways. So far, only some 69 of those fast chargers are operational across eight states, according to the Highway Administration.

The slow infrastructure buildout has bogged down adoption, as drivers contend with "range anxiety." As of June, battery electric vehicles and plug-ins represented less than 10% of car sales in the U.S., according to federal data.

"China has a head-start in a race that is still at the starting line," said Baratunde Cola, CEO and founder of Carbice, a maker of so-called nanotubes whose products help keep electric cars from overheating. "Everybody's still setting up race blocks."

China's lead in electric cars hasn't happened overnight. The key driver: China's recognition more than a decade ago that EVs represented the most important transportation innovation since Henry Ford revolutionized auto manufacturing in the early 20th century.

Determined to race ahead, Beijing threw its economic might behind EV development, similar to the centrally controlled industrial policy that powered the rise of Japan's auto sector in the 1970s and '80s.

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