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US Policy Should Consider Chinese People's View of the World

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When the Berlin Wall fell 27 years ago, signaling the end of communism as a serious international force, no one cared much what people in China thought. The People's Republic of China had escaped its Maoist catastrophe only a decade before. Beijing was almost a nullity in foreign affairs.

Today the world is very different. The PRC trails only the U.S. in economic activity and military outlays. China has become the dominant trading nation around the world and far outranges the U.S. in East Asia, including with Washington's leading allies. Beijing also has won influence in Africa and Latin America through aid, investment, and trade.

What Chinese believe today really matters. Which Chinese? The leadership, certainly. Nevertheless, China's public also matters. While PRC policy does not directly reflect public opinion, the Chinese Communist Party is sensitive to popular currents.

President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive serves to strengthen his power, but it also responds to the common belief that many party officials have turned their work on behalf of "the people" into an unexpectedly profitable career. Nationalism backs the government's manifold territorial claims in nearby waters. The authorities variously attempt to use and diffuse such popular passions.

The CCP's greatest challenge may occur if the economy slows. While a majority of Chinese has modest economic expectations in the short-term, eight in ten expect their children to enjoy a better life. Although President Xi originally was seen as an economic reformer, he has hesitated to reform bloated, money-losing government enterprises. Officials fear that loss of jobs may breed popular unrest. Economic growth has provided the government with popular legitimacy. If people's lives stop improving, the problem quickly would become political.

Given the importance of Chinese public opinion, American policymakers, too, should pay attention to it. Washington should tailor its strategies for greater effect in the short-term and prepare for issues likely to arise in a more democratic China in the long-term. [The latest Pew Research Center survey explores the opinions of Chinese today.](#)

Unsurprisingly, three out of four Chinese citizens recognize that their nation is playing a greater role in the world. Six out of ten believe that's good for China. A small majority supports importing more foreign goods. Two-thirds favor Chinese investment in developing states. Six out of ten back more aid to developing states. But only a fifth want to help other countries solve their problems; a slight majority argues that the PRC should focus on its own difficulties. Twelve percent would do both.

Three-quarters believe China's way of life should be protected against foreign influence, which suggests that President Xi's campaign against Western values has popular support. That number is up from 64 percent in 2002. Perhaps surprisingly, 72 percent of Chinese under 34 feel the same.

However, Chinese attitudes toward America are complex. Half of Chinese have a favorable opinion of America; 44 percent view the U.S. negatively. Slightly more than half have confidence in President Barack Obama (up from just 31 percent three years ago). Hillary Clinton rates a bare 37-35 percent favorable-unfavorable rating. The comparable numbers for Donald Trump are 22-40 percent. Notably, six out of ten Chinese under age 34 have a positive view of America; increasing education also correlates with higher favorability ratings.

A slight majority believes that Washington is attempting to prevent China from becoming an equal power. Almost half, 45 percent, consider U.S. influence and power to be the top threat facing China (that's up six percent since 2013). Forty percent worry about America's military power, 21 percent its economic power, and 19 percent both.

At the same time, 59 percent fear that confrontation over territorial claims in East Asian waters could lead to military conflict. Almost as many have a positive view of international organizations, up from 39 percent three years ago.

Finally, while 40 percent of Chinese believe the U.S. plays a less important role than a decade ago, 35 percent believes the American role is greater. Almost half say the U.S. is most important economically, compared to 29 percent who cite China.

South Korea rates a 55 percent favorability rating, a bit higher than America. India comes in at 26 percent. Only 14 percent of Chinese view Japan favorably.

These statistics offer helpful, albeit limited, lessons for Washington. The first is that the future matters. Young Chinese have a more positive view than their elders of America. Washington should seek to encourage this generational shift, taking special care how it handles issues which might harm America's reputation.

The Pew survey also suggests that educational attainment is America's ally. The U.S. should make it easier for Chinese to study in America. Although attending a U.S. university does not guarantee friendship — Xi Jinping studied in Iowa decades ago — those who come usually gain a greater appreciation of America.

Washington also should affirm its acceptance of greater Chinese involvement in the international order and be especially careful in brandishing its military against the PRC. It would be better to reinforce appreciation for America's economic prowess, which can benefit the Chinese people.

Regarding the South China Sea, American policymakers should make the case for relying on international negotiation and avoiding confrontation, which appears to be supported by the majority of Chinese. Moreover, Washington should focus on international principles rather than its bilateral alliances, especially with Tokyo, which is widely reviled in the PRC.

The U.S.-China relationship obviously matters for the two nations. It also affects the rest of the world. Generally civil, cooperative ties will yield a much better world than bitter, confrontational relations.

Ultimately, although indirectly, Chinese government policy depends upon domestic popular sentiments. Washington should pay attention to those opinions. Another great game is afoot, and must be played over the long-term. The U.S. should attempt to reach the Chinese people in designing its own policy.

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