

# The shallow response of Ted Galen Carpenter

Posted By [Daniel W. Drezner](#) ■ Wednesday, April 13, 2011 - 12:58 PM ■ [+](#) Share

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In response to **my critical post from last week**, I see that Ted Galen Carpenter has doubled down on **his thesis** that, "**China benefits from U.S. policy blunders.**" Let's go through his main points, shall we?

In **his initial post**, Carpenter argued that the American brand was damaged. **I argued** that there had been a rebound. Carpenter's response:

America's global popularity is still at anemic levels—and the initial euphoria about Barack Obama has faded noticeably. And as shown in the Pew Research Center's 2010 survey of global attitudes, America's reputation in the Muslim world is not just anemic, **it is hideous**. That's 2010, Dan, not 2006.

Two responses. First, the poll data Carpenter cites reflects attitudes about Barack Obama in particular and not the United States in general. Since what we're both concerned with is America's soft power rather than Obama's, let's take a look at **the BBC's latest World Service Country Rating Poll**, since that asks the more appropriate survey question: Views of the US continued their overall improvement in 2011, according to the annual BBC World Service Country Rating Poll of 27 countries around the world.

Of the countries surveyed, 18 hold predominantly positive views of the US, seven hold negative views and two are divided. On average, 49 per cent of people have positive views of US influence in the world--**up four points from 2010**--and 31 per cent hold negative views. The poll, conducted by GlobeScan/PIPA, asked a total of 28,619 people to rate the influence in the world of 16 major nations, plus the European Union.

In 2007 a slight majority (54%) had a negative view of the United States and only close to three in ten (28%) had a positive view; America was among the countries with the lowest ratings. Views began to rise in 2008, with positive views rising to 32% on average, and now **the USA is in a middle tier position, ranking substantially higher than China** (emphases added)

Oh, and that's 2011 data, Ted.

Carpenter emphasizes the Middle East, and it's certainly true that U.S. favorability there remains quite low. Even in that region, however, **the latest data** suggests **things aren't getting worse**, except in the country where the data is OBE:

As views of the USA continue to improve globally, the upwards trend is also apparent in Muslim countries. For the first time, a majority of Indonesians are now positive about the USA's role in the world (58%, a rise of 22 points over the last year). Negative views of the USA in Turkey have dropped sharply from 70 per cent to 49 per cent, while negative views in Pakistan of the USA have also fallen slightly, from 52 per cent to 46 per cent. Conversely, Egypt, after a lift in 2009 and 2010, has reverted to a predominantly negative view of the USA, with 50 per cent of Egyptians considering that the USA's role in the world is mostly negative.

As for China's ability to exploit the current situation, here's Carpenter's response:

China *has* shown recent signs of dialing back some of the more objectionable features of its policy. That stands in marked contrast to the U.S. military escalation in Afghanistan, Washington's transparent efforts to maintain an outsized presence in Iraq after the scheduled withdrawal of its military forces, and the new intervention in Libya. In terms of intrusive policies, China doesn't begin to compete with the United States....

[China's] weaknesses do not include running \$1.5 trillion annual budget deficits (much less having much of that debt funded by one's principal geopolitical competitor). Nor do China's weaknesses include overstretching its military forces in Middle Eastern and South-Central Asian snake pits. Those are actions that the United States has taken, and it is naïve in the extreme to assume that China does not benefit strategically and financially from such folly. Yet, oddly, Drezner addresses none of those points contained in my TNI piece.

Carpenter's point about U.S. military overextension is a good one, and is a concern I share. Our disagreement is on the magnitude of the policy externalities that flow from this overextension. Carpenter thinks it's disastrous; I think it's regrettable but not at the root of imminent U.S. decline to China.

First, it's worth noting that while defense spending plays a supporting role in the **worsening U.S. fiscal situation**, tax cuts and domestic expenditures are far more culpable. Second, I *have* looked at whether China's holdings of U.S. debt lead to geopolitical weakness -- and concluded that **this concern has been vastly exaggerated**.

Third, again, looking at global public opinion, there's evidence that **China's economic rise has provoked far more anxiety than Carpenter realizes**. As Chinese power continues to grow (and that's going to happen regardless of U.S. strategy), more and more countries will

be willing to balance with the United States regardless of past military errors. Indeed, the "nationalistic swagger" that Carpenter references among Chinese policy circles is going to exacerbate and not retard this trend.

I agree with Carpenter that it would be better for the U.S. to reduce its overseas military posture, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. That said, China has profited surprisingly little from these missteps, and will experience greater geopolitical pushback over time. I'm also disappointed that Carpenter failed to address the question of how democratizing nations in the Middle East will view a China that continues to act in an authoritarian manner -- particularly towards its own Muslim population in Xinjiang. It's not a coincidence that Iranian protestors started chanting "**Death to China!**" back in 2009.

The bottom line is that Carpenter's analysis exhibits far too much of the doomsaying and pessimistic thinking that plagues American realists and their cheerleaders.