

**Summary:** Publics in Europe and the United States believe the global balance of power is shifting away from the North Atlantic toward East Asia. They see a China whose economic influence is on the rise while growth in the United States and Europe remains sluggish after five years of financial crisis. However, China's growing geo-economic stature has not led to more positive sentiment toward the People's Republic. For both Europeans and Americans, this is likely the result of unease about China as a commercial competitor that can economically supplant the United States, and a belief that Beijing would prefer not to take the interests of others into account in its foreign policy.

## U.S. and European Public Opinion on China

By Amy Studdart and Bruce Stokes

### Introduction

Publics in Europe and the United States believe the global balance of power is shifting away from the North Atlantic toward East Asia. They see a China whose economic influence is on the rise while growth in the United States and Europe remains sluggish after five years of financial crisis. Many Europeans and Americans already believe that China is the world's leading economic power. In most major European nations, majorities think that China will eventually supplant the United States as the world's dominant superpower.

However, China's growing geo-economic stature has not led to more positive sentiment toward the People's Republic. For both Europeans and Americans, this is likely the result of unease about China as a commercial competitor that can economically supplant the United States, and a belief that Beijing would prefer not to take the interests of others into account in its foreign policy. For Europeans, the low priority placed in Beijing on respect for the personal freedoms of its own people is a central concern; and in the United States, views of China are typically characterized by fears

about the U.S.-China trade deficit and Beijing's holding of U.S. debt.

### China's Leadership in World Affairs

Since the 2008 financial crisis, perceptions about the economic balance of power in the world have been shifting. In Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Poland, the median percentage of the public that names China as the world's leading economic power has grown from 29% since 2008 to 53%, according to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center. And in 2013, China was seen as the premier economy by 59% in Germany, 56% in Spain, 53% in Britain and France, and 39% in Poland. Notably, perception of China's economic prowess has grown 32 percentage points in Spain, 29 points in Germany, 24 points in Britain and Poland, and 22 points in France since 2008.

A similar, if less pronounced, change in perception of China has taken place in the United States. In 2013, 44% of Americans named China as the world's leading economic power, up from 26% in 2008.

The rise in China's reputation has paralleled a decline in views about the United States. The European median

# Paper Series

naming the United States as the economic superpower fell from 44% in 2008 to 33% in 2013. Europeans have less respect for their own status. Support for the countries in the European Union as the leading economy is in the single digits except in Germany (14%).

Moreover, Europeans strongly believe that China has already or will one day replace the United States as the world's superpower, including seven-in-ten in Spain (71%) and France (70%) and two-thirds (66%) in Britain and Germany. And 47% of Americans agree.

But neither Europeans nor Americans are particularly satisfied with China's rise. Skepticism of Chinese leadership in global affairs runs high in both Europe and the United States. Just one-quarter of Europeans (26%) see Beijing exerting strong leadership in global affairs as desirable, and two-in-three (65%) view it as undesirable, according to the German Marshall Fund's 2013 *Transatlantic Trends* survey. The picture in the United States is not much better: 42% say Chinese leadership would be desirable, 47% say undesirable.

By comparison, 71% of Europeans see European Union leadership as desirable and 57% support U.S. global leadership. American views are the mirror image: 77% back U.S. leadership and 55% see EU leadership as desirable.

One possible reason Americans and Europeans take a dim view of China's global leadership is the shared perception that Beijing acts without reference to the interests of others when it comes to international affairs. This concern about Beijing's failure to consider other countries' interests when making foreign policy decisions is strongly felt in Spain (85%), Italy (83%), France (83%), and Britain (82%). Americans (60%) are relatively less concerned.

## How Favorably China is Viewed

European and U.S. recognition of China's new found economic and strategic prowess has not made China any more popular. Barely one-third (37%) of Americans have a favorable view of China, as do just 28% of Germans and Italians. Median favorability of China in the eight European Union countries surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2013 was just 43%.

And this support is on a downward trajectory. Since 2011, positive views of China have fallen 14 percentage points

## European and U.S. recognition of China's new found economic and strategic prowess has not made China any more popular.

in the United States, 11 points in Britain, and 9 points in France.

However, China is notably more popular among young Americans and Europeans than among their elders. The generation gap — between the favorable view of China held by people aged 18 to 29 and the view held by people aged 50 and older — is 30 percentage points in the United States, 24 points in Poland, 18 points in France, 16 points in Britain, and 15 points in Italy.

*Transatlantic Trends* found similar results. China's favorability dropped substantially between 2012 and 2013. In 2012, 41% of both Americans and people in 11 European countries surveyed indicated that they viewed China favorably. By 2013, that number had declined to 31% in Europe and 32% in the United States. Of the countries surveyed, in two nations that Beijing has relatively stable political relationship with — Turkey and Germany — publics were among the least supportive of China. Only 22% of Germans said that they viewed China favorably and 35% of Turks said that they had a *very unfavorable* view of China (the highest of any country surveyed).

## Public Opinion on Chinese Policy

### Trade and Economics

Public wariness about China crystalizes around economic issues, particularly in the United States. Six-in-ten (62%) Americans say China represents a threat to jobs and economic security, according to GMF's 2013 survey. This proportion is up from 49% in 2010.

A plurality (46%) of Europeans agree, but this is actually down from 49% in 2010. And, within Europe, views vary wildly. Only 33% of the British and 27% of the Swedes and the Dutch perceive China as an economic threat. Meanwhile, two-thirds (65%) of the French feel economically

## Paper Series

threatened by China, as do other countries hard hit by the euro crisis: Portugal (56%) and Spain (56%).

Notably, both Europeans and Americans feel less intimidated by other emerging market economies. Just 23% of Europeans and 43% of Americans view Brazil, India, and Indonesia as economic threats.

A 2012 Pew Research Center survey highlighted some specific U.S. economic concerns about China. Nearly eight in ten Americans say the large amount of U.S. debt that is held by China is a very serious problem for the United States. Majorities also consider the loss of U.S. jobs to China (71%) and the U.S. trade deficit with China (61%) to be very serious.

### *Strategic Issues*

Most Americans describe relations between the United States and China as good, but most also consider China a competitor rather than an enemy or partner, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center survey.

Nevertheless, when asked which country represents the greatest danger to the United States, more Americans volunteer China (26 percent) than name any other country, including Iran and North Korea. And about half (52 percent) view China's emergence as a world power as a major threat to U.S. interests. Half (50%) say cyber attacks from China are a major problem. And nearly as many (49%) see China's growing military power as a big problem.

A similar proportion of Americans (49%) but fewer Europeans (37%) saw China as a military threat in 2013, according to *Transatlantic Trends*. U.S. attitudes have not changed much since 2007, when GMF first started asking this question, suggesting such sentiment reflects broad unease about China's strategic intentions rather than more immediate concern about Beijing's rising defense expenditures and its recent territorial frictions with its Asian neighbors.

Europeans' anxiety about a Chinese military threat has fluctuated, from a low of 30% in 2011 to a high of 39% in 2012. This statistic is striking considering the fact that Europe has no military presence in the Asia-Pacific, which means that the chances of any European country getting directly involved in an escalation of the various territorial spats in the region are negligible. Likewise, there is no likelihood

of a direct Chinese military threat anywhere near Europe's borders, at least for the foreseeable future. Europeans' concern, therefore, is most likely to be related to discomfort about China's rapid military build up, transnational threats to maritime routes and cyber-security, and a sense that China might use its military force against one of its neighbors, upsetting stability in the Asia-Pacific and challenging the global norms that Europe has been instrumental in building.

### *Soft Power*

Chinese soft power attributes, particularly how Beijing treats the civil liberties and human rights of its citizens, is a major shaper of public views of China in Europe and the United States. In both the United States and Europe, large majorities, including more than eight-in-ten in Germany (87%), France (86%), Spain (84%), and Italy (82%), and nearly seven-in-ten in the United States (71%) believe China does not respect the personal freedoms of its people, according to the 2013 Pew Research Center survey. Beijing's environmental policies also contribute to unease about China. Half of Americans say China's impact on the global environment is a major problem.

### *Moving Forward...*

2013 was bad year for China in terms of U.S. and European public opinion. One explanation is that China's economic and military rise has simply made China more visible and thus more susceptible to criticism. The re-emergence of any country as economically and strategically significant as China was always going to be threatening both from a commercial and security perspective. No one likes the

Chinese soft power attributes, particularly how Beijing treats the civil liberties and human rights of its citizens, is a major shaper of public views of China in Europe and the United States.

# Paper Series

biggest kid on the block, a lesson the United States, and before her Britain, had to learn. Beijing may simply have to grow a thick skin.

However, despite Beijing's ability to sustain good relationships with the capitals of countries whose populations have a low opinion of China, the continued decline of public opinion will not be without consequence. Elected politicians will, at some point, be pressured to respond to the views of their publics; the continued consumption of Chinese goods will partially depend on the appeal of "made in China," especially if Chinese companies want to move up the value chain into higher-end markets for its products, services, and technology; and the international pressure placed on Beijing over human rights, the environment, and its foreign policy role will only increase with China's influence.

An effective public diplomacy that puts an emphasis on transparency and communication can go some way to helping present the Chinese point of view. If Beijing wants to see public opinion in the United States and Europe improve, China's diplomats — official or cultural — must be liberated to communicate more openly with publics, and relations with foreign journalists will need to be repaired. China's internal economic, social, and political challenges have understandably taken center-stage in Beijing in recent years. But a strategy of keeping a low profile internationally cannot continue alongside news-grabbing economic clout, military expansion and increasingly visible disputes with neighbors.

But public opinion is driven by the public's experience and perceptions of Chinese actions. Europeans and Americans pick up on the headlines: mistreatment of foreign journalists; clashes between government and Chinese activists; smog, pollution, and environmental disasters; unfair economic and trade policies; poor relations with neighbors; good relations with pariah states; and worrying approaches to investment in the developing world.

An effective public diplomacy is undoubtedly a necessary component of Chinese foreign policy, but successful public diplomacy is necessarily rooted in substance. As long as China is running a huge trade surplus with the United

States and Europe, contributing to job losses, and as long as Beijing sees the civil liberties of its citizens as a matter of low priority, U.S. and European publics will remain uneasy about China's rise.

## About the Authors

Amy Studdart is the program officer for Asia and Bruce Stokes is a non-resident fellow, both at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

## About the Stockholm China Forum

This is part of a series of papers informing and informed by discussions at the Stockholm China Forum. The Stockholm China Forum is an initiative of the German Marshall Fund, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. It brings together policymakers, intellectuals, journalists, and businesspeople from Europe, the United States, and Asia on a biannual basis for an ongoing and systematic dialogue to assess the impact of China's rise and its implications for European and U.S. foreign, economic, and security policy.

## About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.