

Hegemonic Shift? Public Perceptions of U.S.-China Relations

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The Global Financial Crisis that struck in late 2008 provoked further debate on the rise of China and the future of U.S. dominance in the world. Out of this came the talk of a G-2 between China and the United States to cope with the major complex challenges in the world. This seemed to be a significant upgrade from the previous calls for China to become a “responsible stakeholder.”¹ Previously, China had embraced the stakeholder role through various international commitments, for example dispatching naval ships to combat against piracy in the Gulf of Aden but has shown caution toward the idea of a G-2. While it has become more engaged in international issues, Beijing’s behavior adjusted somewhat in 2010 as it has become more assertive on its own national interests.

Beginning with conflicts over arms sales to Taiwan, the visit of the Dalai Lama to the White House, and human rights issues, the disputes between the United States and China reached a height in 2010 over responses to North Korea’s sinking of a South Korean navy vessel. In general, it was observed that China had become more vocal and forceful on the issues that it considers as its “core interests.”

Since the economic crisis, it has been common to perceive of a narrowing power gap between a rising China and a United States in relative decline. Domestic perceptions are at the heart of this and their view of a narrowing power gap has an influence on foreign policy. In China, strong calls for a tougher policy toward the United States from the public have grown since 2008. (Christensen, 2011) Similarly, in the United States there are popular voices for tougher economic policies toward China, in particular on the issue of China’s appreciation of its currency and practices of fair trade.² To what extent have domestic perceptions in the United States and China changed toward each other in the Post-Crisis era? Have changing perceptions on the power gap also affected views on bilateral issues?

This U.S.-China Watch attempts to understand Chinese and American domestic opinion on bilateral relations by gathering together data from several public opinion surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), Globescan/Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), and Pew. There are three ways in which domestic views are presented, perceptions of the power gap between the two countries, bilateral perceptions of each other, and global perceptions toward the United States and China. Much of the data in this study covers a timeline from 2005 to 2011 so as to grasp better the changing public opinion before and after the financial crisis.



1. Perceptions of the Power Gap

Pessimistic View of U.S Influence and Power

The view in America toward U.S. influence and power in the world has become more pessimistic reflecting the impact of the financial crisis since 2008. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010 survey, Americans had tended to view the United States as the leading economic power, but this has ebbed slightly over the years as the recession has taken a hold and the economy struggles to recover (Figure 1).³ In 2008 46% of Americans viewed the United States as the leading economic power, but by 2010 this had dropped to 38%.

At the same time, there is increasing recognition among Americans of China's economic ascendancy. In 2008 only 26% saw China as the leading economy, yet by 2010 this number had increased to 41%, slightly above the United States (38%). This is in line with much of the common thinking that China will overtake the United States as the leading economy in the next ten to twenty years.⁴

Pessimistic views among Americans are also found when looking toward the future. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) Global Views 2010 survey measured American perceptions on U.S. power in fifty years revealing that they do recognize the power of emerging economies in the world (Figure 2).⁵ In 2006, a similar percentage of Americans answered that the United States would continue as the world's only superpower (40%) or another power would be equal to the United States (39%). However, by 2010 the percentage that sees the United States continuing as a superpower has declined to 33%. Interestingly, the number who sees another power overtaking the United States increased over the same period from 16% to 26%. This reveals that Americans expect the future will be multipolar as Washington will have to contend with rising powers such as China.

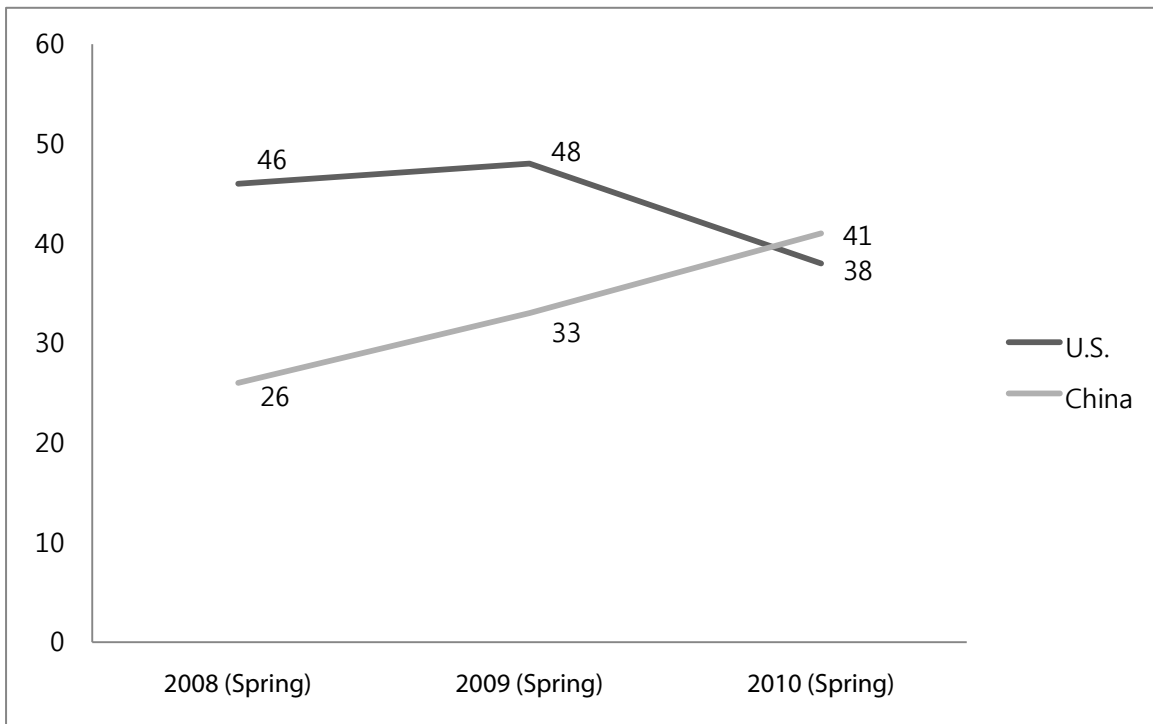
Growing Optimism in China

The pessimistic views of U.S. power among Americans are also reflected in current views on the state of the country. When compared with Chinese respondents they are overwhelmingly downbeat. Figure 3 shows the percentage of Americans who are satisfied with the national conditions of their country. The numbers have generally been low, even before the financial crisis began in 2008 and may reflect the general pessimism that characterized the Bush era. The spike in 2009 following Obama's election may show a new hope for optimism, but the number dips down again in 2010. Chinese respondents, by contrast, express strong satisfaction with the way their country is being run. This certainly reflects strong optimism in China that their country is on the right track.

Figure 4 is more evident of the negative impact that the financial crisis has had on American views of their country. The percentage who believes that the economy is in good shape dips down from 50% in 2007 to 17% in 2009. Chinese respondents have a very strong confidence in their economy, 91% express that China's economy is in a good shape in 2010.

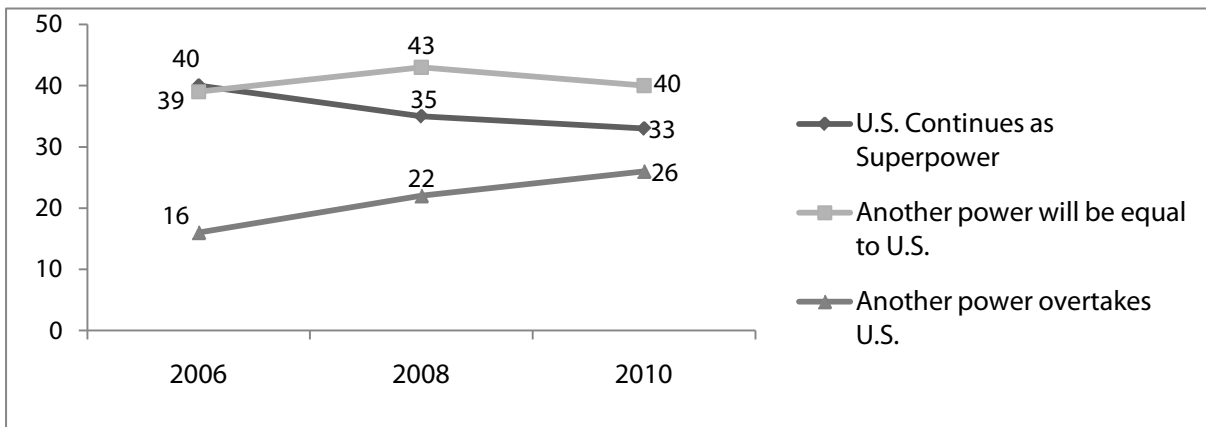


Figure 1: Percentage of Americans who believe whether the United States or China is the leading economic power today, 2008-2010



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010, Q25

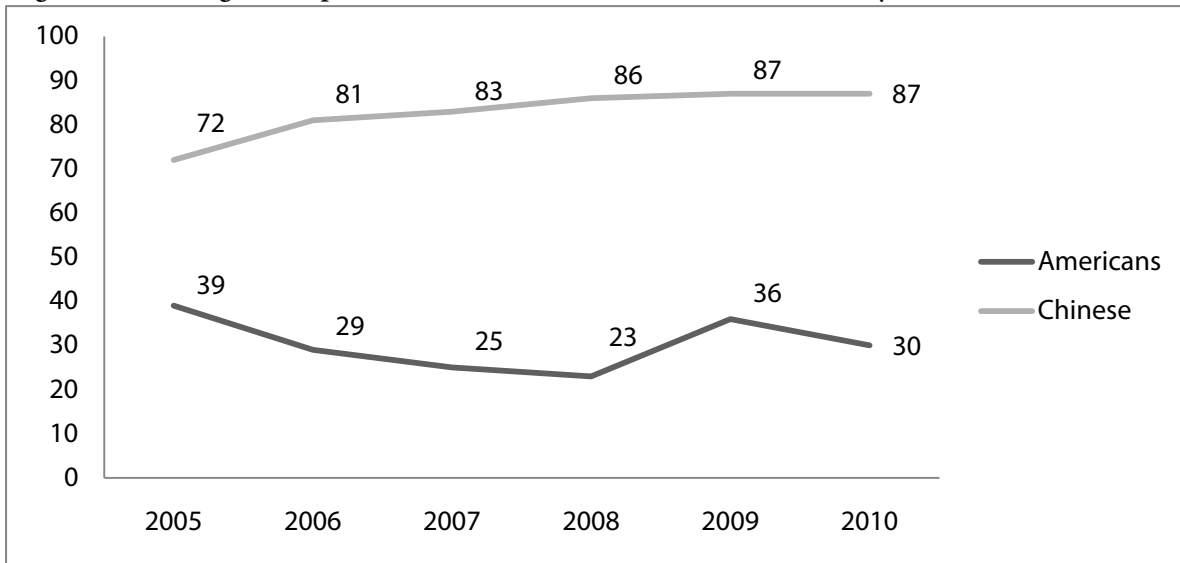
Figure 2: American Views of U.S Power in Fifty Years, 2006-2010



Source: CCGA Global Views 2010, Q170

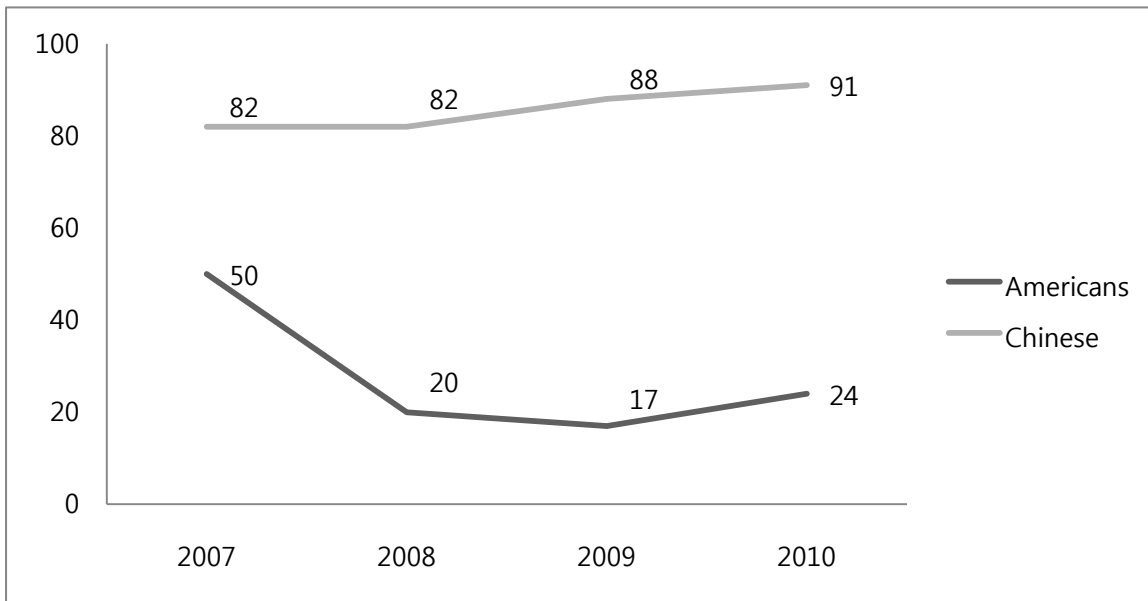


Figure 3: Percentage of Respondents Satisfied with the State of their Country, 2005-2010



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010, Q5

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents Who Believe National Economy Is In a Good Shape, 2007-2010



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010, Q12

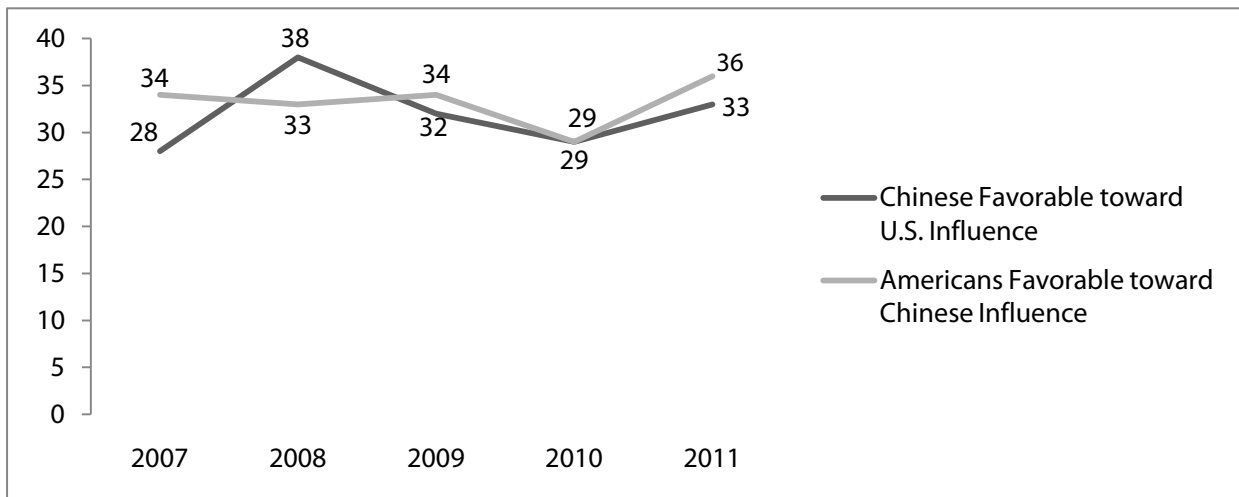


2. Bilateral Perceptions and U.S.-China Relations

Negative Views

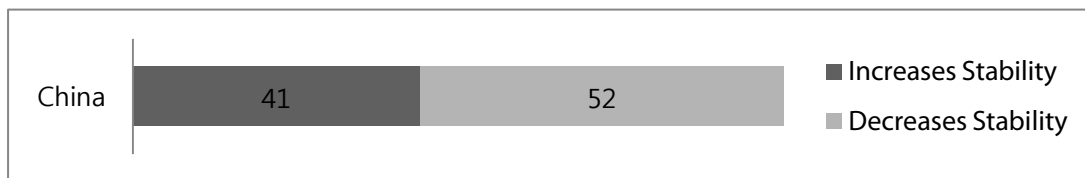
Negative perceptions of the other exist in both China and the United States (Figure 5). Among Americans, only 36% view China’s global influence in a favorable way and for Chinese only 33% view U.S global influence as positive. These low percentages account for the different perceptions that Chinese and Americans hold of each other’s global influence. For Americans, the main negative perceptions of China are related to its growing economic dominance and an increasingly assertive behavior in Asia.

Figure 5: Bilateral perceptions of China and U.S. global influence, 2007-2011



Source: GlobeScan/PIPA

Figure 6: Chinese View of U.S. Military Presence in East Asia, 2008



Source: EAI/CCGA Asia Soft Power Survey 2008, Q355

Protecting the jobs of workers at home is the key foreign policy priority among Americans according to the recent CCGA 2010 Global Views survey. A key issue in this regard is China’s valuation of its currency which is one of the main sources of friction in the bilateral relationship. 71% of Americans express “concern”



about Beijing keeping its currency cheap to make its exports more competitive (see Figure 8).

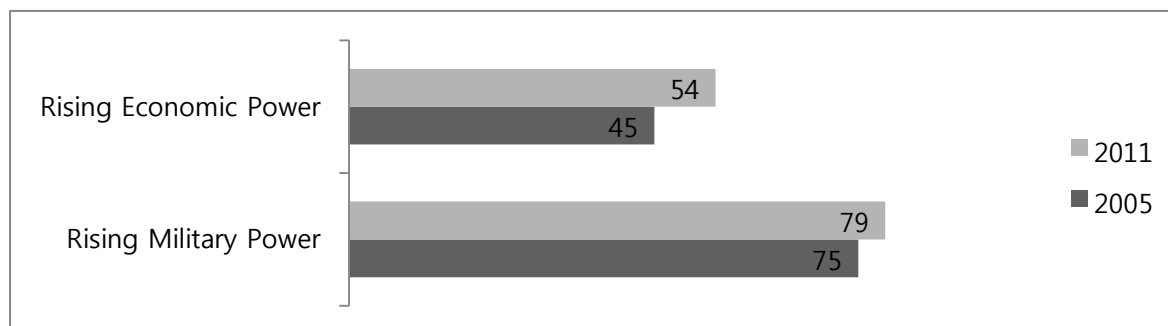
China's assertive behavior has also become a source of concern as "Making sure China does not dominate the Korean Peninsula" is listed as a foreign policy goal in the Global Views 2010 survey. Although only 21% say that this should be a foreign policy goal, the fact that it did generate a response at all shows a degree of concern about Beijing's unquestioned support for North Korea in 2010.

For their part, Chinese tend to have negative perceptions about U.S. global power in terms of its military presence overseas that it views as a destabilizing and threatening factor. In 2006, at the height of the U.S. War on Terror, 72% of Chinese respondents believed that the U.S. military presence in the Middle East provoked more conflict than it prevented. In a CCGA-EAI survey on Soft Power in East Asia from 2008 (Figure 6), 52% answered that the U.S. military presence in East Asia decreases stability. Yet this is a complicated picture as in the same survey, 66% of Chinese viewed U.S. influence in Asia as having a positive role. Furthermore, Chinese respondents also recognized that the basing of U.S. forces in the region helps to prevent an arms race between China and Japan. 61% viewed that it would be "likely" that a China-Japan arms race would develop were the United States to withdraw its troops.

China's Rising Power

Americans are cautious toward China's rise (Figure 7), mainly in regard to its rising military power. The impact though of the financial crisis on these perceptions is not so clear. Negative perceptions of China's rising military power showed little increase, going from 75% in 2005 to 79% in 2011. This reflects concern over Beijing's continued military budget increases and growing regional capabilities that are not matched by any improvement in the transparency of its spending or intentions. Appendix I shows China's current military capabilities in comparison to the United States, while not equal in global terms, Beijing possesses a strong capability to project its interest in the region.

Figure 7: Comparison of Negative Views in the United States toward China's rising power, 2005 and 2011

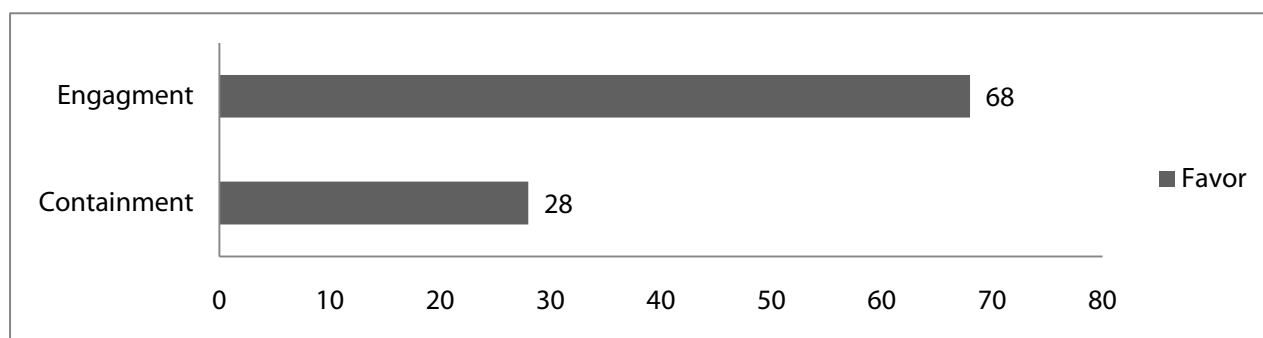


Source: GlobeScan/PIPA



Negative perceptions on China's rising economic power though have increased marginally, reflecting a complicated picture. Americans are concerned about job protection at home, the fairness of China's trade, and other bilateral economic issues. Yet they also recognize both positive and negative benefits from China's rising economic power. In the CCGA Global Views 2010 survey, 50% of Americans believed that the effects of China's economic growth were equally positive and negative. Overall, Americans do not support policies to contain China's rise (Figure 8), rather they favor more engagement policies that will enhance friendly relations.

Figure 8: Americans' Views on how the U.S. should deal with the rise of China, 2010



Source: CCGA Global Views 2010, Q350

Note: In the survey, engagement is "Undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China," containment is "Actively work to limit the growth of China's power."

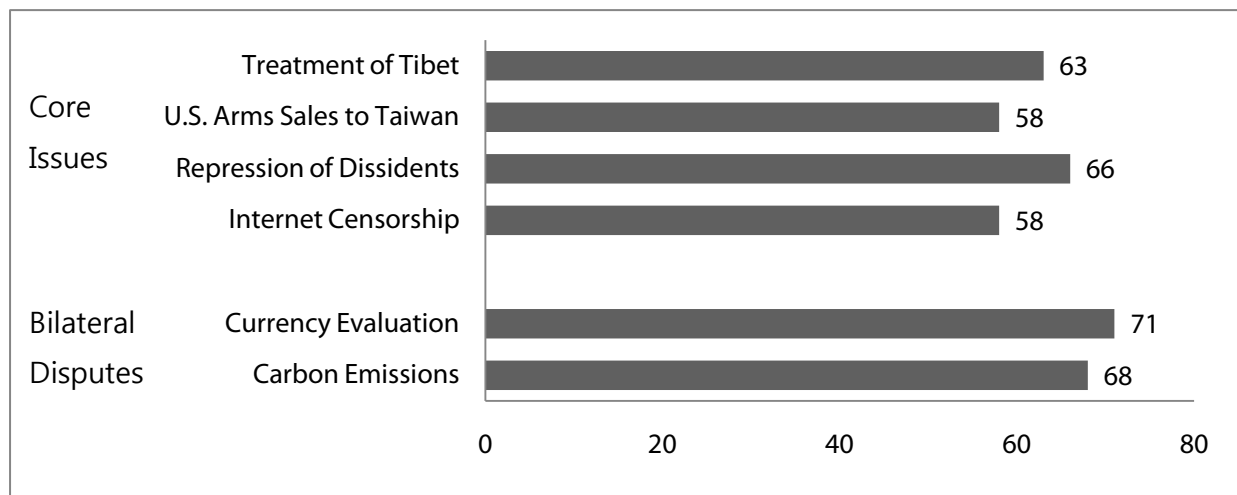
U.S. Public Opinion and China's Interests

Throughout 2010 China became more assertive over its "core interests" which were some of the main contentious issues in U.S.-China relations. The question of what constitutes a "core interest" for Beijing is debatable, for example whether the South China Sea is or not. In general though, "core interests" are related to an issue that the Chinese government consider non-negotiable and is unwilling to make any compromise over. (Swaine 2011) The CCGA Global Views 2010 survey included a question on American views on major issues in U.S.-China Relations. This list of issues can be divided into what Beijing would consider a "core interest," i.e. non-negotiable and what would be a bilateral dispute that could be discussed. Americans tend to show more concern over the issues that the Chinese government would be willing to discuss. In line with the previous data, the currency issue is of most concern for Americans (Figure 9).

Tibet and particularly the Taiwan issue is of less concern for Americans. The Taiwan issue for Americans is becoming less of a priority either due to the rapprochement between China and Taiwan or because of the growing stature of China. Elsewhere in the same Global Views survey, only 20% regard a conflict between China and Taiwan as a major threat, while a strong 71% oppose the use of U.S. troops if China invaded Taiwan.



Figure 9: Percentage of Americans Concerned About Major Issues in U.S.-China Relations, 2010



Source: CCGA Global Views 2010, Q360

Note: Concern includes respondents who answered to concerned and somewhat concerned

G-2 Era? Divisions and Convergences in Foreign Policy Goals

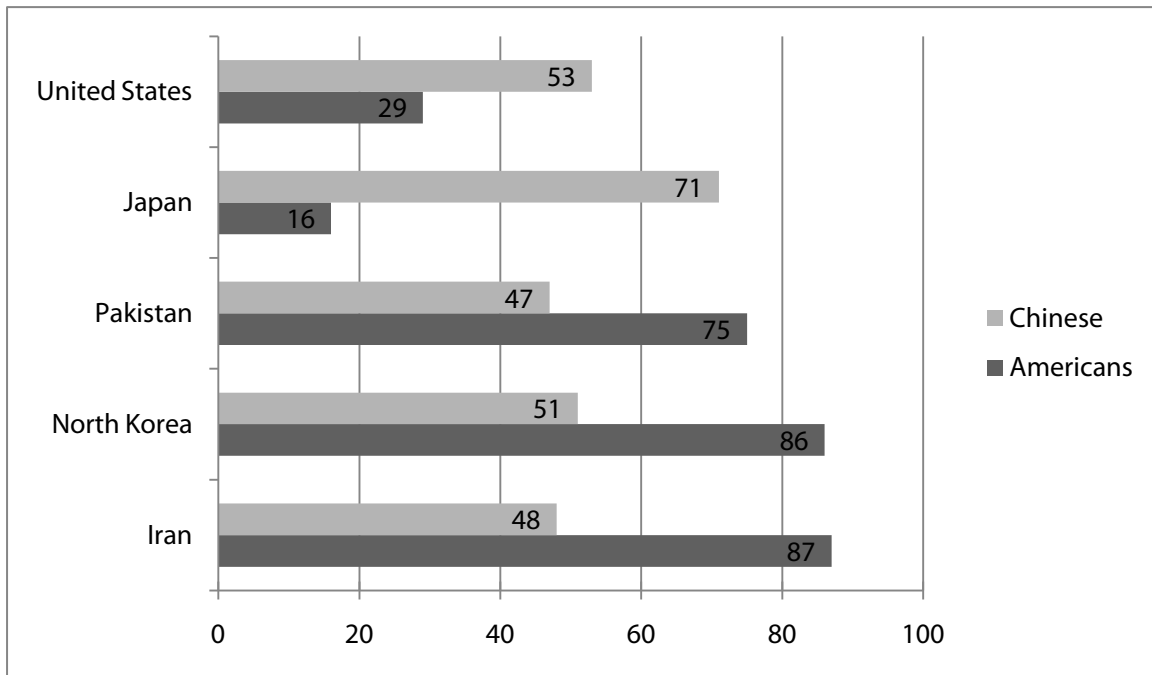
The notion of a G-2 between the United States and China remains controversial, regarded either as premature or unrealistic. (Economy and Sigal 2009) When the idea was initially put forward by proponents such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, the argument was made for the United States and China to enhance cooperation on major global issues.⁶ Climate change, terrorism, Iran's nuclear program, and North Korea were some of the main challenges in which the two countries were called to cooperate more on. At the domestic level though, public opinion on these issues show slight differences (Figure 10). The countries that Americans have the strongest negative perceptions on their global influence are Iran and North Korea. Both countries are "outliers" who are at the heart of nuclear proliferation concerns. Similarly, Americans have more negative perceptions toward the influence of Pakistan which is regarded as an unofficial sponsor of terrorism. Chinese respondents do not share such strong negative perceptions on the influence of the "outlier" countries. Rather they have stronger negative views of Japan's global influence. With unresolved issues over history and maritime disputes, many Chinese are concerned about Japan's influence in the world. After Japan, the global influence of the United States is viewed negatively.

Older data from 2006 (Figures 11 and 12) shows a similar picture yet also reveals areas where foreign policy priorities match among the public of the two countries. In identifying the main foreign policy goals, Americans tend to view terrorism and nuclear proliferation as higher priorities than Chinese do. However, job protection and economic growth are regarded in a similar way among Americans and Chinese.

Critical threats to vital interests also show a difference where Chinese tend to be more concerned about major diseases while Americans are concerned with terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Climate change and energy security though are issues of mutual concern.



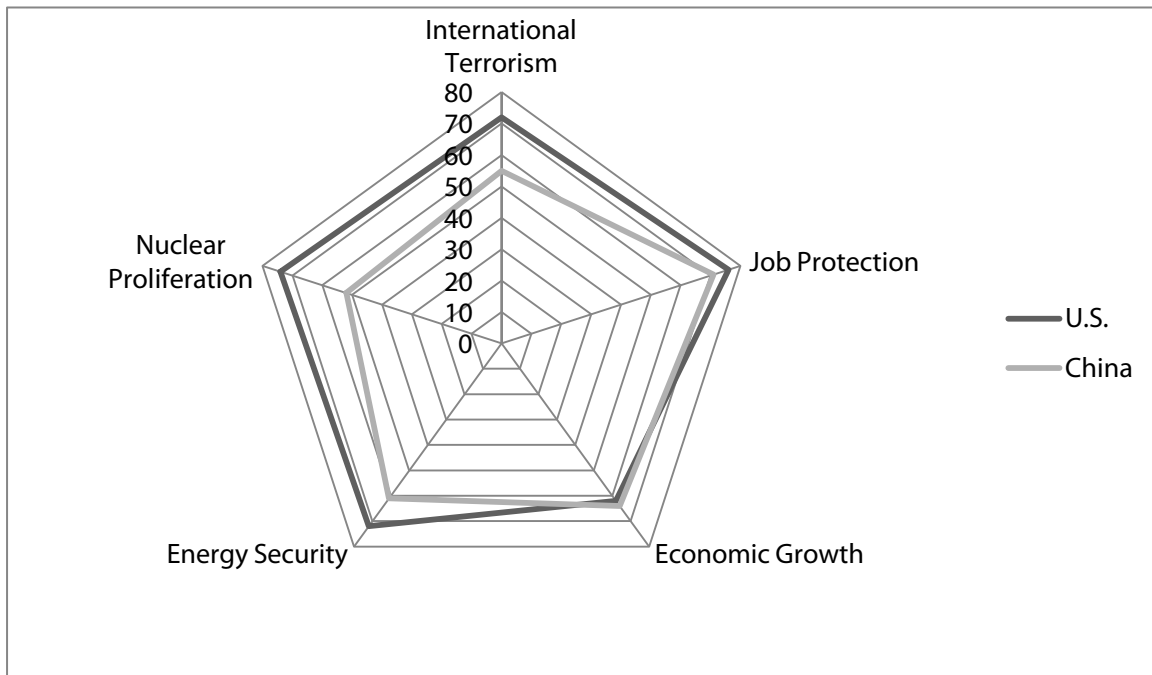
Figure 10: Percentages of Americans and Chinese Negative Perceptions toward Countries, 2011



Source: GlobeScan/PIPA

Note: Question asked “Please tell me if you think each of the following countries is having a mainly positive or mainly negative influence in the world.”

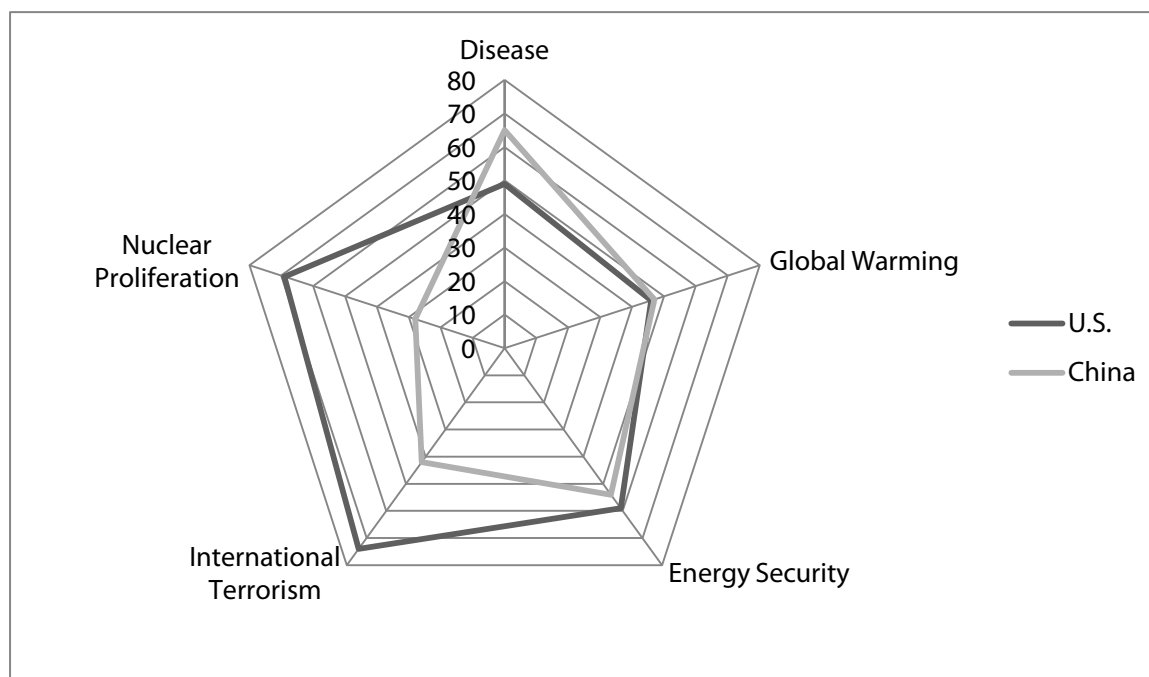
Figure 11: U.S. and Chinese Main Foreign Policy Goals, 2006



Source: CCGA Global Views 2006, Q5



Figure 12: U.S. and Chinese Critical Threats to Vital Interests, 2006



Source: CCGA Global Views 2006, Q3

3. Global Perceptions of the United States and China

The World Likes Obama and China's Economy

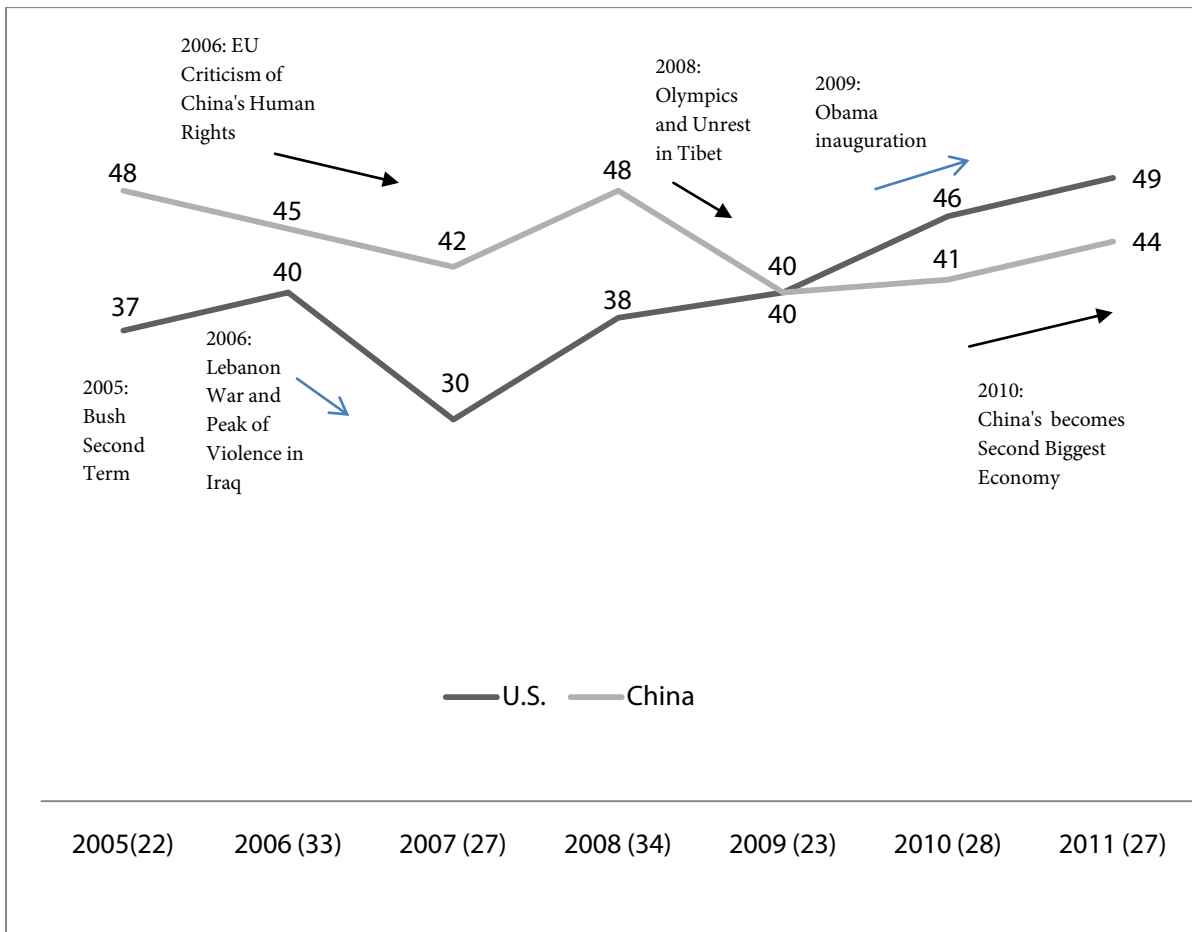
Global perceptions of the United States and China, while not strongly favorable, have improved in recent years. Covering the timeline from 2005 to 2011 (Figure 13), the survey data shows the favorable perceptions toward the U.S. and China's global influence.

From 2006 until 2008, the United States suffers a great deal as the global average drops down 10 percentage points. This certainly is an effect from U.S. policies in the Middle East as part of the wider "War on Terrorism" that was deeply unpopular in parts of the world. During this period, the war in Iraq was worsening while the U.S. also backed Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006. China at the same time had favorable perceptions due to its positive international role as a "responsible stakeholder," particularly its involvement in the Six-Party Talks. However, positive perceptions of China declines as European countries are concerned about human rights. While the 2008 Beijing Olympics seems to have had some positive effect, it also had a negative impact. After 2008, China's favorability rating drops eight percentage points. This may partially be explained by the negative perceptions of human rights in the media during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The 2008 unrest in Tibet also damaged China's reputation internationally along with focus on Beijing's overseas support for repressive regimes such as Sudan and Burma. This kind of negative media coverage, particularly in European countries is a major challenge for enhancing China's soft power.⁷



Both countries from 2009 begin to improve their image. For the United States the inauguration of President Barack Obama certainly contributed to this increase. China's growing economic influence in Africa and Latin America where it has increased aid and investment will have certainly contributed to a favorable view of its global influence.

Figure 13: Global Responses to U.S. and China positive global influence, 2005-2011



Note: Number in brackets denotes number of countries surveyed in that year.

Source: EAI/GlobeScan/PIPA



Appendix I: U.S.-China Hard Power Gap

		China	United States
Economy	Gross Domestic Product (Nominal in U.S.\$ billions)	5,878.257	14,657.800
	GDP per Capita (Nominal)	4,382.136	47,283.633
Defense Budget	2011/ FY2012 (in dollars)	91.5 billion*	671 billion (includes 118 billion OCO Funding)**
	Percentage increase from previous year	12.7%	-37.3%
Naval Forces	Aircraft Carriers	1 (Under construction)	11
	Submarines***	65 (3 strategic/62 tactical)	71 (14 strategic/57 tactical)
	Cruisers/Destroyers	0/28	22/56
	Frigates	52	21
	Naval aircrafts	290	900
	Littoral and Coastal Vessels	253	2 (20+ ordered)
	Air Power	Tactical Aircrafts	1,383
Stealth fighters		1?	137
Long-Range Strike Aircrafts		82	151
Long-Range Strike Aircrafts (Stealth bombers)		0	20
Tankers/ Airborne Early Warning		18/6	512/50
Transports		296	844
Unmanned Aerial Vehicles		?	158
Strategic Forces	Nuclear Warheads	175	5,113

Source: IMF, IISS *The Military Balance 2010*, U.S. Department of Defense

* Officially announced budget at the 11th National People Congress, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/04/c_13761030.htm

**Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) is the separate funding for the war on terror including the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*** Strategic submarines are those capable of launching ballistic missiles, tactical submarines are both diesel and nuclear-powered attack submarines. The United States has only nuclear-powered submarines.



Notes

¹ Former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick coined the phrase “responsible stakeholder” in a speech to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations on September 21, 2005.

² Pew Research Group, “Strengthen Ties with China, But Get Tough on Trade,” January 12, 2011 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1855/china-poll-americans-want-closer-ties-but-tougher-trade-policy>

³ See Pew Global Attitudes Project 2010 <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Spring-2010-Report.pdf>

⁴ “Dating Game: When Will China Overtake the United States?” *Economist*, Dec 16th 2010

⁵ See CCGA Global Views 2010 <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Spring-2010-Report.pdf>

⁶ *Financial Times*, January 13, 2009. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d99369b8-e178-11dd-afa0-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz1MmZi2gSN>, see also Bergsten 2008.

⁷ For more on China’s negative influence in Europe see d’Hooghe, Ingrid “The Limits of China’s Soft Power in Europe” in Lee and Melissen 2011.

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