

Rising China and the Chinese Public's Security Perceptions

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May 2012

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I. Introduction

During the last decade, scholars in international relations as well as policymakers have debated how to interpret the impact of China's rapid rise on world politics. Should we consider China's rise as a potential threat to its neighboring countries, the United States, and existing international rules and norms? Is China a status quo power, or an aggressive challenger to the existing U.S.-centric world order? Diverse views and answers have been generated surrounding these questions. However, such answers tend to focus on how observers *outside* of China should interpret the security implications of China's rise. Much less is known about how the *Chinese* perceive their security environment and China's increasing national power. This situation is rather ironic, because, to explain the security implications of China's rise, understanding Chinese perceptions of China's security priorities, national power and status, and proper international role is essential and more important than merely relying on outsiders' speculations regarding China's intentions.

This working paper thus raises a question that is different from the questions commonly asked thus far: how does the Chinese public perceive China's security environment and the rise of China? More specifically, what do ordinary Chinese regard as the biggest security threat to China? Is the United States considered a rival, an enemy, or a potential threat to China's national security? Does the Chinese public understand today's world as a U.S.-dominated system that is hostile to China? How do ordinary Chinese perceive the level of China's national power and international status, and what do they think that China should do with its increasing power?



This working paper acknowledges that the Chinese public's direct impact on foreign policies is limited. As in any country, ordinary Chinese do not have enough information on or expertise in international affairs and tend not to care much about the details of foreign policies that do not seem to have a direct impact on their daily lives. Furthermore, living under the authoritarian regime, the general Chinese public has little access to the national policymaking process in general, and is almost completely excluded from the closed foreign policymaking at the top leadership level. All in all, the Chinese public does not determine how China behaves.

Nevertheless, that does *not* mean that the Chinese public's perceptions of national security and status are insignificant. Even an authoritarian regime cannot simply resort to oppression and propaganda but needs a certain level of popular support and legitimacy to survive and thrive. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), facing the serious side effects of rapid economic growth and marketization, such as widening social disparity, rising unemployment, and growing signs of social unrest, has struggled with its withering ideological appeal to the public and increasingly turned to nationalism as an alternative justification for its reign. The current Chinese regime cannot ignore what the general public thinks, especially when the issues at hand ignite nationalistic sentiments among the public and the public demands more assertive and aggressive positions of the government. Public sentiments and perceptions regarding China's national security as well as China's international status and role can limit political leaders' policy options either by generating fears of an angry backlash from the public against the regime or by showing the extent to which the leaders can mobilize broader support for their policy positions and preferences. While the Chinese public does not determine how China behaves, the Chinese public can set *constraints* on how China behaves.

To analyze how the Chinese public perceives China's security environment and the rise of China's national power, this working paper utilizes a recent survey designed by a team of scholars including the author, with the support of the East Asia Institute (EAI)'s Asia Security Initiative Research Center. The survey was conducted in China for fifteen days from August 26 to September 9, 2011. It drew on a random sample of 1,029 Chinese over the age of 19 in ten major Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Shenyang, Xian, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chongqing, Tianjin, and Nanjing. Respondents were selected by random digit dialing (RDD) to wire (50 percent) and wireless (50 percent) telephones using a computer assigned telephone interviewing (CATI) program. The survey outcome presented here reveals how the Chinese public perceives China's security environment as well as China's international status and role, and sheds new light on how rising China is likely to behave in the future.



This working paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 examines what the Chinese public regards as major threats to China. It discusses the security priorities of the general public as well as the Chinese public's perception of the United States in comparison to other neighboring countries. Section 3 analyzes how the Chinese public perceives China's international status and role. It discusses how the Chinese public understands power distribution in today's world, how the public evaluates China's power and status in the existing international order, and what kind of role the Chinese public expects China to play with its increasing power. The final section summarizes the findings of this working paper and discusses their implications.

II. Chinese Perceptions of External Threats

1. Top Security Threats: Energy, Environment, and Health Issues

What does the Chinese public perceive as the biggest threat to China's national interests? Considering the heated discussion regarding China as a potential threat to its neighboring countries and the United States as well as the popular portrayal of China as the rival of the United States, the Chinese might also consider the economic competition and military conflicts with neighboring countries or the United States as the biggest potential threats to China's national interests. The outcome, however, is rather unexpected.

The survey asks 1,029 surveyees how they evaluate the possibilities that major security issues would threaten China's national interests during the next decade. Table 1 presents the answers in the order of the magnitude of perceived threat (based on the percentages summed in column 3). Interestingly, the top three issues, holding considerably higher percentages than the rest in column 3, are neither economic nor military threats from other countries. First of all, over 90 percent of the respondents think that disruption in the energy supply would threaten China's national interests during the next decade, making it the most serious threat to China's national interests in the near future. Almost 50 percent of the respondents regard the energy shortage as "very threatening," which shows the sense of urgency shared among the public about a possible energy crisis. A stable energy supply is key to sustainable economic growth, and the heavy concerns about the energy shortage reveal that at the core of the Chinese public's perceptions of national threats are the Chinese economy and its internal vulnerability.



The other two issues on the list are also far from economic conflicts with or direct military threats from particular external competitors or enemies. These issues are global warming and the spread of pandemics, which are connected to the quality and safety of daily life for ordinary Chinese. Of the respondents, 87.9 percent of the respondents think that global warming is threatening, while 87 percent regard the spread of pandemics such as AIDS and avian flue as threatening China's national interests. Considering that global warming, despite its gravity, is an on-going and long-term problem that does not easily bring out a sense of imminent crisis and fear among the public, it is interesting that as many as 42.4 percent of the respondents answer that global warming is "very threatening" to China's national interests.

<Table 1> How do you evaluate the degree of the following factor's threat to China's national interests during the next decade?

	(1) Very threatening (%)	(2) Somewhat threatening (%)	(3) 1+2 (%)	(4) Not threatening (%)	(5) Don't know /No response (%)
Disruption in the Energy supply	48.0	43.1	91.1	8.2	0.8
Global warming	42.4	45.5	87.9	10.2	1.9
Spread of pandemics	34.3	52.7	87.0	12.2	0.8
Japan's remilitarization	32.4	45.3	77.7	20.6	1.7
Unilateral U.S. foreign policy	22.3	52.0	74.3	19.9	5.8
International terrorism	20.6	53.2	73.8	25.4	0.9
U.S. military presence in Asia	22.3	51.4	73.7	24.4	1.9
Military conflict between the two Koreas	14.1	54.3	68.4	30.1	1.5
Economic competition between Asian countries	13.3	52.6	65.9	32.2	1.9

All in all, the keywords describing what ordinary Chinese perceive as the top national security threats are the following: *energy*, *environment*, and *public health*. Although the energy issue carries the possibility of competition and conflicts with other nations over energy resources, the environment and public health issues require long-term cooperation and mutual assistance with other countries. Even the concerns regarding the energy supply do not necessarily suggest that the Chinese public sees the issue in terms of competition with other countries. This list of top security threats implies that the Chinese public neither understands China's international political and economic environment as highly threatening



nor perceives China's national interests in terms of a zero-sum conflict with other countries. The Chinese public in this picture is not an aggressive, nationalistic mass that is agitated by the United States and other powerful countries as many outside observers tend to assume. The strong concerns about domestic economic, environmental and public health problems rather suggest that at the core of the Chinese public's apprehension is domestic stability.

2. The United States: An Enemy or a Friend?

Additional contradictions to common assumptions can be found in table 1. The next four issues on the list are possible unilateral external threats to China. Among them the biggest threat is Japan's remilitarization (77.7 percent), which is regarded as a bigger threat than the hard reality of the U.S. military presence in Asia (73.7 percent) or unilateral U.S. foreign policy (74.3 percent), which could cause harm to Chinese national interests in diverse issue areas. The relatively small difference among the four factors in column 3 widens considerably in the "very threatening" category in column 1. There, 32.4 percent of the respondents think that Japan's remilitarization is very threatening to China's national interests, while much fewer people regard unilateral U.S. foreign policy (22.3 percent) and the U.S. military presence in Asia (22.3 percent) as very threatening. This outcome shows the Chinese public's strong wariness of Japan and its attempts to build up military capacity, which in itself is not surprising considering Chinese deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiments and the tragic historical experiences that resulted from the Japanese military rise during the first half of the 20th century. Yet it is interesting that ordinary Chinese regard the current U.S. military presence in the region as considerably less threatening than Japan's remilitarization, which goes against the image of an intense rivalry between the "G2" that the general "China threat" perspective tends to establish.

Such a public attitude can be found in table 2 as well. Respondents were asked to show their liking for major neighboring countries and the United States by scoring them on a scale of 0 to 100 (100 is the highest score), and table 2 presents the average score of each country in the order of preference. Japan gets the lowest score (35.6), which confirms that Japan is most hated by ordinary Chinese. What is interesting is the comparatively high position of the United States on the list (54.5), which corresponds to the relatively low threat perception regarding the U.S. presented in table 1. The United States is only next to Russia (60.8), and among the top three most liked countries in the list along with Russia and North Korea (54.3). Considering the sentimental ties with the former and current socialist nations, the high preference given to Russia and North Korea is understandable. However,



the fact that the United States is liked as much as North Korea by ordinary Chinese is interesting and noteworthy.

<Table 2> Please evaluate how much you like the following country, on a scale of 0 to 100
(100 is the highest score)

	Average score
Russia	60.8
United States	54.5
North Korea	54.3
South Korea	53
India	45.1
Vietnam	39.8
Japan	35.6

More intriguing is that the Chinese liking for the United States is an ambivalent and potentially volatile sentiment. Table 3 presents whether the respondents agree that the same given set of countries respect China. The percentages of positive answers summed up in column 3 reveal an order quite similar to the likeness order in table 2 except for the changed rank of the United States. North Korea (76.8 percent) and Russia (76.0 percent), the former or current ideological comrades of China, are regarded as having high respect for China, while Japan, with the strikingly low score of 17.7 percent, is regarded as looking down on China. Up to this point the ranking is not unexpected. What stands out on the list is the low percentage of the United States (34.1 percent). The United States is the Chinese public's favorite except for Russia, yet is ranked as the country that disrespects China most among the listed countries with the exception of Japan that is clearly hated by Chinese. In other words, ordinary Chinese quite like the United States but tend to feel that it looks down on the Chinese motherland. Such interesting ambivalence suggests that their good feelings toward the United States are fragile and could easily turn into animosity, especially when the sense of disrespect is prompted. This point needs to be noted, since a similar sense of disrespect is consistently revealed in the next section, indicating potential nationalistic antagonism against the United States.



<Table 3> Do you agree that the following country respects China?

	(1) Strongly agree (%)	(2) Agree in general (%)	(3) 1+2 (%)	(4) Don't agree much (%)	(5) Don't agree at all (%)	(6) 3+4 (%)	(7) Don't know /No response (%)
Russia	11.3	64.7	76.0	17.3	4.3	21.6	2.4
United States	3.9	30.2	34.1	40.7	24.4	65.1	0.8
North Korea	19.9	56.9	76.8	15.5	6.2	21.7	1.5
South Korea	6.0	48.8	54.8	30.7	12.6	43.3	1.8
India	4.4	42.0	46.4	35.5	15.4	50.9	2.8
Vietnam	3.9	36.8	40.7	38.6	18.4	57.0	2.3
Japan	2.1	15.6	17.7	43.3	38.1	81.4	0.8

Table 4 presents answers to a more direct question about the respondents' views on the given countries' effects on China's national security. Obvious is the Chinese public's strong wariness and distrust of Japan, which is consistent with the findings of tables 2 and 3. Based on the percentages of positive and negative answers summed up in columns 3 and 7 respectively, only 10.3 percent (the lowest percentage) think that Japan positively affects China's national security, while 67.2 percent (the highest percentage) think that the effect is negative. Russia and North Korea's effects are viewed positively as expected, and the remaining order of South Korea, India, and Vietnam is also unchanged from tables 2 and 3. Again, noteworthy is the view toward the United States.

To begin with, in column 4 of table 4, the percentage of those who think that the United States has no effect on China's national security is the lowest of all (16.2 percent), suggesting that ordinary Chinese think of the United States as possibly the most important actor who can significantly affect China's national security, either positively or negatively. Then to compare columns 3 and 7, negative evaluations overwhelm positive ones. The percentage of those who believe that the United States positively affects China's national security (23.6 percent) ranks fourth, after Russia, North Korea, and South Korea. But the percentage of respondents who think that the United States negatively affects China's national security (57.8 percent) is considerably higher, second only to the equivalent percentage regarding Japan (67.2 percent). In sum, there is a general consensus on the significant role of the United States in China's national security. While many acknowledge a certain level of positive impacts, the majority believe that the United States affects China's national security negatively.



<Table 4> How do you evaluate that the following country's effect on China's national security?

	(1) Very positive (%)	(2) Somewhat positive (%)	(3) 1+2 (%)	(4) No effect (%)	(5) Some- what negative (%)	(6) Very negative (%)	(7) 5+6 (%)	(8) Don't know/ No re- sponse (%)
Russia	4.7	39.7	44.4	36.1	14.5	2.1	16.6	3.0
United States	1.2	22.4	23.6	16.2	41.9	15.9	57.8	2.3
North Korea	6.5	32.7	39.2	42.3	13.2	2.8	16.0	2.5
South Korea	1.7	24.8	26.5	48.0	20.2	3.1	13.3	2.1
India	1.1	17.2	18.3	35.4	34.4	8.6	43.0	3.3
Vietnam	0.8	15.0	15.8	38.0	35.4	8.1	43.5	2.8
Japan	1.0	9.3	10.3	20.4	46.4	20.8	67.2	2.1

The Chinese public, however, does not seem to think that the magnitude of the negative security effects of the United States is big enough to damage the current Sino-U.S. relationship. Table 5 shows the responses to a question regarding China's future relationship with key actors in East Asia, including the United States. Comparatively speaking, China's relationship with the United States is regarded to have a greater chance to deteriorate than its relationship with other neighbors such as North Korea and South Korea. While respectively 5.5 percent and 7.5 percent of the respondents expect China's relationship with North Korea and South Korea will deteriorate in the future, 11.1 percent expect the Sino-American relationship to continuously deteriorate. However, such a sign of pessimism regarding the future relationship with the United States should not be exaggerated. Almost half of the respondents (48 percent) predict that the status quo will be maintained in the Sino-American relationship, and 38.7 percent think that it will continuously improve. After all, most Chinese (86.7 percent) think that China's relationship with the United States will not retrogress.



<Table 5> How do you expect China’s relationship with the following country will be in the future?

	(1) Continuously improved (%)	(2) Similar to now (%)	(3) Continuously deteriorated (%)	(4) Don’t know/ No response (%)
United States	38.7	48.0	11.1	2.2
North Korea	50.1	42.6	5.5	1.7
South Korea	43.3	47.2	7.5	1.9
Japan	26.6	46.5	23.9	3.0

What the findings in this section suggest is that ordinary Chinese do not seem to view China’s security environment as hostile or highly competitive. They feel notably more threatened by domestic factors such as the energy shortage, pollution, and spread of pandemics than by their surrounding powers’ economic and military challenges. The Chinese public does not seem to regard the United States as one of the nation’s top enemies or a major threat either, and shows positive feelings toward the United States. However, the Chinese public’s perceptions of the United States connote some noteworthy ambivalence. While regarding the United States as friendly as Russia and North Korea, ordinary Chinese generally think that the United States lacks respect for China. They regard that the United States’ unilateralism and military presence in Asia threaten China’s national interests and tend to evaluate comprehensive security influence of the United States on China negatively. But they predominantly estimate that the Sino-U.S. relationship will improve or remain as it is.

All in all, this picture of the Chinese security perceptions corresponds to the optimistic perspective that regards “China’s rise” as benign, and could serve as a source of relief. Yet it also suggests the potential for antagonism against the United States, especially when the issues at hand stimulate the sense of national humiliation among the public. This point will be further analyzed in the following section.

III. Chinese Perceptions of China’s International Status and Role

1. International Power Distribution and China’s Status

How then does the Chinese public perceive the power distribution in today’s world and



China’s position in it? Do Chinese see the world as a unipolar system under strong U.S. hegemony, and feel intimidated by the U.S. power?

The responses to the question “who do you think leads the current international order?” in table 6 suggest that the Chinese public does not see world politics as highly U.S.-centric. While only about 30 percent of the respondents acknowledge the United States as the single hegemon, about half of the surveyees (49.9 percent) answer that “not a few but several countries” lead the current international order, revealing a pluralistic understanding of the world order. Of the respondents, 13.7 percent seem to understand the world as a bi-polar system, led by both the U.S and China. Such an “underestimation” of U.S. hegemony in today’s world politics is consistent with a very optimistic estimation of China’s future position in the world order revealed in table 7. While only 4.4 percent thinks that China leads the current international order (table 6), as many as 60.7 percent of the respondents think that China will surpass the United States and become the world leader in the near future (table 7). Almost one fourth of the respondents (24.4 percent) “strongly agree” that China will surpass the United States in the near future.

<Table 6> Who do you think leads the current international order?

	%
United States	29.4
China	4.4
Not a few but several countries	49.9
United States and China	13.7
Don’t know/No response	2.6

<Table 7> Do you agree that China will surpass the United States and become the leader of the world in the near future?

	%
Strongly agree	24.4
Somewhat agree	36.3
Somewhat disagree	28.2
Strongly disagree	9.9
Don’t know/No response	1.2

Such a high level of confidence is revealed in the public’s recognition of China’s dramatic power rise as well. Table 8 presents answers to the question regarding influence change in Asia during the last decade with a sample of five major countries in the region:



China, the United States, South Korea, Russia, and Japan. The absolute majority (91 percent) think that China's influence in Asia has increased, while only 58 percent think that U.S. influence has increased in Asia. More interesting is the percentage of those who think that U.S. influence in Asia is sinking. Of respondents, 25.9 percent say that U.S. influence in Asia has decreased, which is lower than the percentage of those who see that Japan's influence has diminished (32.9 percent) yet considerably higher than those who think that the influence of Russia (18.2 percent) and South Korea (10.7 percent) has declined

<Table 8> How do you think that the following country's influence in Asia has changed during the last decade?

	(1) Increased (%)	(2) Little change (%)	(3) Decreased (%)	(4) Don't know/ No response (%)
China	91.0	6.0	2.1	0.9
United States	58.5	13.6	25.9	1.9
South Korea	42.2	44.5	10.7	2.6
Russia	39.3	39.3	18.2	3.3
Japan	39.1	25.9	32.9	2.1

Table 9 provides some hints to what the source of the Chinese public's high confidence in national power is. The question asked is "are you proud of China's achievement in the following issue area?" and column 3 sums up the percentages of positive answers, namely, "very proud" and "proud." According to the outcomes, the largest percentage of respondents (77 percent) is proud of China's military capacity. Then 70.5 percent are proud of Chinese capacity in science and technology, 66 percent of economic capacity, and only 51.6 percent of the political system. What the Chinese public regards as the biggest achievement of China seems quite different from outsiders' general evaluation. Economic growth is undoubtedly acknowledged as China's most impressive achievement during the last couple of decades and the key to China's rise, while many are doubtful whether China's military capacity, though potentially threatening, has reached the point of challenging U.S. hegemony. In addition, about half of the respondents (51.7 percent) show pride in China's political system as well, expressing their trust in the current communist regime.



<Table 9> How proud are you of China’s achievement in the following issue area?

	(1) Very proud (%)	(2) Proud (%)	(3) 1+2 (%)	(4) Not very proud (%)	(5) Not proud at all (%)	(6) Don’t know/ No response (%)
Military capacity	23.3	53.7	77.0	17.0	4.1	1.8
Science and technology	20.1	50.4	70.5	23.5	4.2	1.7
Economic capacity	17.0	49.0	66.0	25.8	7.3	1.0
Political system	13.5	38.2	51.7	31.3	14.5	2.5

All in all, the Chinese public sees the world as more power-balanced than U.S.-dominated, where China can rapidly expand national power. In this world view, there is no strong hostility toward the existing world order or noticeable feelings of injustice and unfairness. This might be a reason why, as shown in section 2, the Chinese have such a “friendly” attitude toward the United States despite some reservations about its influence on China’s national security. Ordinary Chinese also seem to have very optimistic views of their nation’s future. They have strong confidence in China’s growing power, and many of them believe that China will soon surpass the United States and become the leader of the world. Such a self-evaluation seems to be generated at least partly from their pride in their nation’s growing military capacity, which contradicts outsiders’ view that appreciates China’s economic achievements far more. This is the portrayal of how ordinary Chinese perceive the world order and China’s position in it.

2. China’s Role in International Society

The Chinese public’s optimistic view of the world must have contributed to its strong support for China’s intervention in international issues. When asked opinions about China’s intervention in international issues, the overwhelming majority (89.9 percent) think that China’s active intervention will positively affect China’s future, and only a few (8.6 percent) hold a cautious position (table 10). Then as the most appropriate role for China to play in international society, over half of the surveyees (52.4 percent) respond positively to the image of a “mediator” (table 11). In other words, the majority of ordinary Chinese regard bridging the advanced and developing countries and mediating conflicts and differences between them as a role that fits China best. The next most popular option is a more aggres-



sive role, that is, as a reformer of the existing world order and institutions led by Western countries (26.6 percent), which can be interpreted as challenging the status quo, though the extent might be modest. The last preference is the most provocative role that requires dominant soft and hard power to replace the existing world order and institutions, that is, a creator of a new, alternative China-led world order and institutions (15.3 percent). It is noteworthy that, when combined, supporters of the last two more active, aggressive options reach 41.9 percent.

In sum, the Chinese public thinks that China will benefit from active intervention in international issues, and the best role for China is to peacefully enhance international cooperation rather than aggressively challenge existing powers and norms. However, many did not hide the expectation that China should more actively challenge the existing world order dominated by “Western countries” and set its own terms and rules.

<Table 10> Do you think that China’s active intervention in international issues will positively affect China’s future?

	%
Yes	89.9
No	8.6
Don’t know/No response	1.6

<Table 11> Which do you think is the most appropriate role for China to play in international society?

	%
Creator of a new, alternative China-led world order and institutions	15.3
Mediator of conflicts and differences between the advanced and developing countries	52.4
Reformer of the existing world order and institutions led by Western countries	26.6
Don’t know/ No response	5.7

Those who feel that the high popular support for China’s role as a reformer or a creator is worrisome might find the answers summarized in table 12 alarming. First of all, almost 60 percent of surveyees agree that China is not receiving the due treatment it deserves on the international stage (column 3). This outcome is consistent with the finding in table 3, that is, many Chinese think that the United States disrespects China. The striking contrast between the elevated confidence in and optimistic views on national power presented in tables 6 to 9 and this sense of international disrespect may have significant implications.



When an international conflict occurs, the sense of humiliation and injustice originating from this gap between confidence and frustration can provoke volatile nationalistic reactions. Considering that the CCP, increasingly relying on nationalism and the mission of “restoring” national status as the basis of its legitimacy, has to react sensitively when the public’s nationalistic sentiments explode, such wide-spread public dissatisfaction with China’s current international status is worrisome.

Such public frustration and dissatisfaction with China’s current status explain why the public strongly support China’s more active and aggressive role in international society as shown in tables 10 and 11. The question is the way in which China carries out such a role. The respondents’ reaction to the statement regarding the importance of international rules and norms in table 12 provides cause for grave concern. Even though 46.6 percent of respondents (column 3) agree that China should observe international organizations’ decisions even when they differ from China’s perspectives, more respondents (48.3 percent in column 6) seem to believe that China does not need to observe international organizations’ decisions that do not coincide with China’s perspectives and national interests. The Chinese public’s fervent aspirations for enhanced international status and more active international roles, which might be pursued at the expense of international rules and norms, send a disturbing signal to China watchers.

<Table 12> Do you agree with the following statement?

	(1) Strongly agree (%)	(2) Agree in general (%)	(3) 1+2 (%)	(4) Don't agree much (%)	(5) Don't agree at all (%)	(6) 4+5 (%)	(7) Don't know/ No response (%)
China is not receiving the due treatment it deserves on the international stage	17.8	41.8	59.6	24.8	13.9	38.7	1.7
China should observe international organizations' decisions even when they differ from its perspectives	7.9	38.7	46.6	34.3	14.0	48.3	5.2

On the whole, the responses presented and analyzed in this section provide sources of both relief and concern. The good news is that the Chinese public does not seem to have



evident animosity against the existing international order. Many Chinese see the world as being led not by the United States but by many countries and express strong confidence and pride in China's growing power under the existing system. The bad news is that the Chinese public's optimistic view on China's growing power connotes some aggressive elements. Many Chinese overrate China's power, especially in terms of military capacity, and think that China should reform or replace the existing international order. The strong popular support for China's active role in international affairs and emphasis on national interests over international norms, combined with the potentially volatile grievances against how China is treated on the international stage, provide a grim picture of the world with a rising China.

IV. Conclusion

This working paper has addressed one of the major debates among scholars in international relations during the last decade: whether China's rapid rise is a threat. In an attempt to shed new light on this discussion, the working paper raised the following question: how does the Chinese public perceive China's security environment and the rise of China? In other words, what do ordinary Chinese regard as the biggest threat to China's national interests? Do they regard United States as a rival, an enemy, or a potential threat? Do ordinary Chinese understand today's world as a U.S.-centric system that harms China's national interests and think that China should challenge it? How do they perceive China's national power and status, and what kind of role do they think that China should play? To answer these questions, this working paper utilized a recent survey conducted in China.

The findings of the survey first reveal that the Chinese public has ambivalent yet generally positive perceptions of China's security environment. The Chinese public neither understands China's international security environment as highly threatening nor perceives China's national interests in terms of a zero-sum conflict with other countries. The Chinese public does not feel highly threatened by the United States either, and has mixed but friendly feelings toward the United States than many outside observers tend to assume.

However, the Chinese public's perceptions of China's international status and role provide sources of both relief and concern. Many Chinese understand the world as more power-balanced than U.S.-centric and show no evident sign of hostility towards the existing world system. They seem to regard the existing system of world politics as a fair and favor-



able one where China can rapidly enhance its national power and catch up with the United States in the near future. Yet the Chinese public's heightened optimism and strong confidence in China's national power betray worrisome self-overestimation. The Chinese public also reveals a strong preference for China's active and aggressive intervention in world affairs, possibly at the expense of international norms that do not coincide with China's national interests.

Particularly noteworthy are the consistent responses showing that the Chinese public feels that China is disrespected on the international stage despite its already enhanced national power and influence. This coexistence of national confidence and bruised pride can be dangerous, since it can provoke volatile nationalistic emotions against foreign nations. Considering that the CCP is increasingly relying on nationalism as its new *raison d'être*, such nationalistic sentiments could limit the Chinese government's policy choices and push it to react aggressively to international issues, especially when they stimulate a sense of national humiliation and injustice among the Chinese public.

One cannot equate the Chinese public's security perceptions with the views of Chinese policymakers or China's foreign strategies. However, the Chinese public's perceptions of security threats, China's national power and status, and the proper international role for China can have an important influence on China's strategic decision by setting the boundaries of acceptable choices. The Chinese public's security perceptions analyzed in this working paper suggest that the "China threat" might be an exaggeration at this point, but there exist disturbing signs that confirm the need for caution.■

Acknowledgement

The author appreciates the insightful comments from Jae Cheol Kim and Chaesung Chun on the first draft of this working paper.



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- The East Asia Institute, an Asia Security Initiative core institution, acknowledges the MacArthur Foundation for its generous grand and continued support.

