American Public Perceptions of a Rising China

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Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Americans think about the relationship between the United States and China. It concentrates on the landscape of public opinion and is divided into three major parts. The first part describes the threats and opportunities Americans see in the relationship. This initial part also describes popular perceptions of the balance of power between China and the United States and explores the trends people see in the relationship. The second part of the paper aims to put the descriptive picture in perspective. It describes how these popular perceptions compare to popular beliefs about other countries. Especially, important here is an investigation into the sentiments people feel and how much, if at all, those sentiments drive a cognitive inclination to demonize China. The third part of the paper explores the divisions in the ideational landscape. It looks in particular at the association between different beliefs about China and the party identifications in the United States. The paper ends by speculating on how several economic and political trends in the United States and Asia might affect American public opinion in the future.

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Part 1:
American Perceptions of the China-U.S. Relationship

The impression someone has of another person or country can include many features arrayed across all sorts of dimensions. It might emphasize the country's location, size, its political system, its dominant religion, or its typical style of dress. Fiske (2006; 2002) has found that when we boil down all the possible complexity, two judgments are the most important when trying to explain how someone will behave toward the other. These are first how warm or cold, and second, how competent the other is thought to be. In the international context, Herrmann (2003) argues these two judgments translate, firstly, into judgments about how the other country's goals line up with the observer's country's goals in either a complementary or contradictory way, and secondly, into judgments about how much power the other country can exercise. These judgments determine the threats and opportunities someone sees in the relationship and thus motivates them to act in one way or another. They also determine what strategic options are available. Consequently, this section will examine first popular perceptions of the positive or negative interdependence of Chinese and American goals, and then popular perceptions of China's relative power. It will end by looking at the trends Americans see in the relationship going forward.

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Perceived Goal Interdependence:

The Sino-American relationship is much more complex at the inter-societal level than the Soviet-American relationship ever was. Consequently, it should not be surprising that American judgments about the overall character of the relation differ substantially. Many Americans are experiencing parts of the relationship differently. Moreover, with so many different threats and opportunities involved it is not easy to reach a summary conclusion. The difficulty here is evident in public opinion

polls showing that Americans try to apply the well-known labels they have for relationships but often end up applying somewhat contradictory ones and disagreeing among themselves over which is the best fit. For example, in March 2013 a Fox News found 14% of a national poll referring to China as a "bitter enemy" with another 33% labeling it "somewhat of an enemy" while at the same time 36% called China "somewhat of an ally" and 7% referred to it as a "strong ally."[1] In July 2012 polls by NBC News and Gallup found that 25% of the sample called China an ally and 25% called it an enemy.[2] In two other polls, however, clear majorities saw China as a rival (67%) or competitor (66%) and relatively few (27% and 16%) called it a partner.[3]

Table 1. The Metaphors Americans Choose to Describe China's Relationship with the USA.

Poll	Date	Percent of Americans Using this Metaphor to Describe China's Relationship with the USA						
Polling Company	Date	Ally	Friendly	Unfriendly	Adversary	Enemy	Neither/Both	Unsure
Fox News	3/2013	42				47		
NBC/WSJ	7/2012	25			62		03	07
Gallup	12/2011	13	63	17		06		01
Gallup	11/2011	11	48	20		12		09
ABC	1/2011		47	33		11	04	05
Gallup	8/2008	07	60	15		08		10
NBC	7/2008	23			54		12	11
NBC	7/2007	28			50		13	09
NBC	7/2005	26			49		10	15
Gallup	5/2001	05	44	33		11		07
NBC	4/2001	16			71		07	06
ABC	4/2001	28		37		20	08	06
NBC	6/1999	18			67		05	10
ABC	6/1998	39		35		12	09	05
NBC	5/1997	29			59		06	06
NBC	3/95	31			62		02	05

Of course, one school of thought about public opinion holds that people do not have coherent opinions (Zaller, 1992). It pictures people as responding to pollsters off the top of their head and warns

against putting much stock in public efforts to figure out something as complicated as Washington's relationship with Beijing. Contrary to this view, Page and Shapiro (1992) argue that looking at polls over time paints a different picture. Although the opinion of any single individual may be bouncing around, they argue that the basic distribution of opinion across the landscape stays mostly constant. This is what appears to be the case with regard to American public opinion about China. As seen in Table 1, since 1995 a majority of respondents to the NBC News polls consistently describe China as an adversary while from 2001 till 2011 a majority of the respondents to the Gallup Polls describe China as an ally or friendly. A CNN poll in May 2011 found the same thing.[4] Meantime, in the Gallup Polls between 23% and 44% described China as unfriendly or even an enemy. In the CNN poll mentioned above, 37% did. In a similar series of ABC News/Washington Post polls running from 1998 through 2011, from 44% to 57% consistently described China as unfriendly or an enemy.[5]

It does not appear that opinion is especially volatile but rather that it is divided. When the Transatlantic Trends survey asked a national sample in 2012 if "the United States and China have enough common interests to be able to cooperate on international problems" 46% agreed they did while 47% said that they had such "different interests that cooperating on international problems is impossible."[6] A nearly identical split (46% to 45%) was evident when they substituted the words "common values" for common interests and asked the same question. The division in American perceptions becomes more skewed when the questions focus on trust. In an April 2012 Pew survey only 5% said the United States could trust China a great deal, and 21% thought they could trust China a fair amount but 68% thought when it came to China, the United States could not trust it too much (39%) or not trust it all (29%).

Although many Americans are wary of China, most believe the relationship between the United States and China is multi-dimensional and includes opportunities along with threats. They are not comfortable with stereotypical labels. When the Pew Global Attitudes Project asked Americans what characteristics they associate with the Chinese people, the terms commonly part

of enemy images were only endorsed by a minority albeit a sizable one and rejected by a majority albeit a narrow one.[7] For instance, 43% said the Chinese people were aggressive while 50% said they were not. When it came to greedy, the split was 40% to 50% and for selfish and arrogant 31% to 58% and 36% to 56% respectively. Fewer described the Chinese people as violent (24%) with two-thirds (67%) saying were not.

Instead of characteristics resembling an enemy image, most Americans attributed to the Chinese people characteristics indicative of a competitive rival. 89% said the Chinese were competitive and 93% agreed they were hard working. 73% described them as inventive and 63% as nationalistic.[8] It appears that overall, most Americans see a competitive interdependent relationship ripe with plenty of possible conflicts of interest but also numerous opportunities for mutual gain. They are not so driven by emotions emanating from either the threats or opportunities that they are inclined to simple images that are comprised of only good or bad attributes. From 1997 through 2011, the Pew Research Center ran eleven polls asking Americans if China was an adversary or a serious problem, or not a problem.[9] Consistently, a quarter to a third of the national sample saw no problem. The rest did, however, with from 14% to 22% characterizing China as an adversary and from 39% to 50% characterizing it as a serious problem. With so many people seeing China as a problem, it makes sense to delve more deeply into what the nature of the problem is thought to be.

Most Americans agree that China's rising influence in the world is a bad thing for the United States. When asked in April 2012 about "China's emergence as a world power," 52% said it was a major threat and 35% more said it was a minor threat. Only 9% thought it was not a threat.[10] In February 2013, a Gallup Poll found that 51% saw the military power of China as "critical threat" and 39% more saw it as an important threat.[11] Again, only 9% said China's military power was not a threat. In the previous Pew Global Attitudes project, 82% felt "China's growing military power" was a problem — either a very serious one (49%) or somewhat serious one (33%). In the previous year, Pew found that 85% believed that China becoming as powerful militarily as the United States was a bad thing

and 79% felt China military power growing even if not achieving American standards was a bad thing for the United States.[12]

The 2013 Gallup Poll found that just as many Americans saw China's rising economic power as a critical (52%) or important (39%) threat and that very few (8%) did not. Although Americans see both economic and military threats, 60% of a national sample told the Pew Research Center that China's economic strength was more worrisome than it military strength.[13] When the Committee of 100 U.S.-China Public Perceptions Survey probed in January 2012 to find out what people feared China's strength would threaten, 59% said the United States' control over its own economy.[14] In the previous month, 86% told the Pew Research Center that China posed a threat to the economic well being of the United States with 59% saying it was a major threat.[15]

Although the majority in the United States feels threatened by China's rising economic strength, polls consistently find that around a third see opportunity instead. In the Transatlantic Trends 2012 survey, for example, when 59% said they viewed China's rise as "more a threat to jobs and economic security," 30% said they viewed it as "more of an opportunity for new markets and investments."[16] In November 2010, a CNN/ Opinion Research Corporation poll found that 35% of a national sample chose opportunity when asked to choose between saying China's economic wealth and power was more of a threat to the United States or more of an opportunity for it.[17] In January 2011, 29% responded to a similar question posed in an ABC News/ Washington Post poll and a year later 33% choose to describe China as an economic partner rather than a threat of any kind in the Committee of 100 U.S. China Public Perceptions Survey.[18] The Global Views 2012 Survey found that 49% of respondents felt that if China's economy were to grow to be as large as the U.S. economy that would be an equally positive and negative thing, with 9% more thinking it would be a mostly positive thing.[19] Of course, a lot (40%) thought it would be a mostly negative thing and CBS News in October 2012 found that a majority (54%) thought the economic expansion of China has been generally bad for the United States.

Where the perceived economic threat is somewhat mitigated by the substantial minority of people perceiving opportunity, the perceived military threat was not long ago somewhat mitigated by a nearly even split over whether or not China represented a military threat. In a poll taken by CNN/Opinion Research Corporation in November 2008, 51% considered China to be a military threat while 49% did not. When the same question was asked in 2009, not much had changed. 51% still saw threat and 47% did not.[20] By January 2011, however, opinions had started to shift. Responding to a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll, 66% saw China as a military threat although only 23% saw this as an immediate or near term danger. 43% thought it was a threat the United States would face down the road. When CBS News asked a national sample in November 2011 about China's military threat to the United States, 67% saw it as one but again only 25% saw it as a major threat and 42% saw it as a minor threat.[21] In that same poll, 26% still saw no threat at all, but of course, this is down to just over half of those who responded that way to the CNN poll four years earlier and as reported above in February 2013 Gallup found that 90% of Americans considered China's military power to be either a critical or important threat.[22]

Perceived Relative Power: More Americans may perceive China as a military threat than in the recent past but the Pew Research Center found as recently as January 2011 that a large majority (67%) still saw the United States as the world's leading military power.[23] Only 16% in that survey thought China was. The situation is different when considering American perceptions of China's economic standing. When Gallup asked a national sample of Americans which country they thought was the leading economic power in the world more than half said China, 52% in 2011 and 53% in 2012 and 2013.[24] In those surveys, 32% and 33% said the United States was the leading economic power. Pew found a somewhat more even split in April 2012 when it asked Americans to name the world's leading economic power. 41% of its national sample named China and roughly the same number (40%) named the United States.[25] This split in opinion was evident when Pew asked the same question in 2011. However, when Gallup asked

people to look ahead twenty years and identify the country they expected to be the world's leading economic power then, it found that nearly half thought it would be China (47% in 2011 and 46% 2012).[26] In these polls, markedly fewer (35% in 2011 and 38% in 2012) expected the United States to be the leading economic power in two decades. In 2012, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that 76% of Americans believed China's economy would grow to be as big as the U.S. economy and only 21% thought the U.S. economy would always stay larger.[27]

When asked in October 2012 to compare various institutions that affect economic growth in China, India, Brazil, Japan and Europe to those in the United States, most Americans gave the edge to the United States. 75% felt U.S. governmental institutions were ahead of most or all others and 75% also thought U.S. colleges and research universities were ahead of all or most others.[28] Two-thirds felt the same about U.S. businesses and corporations as well as U.S. banks and financial institutions. A survey done just a few months earlier, however, asked about the relative trends in school quality, specially if people thought schools in China and India were catching up with U.S. schools. 14% of the national sample thought Chinese and Indian schools were catching up and 44% thought they were already surpassing U.S. schools.[29] Fewer than a quarter thought Chinese and Indians schools were either about the same as U.S. schools (13%) or falling behind (10%).

It is worth noting that in the polls asking about relative military and economic power only 5% or less of the national samples named any other country (e.g., Russia, Japan, or India) or countries (the European Union) beside the United States and China as leaders. Almost everyone saw these two as the main contenders when thinking about who would lead the world in the future. In both January and December 2011, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll asked a national sample of Americans who they thought would be the "world's leading nation" twenty years from now and found opinion evenly

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split both times. 38% and 35% said China and 35% and 39% said the United States in 2011 and 2012 respectively.[30] Again no other country was mentioned by more than even 4%. Pew found a similar even split when it asked in April 2011 if Americans thought, "China would eventually replace the United States as the world's leading superpower." 34% thought that it would. 12% more thought it already had. About the same number as these combined (45%) thought it never would.[31]

Perceived Trend in the Relationship: With the increasing number of Americans perceiving China as a threat and with so much disagreement among Americans over what the future balance of power between the two countries is likely to be, it might seem reasonable to expect Americans to see the trend in the overall relationship heading in a negative direction. That, however, is not the case. From 1995 to 2011, the Pew Center for the People and Press asked national samples in eight different surveys what they thought the trend was in relations between the United States and China.[32] In 1995, 16% thought relations were improving and 22% thought they were getting worse with the majority 53% figuring they were staying the same. In 2011, the distribution of opinion was nearly identical. 16% still saw relations improving, 22% thought they were getting worse and 55% thought they were staying the same.

Across the sixteen years there were some fluctuations. For instance, in 1999 as many as 35% thought relations were going in the wrong direction, probably reflecting the conflict in Serbia. In May 2001, 40% thought this, almost surely reflecting the Hainan Island incident. Despite these brief blips, the distribution of opinion on how relations were going has been mostly constant. In the Pew data there is an increase in the number of Americans seeing relations getting worse, moving to 22% in January 2011 from 14% in February 2002, but nothing like the increase we might expect given the perceptions of threat and power discussed above. Moreover, Gallup found in December 2011 more Americans seeing "relations between the United States and China in the past ten years" as having improved (35%) than having declined (28%).[33] Those seeing relations as having improved (35%) combined with those seeing them as having stayed the same (33%) make up a clear majority

(68%). The Committee of 100 U.S. China Public Perceptions Survey taken in January 2012 found similar results. In that study, the majority saw the relationship as currently improving (25%) or not changing (42%) and 26% thought it was getting worse.[34]

Why the majority of Americans see the trend in the relationship staying constant or improving is an important question. After all, a majority sees the power relationship changing and perceives a current major economic threat. Moreover, a large majority sees the economy in the United States including jobs and the budget deficit as the most important problem facing the country. This was clear in all the polls related to the 2012 presidential election.[35] And even if the public was not making the connection between their economic worries and China on their own, the presidential candidates in 2012 made the connection clear for them.[36] If that were not enough, most Americans also perceive a growing geopolitical challenge on the horizon and care about numerous other issues that are perennial bones of contention in Sino-American relations, including Taiwan, North Korea's nuclear program, and human rights in China just to name a few. Consequently, exploring a bit more deeply the intensity of the sentiments shaping the American public's perceptions of China is warranted. One way to do this is to compare the sentiments involved in this relationship to those involved in other relationships. That is the task we turn to next.

Part 2: Evaluating American Perceptions in Comparative Perspective

The Relative Danger: In early 2012, Gallup asked respondents in a national sample to name "the one country anywhere in the world" they "consider to be the United States' greatest enemy.[37] The Pew Research Center asked a similar open-ended question in January 2012 asking respondents to name the "country in the world, if any, [that] represents the greatest danger to the United States."[38] In both polls, the top three most mentioned countries were Iran, China and North Korea in that order. In the Gallup poll, 32% said Iran

was the greatest enemy and in the Pew poll 28% said Iran was the greatest danger. In these polls, 23% and 22% said China was greatest enemy and danger respectively. Far fewer (less than 10%), said this about North Korea in either poll, and no other country was mentioned by more than seven percent. These results indicate that among the countries Americans worry about, China is one of the two main ones. At the same time, these results suggest that only about a quarter of the Americans polled see China in extreme terms. It appears that the relationship has not yet generated the sort of intense emotions that have often been seen to produce serious stereotyping and demonization (Haslam, 2006).

The Relative Emotional Sentiments: Intensely felt threats often lead people to construct a cognitive picture of another country that justifies acting against it, sometimes even without the restraints imposed by normally applicable rules and moral codes of conduct (Herrmann, 2003). This can be seen when the other country is portrayed as so evil or aggressive as to justify using extraordinary means to defend against it. We might imagine that threat is only felt when a country does things that clearly reveal its intentions and demonstrate that others need to worry about it. However, that is not always the case. Determining what a country's intentions are is a notoriously difficult task for which we have rather few agreed upon indicators (Cottam, 1977; Jervis, 1970). In rationalist theories of war the intentions of the other country is assumed to be unknowable private information (Fearon, 1995). Because many actions like acquiring weapons, establishing alliances, and even dominating other countries can be attributed to both defensive and offensive motives, there is substantial room for pre-existing images and sentiments to shape how information about new actions are interpreted. When this happens the pre-existing sentiments about the country may shape the meaning attached to the act far more than any meaning inherent in the act shapes the sentiment.

This is an important point because it suggests that emotional feelings can play a big role in how people interpret information about a foreign country. When they feel negative emotion toward another country, then they may be inclined to read aggressive and exploitative motives into its behavior. For instance, if the country

acquires more advanced weaponry, then they may attribute this to offensive motives and a desire for conquest and hegemony. In contrast, when observers feel positive emotion toward another country then they may attribute the very same behavior to defensive and benign motives. The more intense the sentiments related to feeling of threat and danger become, the more clear this bias in attribution is likely to be. Consequently, by exploring the sentiments Americans have about China and by examining how biased their interpretation of Chinese behavior tends to be, we can gain important perspective on how intense the feeling of threat and danger are.

We saw in Part 1 that a majority of Americans classify China as an adversary and that an equally sized majority believe it is friendly. When we look more directly at the sentiments Americans have toward China, we see a similar ambivalence and mixed picture. From 2004 to 2013, Gallup asked nine times about the overall sentiment Americans felt toward foreign countries. The feelings about China were consistently split.[39] There was always a bare majority that expressed mostly or very unfavorable opinions about China, but, at the same time, in all these surveys the smallest percent saying they had a mostly or very favorable opinion was 41% and in several years the number expressing positive feelings hit 48%. This pattern was also evident in the 2012 Transatlantic Trends survey.[40] In 2013 when Gallup asked Americans what their overall opinion of China was over half (52%) said unfavorable either mostly (35%) or very (17%). At the same time, 43% said favorable, either mostly (35%) or very (8%).[41]

Comparing the split among Americans in how they feel about China to the split in they feel about other countries can put this picture of the emotional landscape in perspective. The number feeling favorably about China is much smaller than the number feeling that way about Canada, which was always between 75% and 80%. Of course, Canada is one of Washington's closest allies so this is pretty high bar to compare against. When looking at the distribution among Americans of feelings about Iran and North Korea, the favorable feelings toward China look better. In the nine Gallup polls, there never was more than 15% expressing any kind

of positive sentiment toward North Korea and never more than 13% expressing it about Iran.

It is not simply that more Americans have favorable feelings about China than have them about North Korea or Iran but also that the negative sentiments Americans have toward China are less intense than those they feel toward North Korea and Iran and more comparable to how American feel about other important countries. For instance, four polls conducted in 2006 asked Americans to express their sentiment on a 0-100 thermometer.[42] In these polls, the mean ratings for China ranged from 39 to 44. Again, these were lower than the mean rating for close American allies like England that ranged from 76 to 79 but were comparable to the mean rating for France that ranged from 43 to 45. These feelings about China were much warmer than those for North Korea and Iran, which ranged from 14 to 20 and 14 to 17 respectively.

Numerous polls find that only a relatively small number of Americans have especially strong positive or negative sentiments toward China. In 2012, for example, in polls conducted by The Pew Research Center, Gallup, and ABC News/Washington Post Americans were asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion or impression of China.[43] The largest percent expressing a very unfavorable sentiment was 26% in the ABC/Washington Post poll, in the Pew and Gallup poll 15% and 20% did respectively. In the 2013 Gallup Poll it was 17%.[44] In the 2012 polls, even fewer expressed very favorable opinions with 9% doing that in the ABC/Washington Post poll and only 6% doing that in the other two. In the 2013 Gallup Poll, 8% expressed very favorable opinions. The large bulk of the population expressed more moderate feelings either somewhat favorable or somewhat unfavorable. Overall, there were more Americans expressing an unfavorable sentiment than a favorable one but the division here was not completely lopsided. For instance, in the 2012 Pew poll there were 40% on each side of this. In the Gallup and ABC/Washington Post polls, the tilt toward unfavorable sentiments was pronounced with ratios of 52% to 32% and 56% to 41% unfavorable to favorable opinion.

This ratio of unfavorable to favorable opinion shifted in a somewhat more negative direction between 2011 and 2013. When

Gallup asked the same question in 2011, for instance, the ratio was 50% to 47%.[45] This shift might reflect the beginning of a new trend but is not out of line with the fluctuations in the distribution evident in Gallup polls stretching back to 2000. In the past twelve years, the ratio has been as great as 57% to 36% in 2000 and as small as 46% to 45% in 2003.[46] Consequently, it is too early to conclude that any new general trend is evident. Instead, it is reasonable to conclude from these direct measures of sentiments that the distribution of feelings in the United States is mostly divided between moderately favorable and moderately unfavorable opinion and that this pattern has been fairly steady over time.

The Relative Bias in Interpretation and Treatment: Another way to gauge the intensity of the feelings is to look for biases in the ways American interpret Chinese moves and compare these to the biases they exhibit when interpreting the behavior of other countries. We can do that by examining two experiments I embedded in a national survey.[47] Although the survey was in the field in 2004, the results may still be quite germane. After all, as seen in the polls just discussed, the pattern in sentiments has not changed dramatically since then. The first experiment asked Americans to attribute a motive to the act of acquiring new weaponry when done by a foreign country. The second asked them to respond to another country that had just ignored international law and attacked another country presumably as retaliation for a terrorist attack they said was launched from the target country. In both experiments, how Americans interpret and react to Chinese behavior can be directly compared to how they react to the exact same behavior done by several other countries and thus reveal just how much bias is evident in their treatment of China.

The first experiment divided the national sample into four groups with each hearing about a country acquiring military capability. The only difference across the four conditions was the name of the country doing the acquiring. It was England, Israel, China, or Iran. The exact wording read this way: "[England, Israel, China, Iran] recently improved its ability to strike with its air force and missiles into neighboring countries. Some people think it is doing this simply to better defend itself, other people think it is doing this so it can be more aggressive." Participants were then asked, "What do you think?"

Once participants had attributed the acquisition to offensive or defensive motives, they were asked a second question. It read, "If all the other members of the United Nations Security Council decided that [England, Israel, China, Iran]'s military escalation should be opposed and asked the United States to join with them, what do you think the United States should do?" The choices they were given at this point were: 1) Strongly support the United Nations and agree to use economic sanctions against [England, Israel, China, Iran] if needed, 2) Support the United Nations verbally but not agree to any sanctions against [England, Israel, China, Iran], 3) Not support the UN decision but not veto it either, 4) Veto the UN decision and verbally endorse [England, Israel, China, Iran]'s right to arm itself, or 5) Veto the UN decision and materially help [England, Israel, China, Iran] arm itself.

Table 2. The Percent of Americans Attributing the Acquisition of Military Capability to Aggressive or Defensive Motives

	Offensive	Defensive
England	16%	84%
Israel	42%	58%
China	59%	41%
Iran	71%	29%

Table 3. The Percent of Americans Willing to Actively Oppose or Support Another Country's Acquisition to Military Capability

	Support the UN to Oppose Military Acquisition	Do Nothing to Stop the Acquisition	Help the Country Acquire Military Capability
England	33%	30%	37%
Israel	54%	21%	25%
China	69%	24%	07%
Iran	79%	16%	05%

As seen in Table 2, there were more than three times the number of Americans in this experiment who attributed offensive motives to China than who attributed offensive motives to England. As seen in Table 3, there were twice as many ready to actively oppose the Chinese acquisition as ready to oppose England's and there were more than five times more Americans ready to help England get stronger than help China do this. This, of course, is not surprising given the close alliance between Washington and London. More interesting, are the comparisons with Iran and Israel. Fewer Americans see aggressive intentions in China's acquisition of military strength than see it in Iran's and more are ready to oppose actively Iran's acquisition than China's. It is likely the decisions on how actively to oppose the acquisition reflect American perceptions of relative power and the options available to do anything about it and not just less intense negative sentiment. At the same time, however, there is a similar gap in the proclivity of Americans to attribute aggressive intentions to China compared to Iran and this difference is more difficult to attribute to power considerations alone.

In the Acquiring Military Capability experiment, fewer Americans attributed aggressive intentions to Israel than attributed them to China and fewer likewise expressed a willingness to oppose Israel's acquisition. Three times as many said they would actually support it than said they would do the same for China. Like in the comparison with England, this may not be surprising but what is worth noting is that the gap between how Americans treat Israel and China is not as large as might be expected given the widespread view that the United States protects Israel and applies a double-standard in its favor. This somewhat surprising similarity in American reactions to ambiguous moves made by China and Israel is even clearer in the second experiment I ran which involves a scenario in which countries react to a terrorist attack.

The second experiment began with a preamble that read, "Terrorism has raised questions of how countries should behave. Countries should be allowed to protect themselves, but on the other hand, should not just do whatever they want." It then asked participants, "Imagine, for example, that terrorists blew up a bus in [England, Iran, Israel, China] killing twenty people

and [England, Iran, Israel, China] then took the law into its own hands and retaliated against the village in the foreign country it said the terrorists came from killing and killed 15 people and wounded 75 others. If in this case, the United Nation's decided that [England, Iran, Israel, China] should pay a $5 million fine and pay compensation to the survivors in the village, what do you think the United States should do?" The policy choices participants could choose from included: 1) Strongly support the United Nations and agree to use economic sanctions against [England, Israel, China, Iran] if needed, 2) Support the United Nations verbally but not agree to any sanctions against [England, Israel, China, Iran], 3) Not support the UN decision but not veto it either, 4) Veto the UN decision and verbally endorse [England, Israel, China, Iran]'s right to arm itself, and 5) Veto the UN decision and materially help [England, Israel, China, Iran] arm itself.

As in the first experiment, any single participant was asked only one version of this question mentioning only one country. In other words, the 2,520 participants were spread across four conditions with around 625 hearing about each country. This allows us to compare how the responses in the group hearing the story featuring China differ from the responses in the groups hearing about the three other countries. Also, as in the first experiment, the situation in this second is meant to feature an action that could be read in several ways. Someone could focus on the right of a country to defend itself and justify the retaliation. At the same time, people could criticize the act as one that took the law into its own hands, retaliated without due process, and inflicted collective punishment on the targeted village. It is precisely because the situation in the scenario does not dictate entirely how people are likely to respond that gives us the opportunity to infer from the choices being made what the sentiments and pre-existing feelings about the retaliating country are likely to be. This sort of identity substitution experiment is often used to explore prejudices people might be reluctant to reveal in response to more direct questions. The results of this experiment reinforce the earlier findings that American feelings about China are not especially intense nor are the inclinations to demonize China widespread.

Table 4. The Percent of Americans Willing to Support the Punishment of a Country that Retaliates for a Terror Act by Taking the Law into Its Own Hands

	Demand Compensation and Fine	Demand Compensation	Ask Country Not to Do it Again	Defend the Retaliation as Just
England	28%	25%	21%	26%
Israel	47%	20%	19%	14%
China	42%	26%	18%	14%
Iran	60%	23%	12%	05%

As seen in Table 4, in this Retaliating for Terrorism experiment, roughly the same percent of Americans agreed to punish Israel as agreed to punish China and with basically same severity. Substantially more Americans were willing to demand that Iran pay a fine for doing the same thing as China. Also, twice as many Americans were ready to defend China's right to retaliate without penalty as were ready to do this for Iran. At the same time, far fewer were ready to impose the same standards on England but again that is a high bar given the nature of U.S.-British relations. What seems most important here is that although most Americans do not treat China gently as if it were part of its in-group, not that many are driven by such hostility that they apply a clearly ethnocentric double-standard that is severe. Far fewer Americans impose an ethnocentric double standard on China than impose one on Iran and about the same number impose the same standards on Israel as on China and Israel is a country many people around the world believe Americans treat with kid gloves.

The Relative Blame Attributed to China: One of the reasons Americans do not harbor negative sentiments toward China is that despite the threats they see, many blame the U.S. government for the problems they face as much or more as they blame the Chinese for these. As seen above, it is economic threats that are currently seen as most severe and there is little doubt that large majorities report that they oppose outsourcing

(80%), think China is causing job losses in the United States (78%), and worry that U.S. investments in China will result in the loss of U.S. technological advantage (61%).[48] At the same time, however, when asked "who do you think is most responsible for the United States' large trade deficit with China, the U.S. government or the Chinese government," 70% answered the U.S. government, and 21% blamed China. When asked "who do you think is most responsible for the deterioration in U.S.-China relations, the U.S. government or Chinese government," again more (50%) said the U.S. government than said the Chinese government (29%), or both (15%).[49]

When looking at assigning blame, we again see a clear division among Americans. Although the majority does not blame China, a minority does. We have seen that when naming the relationship, identifying the intensity of the threat, or expressing favorable and unfavorable sentiments between two-thirds and three-quarters see some adversarial qualities to the relationship but do not see intense threat, some even express positive sentiments. At the same time, between a third and a quarter see China as an enemy, perceive serious threats, and express negative feelings about China. Because of the contest between the different perspectives, when describing the overall shape of the ideational landscape I have more often than not emphasized the moderate character of it. This may be appropriate when making generalizations about the country as a whole. It is not sufficient, however. The political process will not necessarily lead to an outcome in which one perspective necessarily moderates the other. It is worthwhile looking a bit more closely at how the various mindsets work and tie into the larger ideological and partisan contest in the country.

Part 3: The Partisan Division in American Perceptions

Sorted More than Polarized: There has been some debate among scholars as to whether the U.S. pubic is polarized or just well sorted (Fiorina, with, Abrams, & Pope, 2006; Jacobson, 2007; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). In this context, polarized

means opinions are distributed toward the two extreme ends of a policy spectrum with rather few staying in the moderate middle. Well sorted refers to the association between ideological policy positions and identification with different political parties. If everyone who leans to the left on an issue is a Democrat and everyone who leans to the right is a Republican, public opinion could be well sorted but not necessarily polarized. In this example, the vast majority could take moderate and middle-of-the-road positions as long as the leaners in each direction were neatly sorted into the two major competing parties. In the case of China, the proportion of people on the extreme end-points of policy debates is fairly small and the majority is in the middle expressing more moderate opinions. There is a fairly clear sorting, however, with Republicans and Conservatives on average describing China in less friendly terms and perceiving more threat than Democrats and Liberals.

Table 5. Partisan Differences in the Metaphors Americans Choose to Describe China

Polling Company	Date	Ally	Friendly	Not Much Problem	Unfriendly	A Serious Problem	Adversary	Enemy
CNN	5/2011							
	Lib/Con Dem/Rep	15/10 20/06	50/36 55/49		27/35 17/32			07/17 06/12
ABC	01/2011							
	Lib/Con Dem/Rep		60/39 55/36		27/32 33/35			07/18 05/19
PEW	01/2011							
	Lib/Con Dem/Rep			37/23 26/24		44/41 43/46	15/28 19/23	

As seen in Table 5, more than three times as many Democrats describe China as an ally as Republicans do and only half as many describe it as an enemy. Almost twice as many Republicans describe China as unfriendly as Democrats and a substantially smaller percent of Republicans describe it as friendly. Moreover, a slightly higher percentage of Republican sees China as a serious problem and adversary. These partisan differences track with the

splits between self-identified liberals and conservatives as would be expected in a well-sorted polity. The pattern is so similar when comparing Liberals to Conservatives and Democrats to Republicans that I will not report both but simply compare Democrats to Republicans.

There is not much partisan difference when it comes to the substantive threat China poses, the majority of Democrats (62%) and Republicans (60%) think it is mostly economic and a comparable minority of Democrats (26%) and Republicans (28%) see it as more military.[50] Where a difference is evident is in the intensity of the perceived threat. Two-thirds of Republicans describe China as a major economic threat. Just over one-half of Democrats do.[51] A third of Democrats see China as only a minor threat while fewer than a quarter of Republicans are so inclined. Very few Democrats (7%) or Republicans (6%) see China as no economic threat at all. Large majorities in both parties agree that it is American jobs that are threatened by China. About a third of Democrats, however, reported in 2011 that they saw an opportunity to open new markets in China that overshadowed this. Only a quarter of Republicans reported that they saw opportunities like that.[52]

When looking forward in December 2011, a plurality of Democrats (46%) and Republicans (44%) expected the United States to be the leading nation in twenty years but noticeably more Republicans (38%) than Democrats (28%) thought China would be.[53] In another poll, the majority of both Democrats (56%) and Republicans (58%) agreed that the relationship between China and the United States was staying the same but nearly twice as many Republicans (30%) as Democrats (16%) thought is was getting worse and more than twice as many Democrats (21%) as Republicans (08%) thought is was getting better.[54] Some of this Republican pessimism might be attributable to there being a Democratic president in the White House. It is just as likely, however, to reflect that far fewer Republicans (36%) than Democrats (56%) express very or mostly favorable feelings about China and more Republicans (46%) than Democrats (25%) express mostly unfavorable sentiments toward China.[55] It is possible that when this emotional dislike is coupled with a perception of China's

increasing influence, a judgment that the relationship is worsening results.

Partisan Differences in Interpretation and Treatment: The difference in emotional sentiment toward China may also lead Republicans to attribute more aggressive motives to China and in my two experiments to exhibit a sharper distinction in how China is treated compared to American friends. Although it is difficult to assess the causal role of sentiments, what is clear is that a larger percent of Republicans (66%) than Democrats (56%) attributed aggressive motives to China in my Acquiring Capability experiment. Moreover, the number of Democrats (50%) who attributed those sorts of motives to Israel was more than twice the percent of Republicans (24) who did that. Likewise, when it came to joining an international effort to oppose the new acquisition, Republicans react very differently to the story when it involves Israel instead of China. More Democrats treat the two countries even-handedly. Among Democrats, 69% and 71% join the international effort when it targets Israel and China respectively. Meantime, only 36% of Republicans join it when it targets Israel but 71% join it when it targets China.

In the Acquiring Capability experiment, the same percentage (71) of Democrats and Republicans join the UN effort when it targets China. The difference here is in how differently they treat Israel and England and exhibit what appears to be an ethnocentric double standard. Among Democrats, the objection appears to be with the action itself and not the fact that China is doing it. They punish others for doing it too. This pattern is also evident in the Retaliating for Terrorism experiment. In it, a larger percent of Democrats agree to join the UN effort to punish Israel (81) than China (71). Here, actually a smaller percentage of Republicans (56) agreed to punish China, suggesting perhaps that on average Republicans did not see the act of retaliating as objectionable as Democrats did. Nevertheless, a smaller percentage still of Republicans agreed to punish Israel (42) or England (36) thereby once again exhibiting the differential reaction to the same act when done by perceived friend instead of perceived foe. And in terms of treating perceived foes differently, far more Republicans

were ready to punish Iran (73% and 85% in the two experiments respectively) than were ready to punish China reflecting probably both less intense sentiments and an appreciation for China's potential countervailing power.

Part 4: Looking Toward the Future

Obviously, there are many issues in Chinese-American relations that have the potential to fuel conflict. The two countries have different forms of government, they compete in numerous commercial realms, they both need increasingly scarce non-renewable resources, and they have different allies. The list of specific policy differences is long and includes among many other things the protection of intellectual property rights, environmental protection, worker and product safety, government subsidies helping in-country commercial ventures, and the rules and prospects for foreign direct investment, and, of course, Tibet, Taiwan, and Japan, plus the Islands in the South and East China Sea and the relationship each country has with North Korea and Iran. This paper did not catalogue the many places Chinese and U.S. policy is likely to diverge and generate public reaction. This is not because most Americans do not consider these to be important problems. To the contrary, when Pew asked a national sample in April 2012 what they thought of territorial disputes in the South China Sea the vast majority (83%) said it was either a very serious or somewhat serious problem.[56] Vast majorities said the same about potential cyber attacks from China (79%), the U.S. debt held by China (92%), the need to get tougher on terms of trade with China (86%), promoting human rights in China (81%), and advocating more freedom for Tibet (70%).

The focus here has not been on the possible flashpoints because they are well known not because they are unimportant. Because they are numerous, the purpose here has been to explore the underlying perceptions in which these specific contests are likely to be embedded. In particular, this study has tried to gauge how flammable the current state of opinion in the United States is likely

to be in reaction to the various conflicts of interest that are likely to come along.

Combustibility: As we have seen recently in the Muslim world, sometimes public opinion can be harboring such deep resentments and frustration that it does not take much to touch off an explosion. When this is the case, a particular action might be the proximate cause of an explosion but its real origins lay deeper. If that particular event had not touched it off, something else probably would. On the other hand, when there is widespread popular affection for a foreign country, this can dampen the likelihood that a disagreement over any specific question will explode into a crisis and destroy the underlying sense that the two countries enjoy an important positive interdependence. This is not hard to see in French-American relations from time to time. Looking at the landscape of U.S. public opinion about China from this broader perspective has been the purpose of this paper. Its analysis suggests that the popular sensitivity and reactivity to China in general is fairly moderate and unemotional. There is not widespread animosity toward China or intense fear in the United States. At the same time, the majority senses this is an adversarial and competitive relationship that can involve real danger in the future.

Opinion about China in the United States is divided with minorities on each of the positive and negative extremes and the majority in the middle. Most see China as an adversary but do not perceive great hostility emanating from China. Unlike during the Cold War, there is not widespread agreement that the United States should seek to contain China the way it sought to contain the Soviet Union. When in 2012 the Chicago Council on Global Affairs asked Americans if they felt the U.S. should "actively work to limit the growth of China's power," only 28% said yes, while 69% said the "U.S. should undertake friendly cooperation and

Opinion about China in U.S. is divided with minorities on each of the positive and negative extremes, and the majority see China as an adversary but do not perceive great hostility emanating.

engagement with China" instead.[57] That survey found that more Americans (55%) thought "limiting the rise of China's power" should be a very high or somewhat high priority when thinking about America's relations with Japan. Roughly the same percent (53%) saw it as a priority in relations with South Korea as well. Even in these contexts, however, large minorities thought it should be only a somewhat low priority or very low priority when it came to relations with Japan (40%) or South Korea (41%). The same division was evident when the Chicago Council asked if the "U.S. should give higher priority on building up strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan even if this might diminish our relations with China" (53%) or if the U.S. should give priority to "building a new partnership with China, even if this might diminish our relations with our traditional allies (40%)."

Not only are Americans divided over which basic strategic approach to take with regard to China, they are also divided when it comes to defending Taiwan. When the Chicago Council put the question as favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if China invaded Taiwan, more than two-thirds (69%) opposed and less than a third (28%) favored using U.S. troops.[58] When the Pew Global Attitudes project posed the question as whether to "use military force to defend Taiwan" nearly half (48%) said yes the U.S. should and only slightly fewer (43%) said it should not.[59] Likewise, when the Chicago Council asked about military aid to Taiwan the split in opinion was evident with 50% saying the U.S. should keep aid to Taiwan the same and 7% saying it should increase it while 19% said the U.S. should decrease aid and 22% said it should stop military aid to Taiwan altogether.

In the midst of the ongoing strategic debate in the United States, China is not typically seen as engineering complex conspiracies and moving foreign pawns around the world chessboard the way Americans used to suspect Moscow did. Beijing, for instance, is not seen as controlling the decisions taken in Pyongyang or Tehran. This is not to say Americans do not expect China to help reign in the danger Americans see emanating from these two radical regimes but simply to acknowledge that most Americans do not see North Korea and Iran as tools of Chinese aggrandizement. This

is important because it suggests that the American public is not roiling with nationalist insecurity nor is it ready to pounce on any possible Chinese slight or transgression. There is a cushion in the relationship that was not always there during the Cold War.

Although the landscape of public opinion in the United States when it comes to China is divided and mostly moderate, there are formations that could fall in line behind a more hostile and confrontational American posture if that was what leaders in Washington were mobilizing. There is already between a quarter and third who see China as an enemy and the two-thirds majority that sees China as an adversary could gravitate in that direction too if it senses that China is no longer friendly. That could happen because of China's behavior with regard to any number of possibly conflictive issues or simply from an increasing American familiarity with the anger and resentment oftentimes evident among Chinese nationalists. Because so many Americans expect China's influence to be great in the near future, perceived threat could intensify quickly should the comforting sense of friendliness and collegiality disappear.

Importance of Leadership: Currently, Republicans see more threat than Democrats and have more unfavorable feelings about China but opinion in the United States is not polarized. It is simply well sorted into party camps. It would be a mistake to see this partisan sorting as evidence of sharp disagreement that is likely to stall any collective action across party lines. When is comes to China, the majority of Democrats and Republicans agree on the seriousness and substantive character of the threat and share mostly moderate perceptual images and emotional sentiments even if they lean in different directions. Leaders of either party could reach into the moderate majority on the other side and work to mobilize across party lines with regard to China. It might be difficult for a leader of either party to unite the majority around one of the extreme images of China as either enemy or ally, but this is not because of partisan differences. It is because the majority in both partisan camps is moderate. If that was changing because of increasing perceptions of threat and declining friendliness, a leader of either party could probably unite the population around a more stereotypical image.

Of course, moving people in a perceptual and emotional direction is not the same as getting them to agree on a course of action. The recognition of China's rising power is likely to make some policy decisions harder to agree on because the costs and risks they entail will be more difficult to determine. The interdependence between the two countries is so much more extensive than what existed between the United States and the Soviet Union that turning to a strategy of containment is not likely to be a uniformly popular option. After all, there is a substantial minority, perhaps a quarter to a third who sees China as an ally or partner representing valuable mutually beneficial opportunities. They will be reluctant to pass those opportunities by unless the threat is clear. Conflict between China and Japan could produce that and so could aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. So too could a North Korean aggression that China condones. Hopefully, the escalation of these potentially dramatic geostrategic conflicts will not be on the horizon in which case public opinion in the United States is more likely to remain mostly moderate allowing ample room for diplomats to work out accommodations and compromises.

Because most Americans do not have stereotypical images of China that paint it as either all evil or all good but instead are operating with more complex impressions that include a mix of positive and negative attributes, leadership has both the room to operate diplomatically and also the opportunity to move opinion in numerous directions. Leadership is almost always important but in a situation where public opinion is divided and ambivalent, it is especially critical. The public will likely be permissive of actions going in either a more compromising or hawkish direction. The majority will need to hear a convincing reason to move one way or the other but is likely to be relatively open-minded and persuadable. Consequently, the future shape of the U.S. public opinion

The future shape of the U.S. public opinion landscape on China will be heavily affected by how the American president and other very top leaders interpret the actions China takes.

landscape when it comes to China will be heavily affected by the interpretations of the actions China takes that the American president and other very top leaders provide.

During the 2012 presidential election campaign President Obama's team accused Governor Romney of having been too supportive of "shipping jobs to China" and Governor Romney's camp accused President Obama of having failed to stand up to the "cheaters." There is little doubt that Americans are worried about their jobs, especially losing them, and describing China as a cheater is not likely to endear Americans toward Beijing either. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, most Americans see their economic problems as deriving from numerous causes and not just the competition with China. This may be of little comfort to people worried that political leaders will scapegoat China to appeal to American populists but being called a cheater is better than being seen as an enemy.

This may not be a very optimistic point to end on but it is consistent with the overall analysis presented here. There is plenty of public support in the United States today to sustain a positive relationship with China. Even if Americans think China is cheating, they want to keep playing the game. At the same time, there are dangers ahead. There are many conflicts of interest that will need to be resolved as Chinese-American relations go forward. Although public opinion will allow these to be dealt with in a complex way today, if fears crystallize and emotions intensify this may not be the case in the future. Consequently, it is important for leaders on both sides to build the institutional foundation that will manage the predictable disagreements likely to bedevil Sino-American relations. This will be easier to do when public opinion is mixed and mostly non-emotional as it is today in the United States than after it is mobilized by the turmoil and polemical contest conflict inevitably generates.

Although public opinion will allow the conflicts of interest between U.S. and China to be dealt with in a complex way today, if fears crystalize and emotions intensify this may not be the case in the future.

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