

Global Attitudes: Perspectives on the US- China Power Shift

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Robin Niblett

I'm conscious with time, let's get some questions and comments from our guests here and members, and then let you bring around some of them as you go along.

Question 1

I was quite taken aback by Europeans' perceptions of the Chinese economy, but perhaps the Asians know more than we give them credit for, because the characteristic of the Chinese economy which I find fascinating is almost the bubble psychology around this dead fuel surge in demand, which in fairness to the Chinese leadership, they're well aware of the risks. So perhaps the Asians are far more perceptive of the nature of the Chinese economy in the way that the Europeans feel the further you are away from a property bubble, the more dynamic and beautiful it looks. As an Irish person who watched the Irish crash very closely as well, I'm afraid there's a little truth to that. Thank you very much.

Question 2

Thank you. There's an interesting contrast here between the view that was put by representatives of the OECD here at Chatham House last week. They were presenting the new development report, and they were arguing that... I suppose the contrast is between the objective and the subjective view. They were arguing that they didn't see any emerging country, and China obviously one of these, reaching equilibrium in cap to gross domestic product before 2050. This reminded me of a series of lectures I gave about three months ago, seven lectures on the global economy, and I ended up with a case study of China. I found 20 hurdles that I perceived that China had to overcome before it reached any sort of equilibrium. I think this contrasts with the sorts of views that have been put by Martin Jakes in his book, 'China will rule the world tomorrow'.

Question 3

It's a thing maybe similar to what this gentleman said. It will be interesting to see your survey, and hopefully [indiscernible] after three years, because 2017 is when Goldman Sachs predicts that purchasing power parity, not GDP, but purchasing power parity, China will be equal to the United States. So obviously we know the difference between nominal purchasing power parity, but I think it will just be interesting to see how people's opinions change. You said fact is a fact, opinion is opinion, but when this fact comes up, how will people react to it?

Question 4

My question is in terms of soft power. Which country has its own soft power? If my understanding is correct, soft power can be defined as a power or attractiveness to make friends without using force. The terms of soft power, just like the United States has Voice of America, China has [indiscernible] news service at the central news station. Just like the UK has the British Council, China has the Confucius Institute to promote also languages and culture. Do you think, ladies and gentlemen, that this soft power works in

many parts of the world in making a favourable opinion? What are the challenges, and to what extent are they successful?

Robin Niblett

Just one point. Defence spending has certainly increased hugely in the region. I was just thinking of Rod's point there, about this perception of the risk of military conflict, somehow it breaking through. There must be a growing awareness and debate about defence investments, the presence of them, it going into budgets, being part of parliamentary discussions. I think it was quite good that you changed the question around to that issue, rather than territorial disputes and brought it around to something more specific when it is tied into the specifics. I think Asia overtook Europe in total defence spending last year, if I remember rightly. In any case, over to you on some of these points.

Bruce Stokes

Just a couple points. I had never thought of the analogy between the Dublin property market and the Shanghai property market, but it's a great one. One of the interesting things in this survey that we saw last year and see again this year is that even though many Europeans see the Chinese economy as good for the European economy, and see China as already the world's leading economic power, one of the things that damages China's reputation in Europe is the perception of Chinese human rights record.

In fact, last year when we ran the regressions, we found that actually, the driver of the unfavourability of China in Europe was not fear of Chinese economy. It was the perception of China's human rights record. China, until it fixes its human rights record, I think will continue to have problems in Europe, even though some of these other indicators suggest the Europeans feel fairly positive about China.

Robin Niblett

One of your more interesting charts was the one on the divergence of European attitudes. It certainly struck me that a lot of the negativity, countries like Italy for example, were economic.

Bruce Stokes

We have yet to run the analysis and I need to go back and do that, but at least last year, when you looked at what was the stronger driver among people who had an unfavourable view of China, it was, the stronger driver was their unfavourable perception of Chinese human rights, rather than their unfavourable view of the Chinese economy. Whether that still holds, I'm not quite sure this year.

The question on soft power I think is an excellent one. We did not ask soft power questions per se, except for the NSA question and except for the human rights question, this year. But last year in Africa and Latin America, we asked a whole battery of questions about Chinese soft power that paralleled the same questions we asked about the United States and had been asking for years.

We in the past had found that even when people had an unfavourable view of the United States in general, they had favourable views often of American soft power. So it will be interesting to see how they feel about Chinese soft power, full presuming that you wouldn't get much perception. A lot of 'don't knows'.

What we did find, interestingly, was that in a number of countries, there was a fairly positive view of Chinese soft power already. Now, we know there hasn't been that much of an effort for a prolonged period by China on soft power. They are beginning with the Confucius Institute and things to do more. My sense is what we're picking up when we ask people is about Chinese science and technology, for example, which we thought and always interpreted as well, people love American science and technology. Even if they don't like our foreign policy, they like our science and technology.

In fact, we found that in many countries, people equally like Chinese science and technology which probably means not that they thought that China was at the cutting edge of science and technology, but they had a refrigerator from China that worked. I think you have to realize that public perception is fairly unsophisticated. These are not people who spend their nights worrying about balance of power around the world. They like Chinese pop culture or they like Chinese science and technology.

We found that it's actually stronger in the countries we surveyed in Africa and Latin America than we had anticipated, including in Africa we asked people about American way of doing business, people tend to like that. Thank you very much. We then asked them about Chinese way of doing business, assuming again from the anecdotes that one would read, 'Oh, the Chinese are exploiting the Africans. They're doing all these horrible things. The public must be very upset about this.' In fact not.

They like Chinese business practices for the most part, except in South Africa. My presumption is, that's because they see the Chinese economy as successful and they must be doing something right. We admire their business practices. So we should realize that people's opinions on these things often may not be terribly sophisticated. They are their emotions, and that's what you have to deal with as a politician or a policy leader, is people's emotions, not necessarily their reason.

Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer

Two things very quickly. The idea that maybe one of the greatest challenges that we're going to face is maybe not the rising China or the strength of China, but maybe its vulnerabilities – social, economic, political. I think that's really something that we might want to study more, just like Russia. Maybe what Russia is doing in Ukraine is not out of strength but out of weakness. I think that this is something we have to look at more closely. Are we not overestimating this idea of the rising China?

The other one is power. Soft power is, as Joseph Nye said, is trying to convince others to do what you want them to do, without using the military, so without using hard power. If I look at the US approach, the United States has more and more difficulties to convince others, including its closest allies to do what they would want them to do. I think in particular of Israel, but I also think of people they've helped install into power, like Hamid Karzai or Maliki in Iraq.

So I think that this is also very much linked to a question of credibility. I think that today, the American leadership suffers from a lack of credibility. It started maybe in Syria or before, when you put red lines and you don't respect them. Then soft power, this idea of convincing others to follow you, becomes much more difficult to deploy.

Roderic Wye

On the question of do the Asians know better, they probably do. They take it all more seriously certainly than we do. I think you're right to be sceptical about the Chinese economy and its ability to continue to grow in the way that it has done. The problems will increase and we will get the kind of concerns that you've just raised now. What happens when things go wrong in China? We are seeing reactions to things going well in China at the moment. I think the reactions to things going wrong in China, which they may well do in the not too distant future, will be rather different.

Question 5

It's not a specifically Russia related question, but is there anything you could say, perhaps Bruce, about the extent to which public perspectives track elite perspectives. What I mean is, the way in which elites' policies reflect public opinion over time. Or perhaps the other way around, whereby... I'm thinking perhaps of Russia propaganda, whereby the public perspectives may track and follow elite policies.

Question 6

On drones, if I can ask a question on drones, I'm interested in the amount of damage, as it were, that drones create. If that amount of damage was done with that frequency by tanks rolling into that country, would that not cause a much greater effect on the view that other countries have of the United States, who I suppose are the main enthusiasts for drones? Could they, as it were, get away with murder?

Question 7

Two very quick questions. I was interested in the kind of young/old divide on views on the US and China. I was wondering if you think it's to do with, Bruce, older people being maybe more cynical, maybe a bit more nationalistic in terms of why they're less trusting or less favourable towards the US and China? Second question for Alexandra, Transatlantic Trends, which we are actually hosting an event on in September you'll be pleased to hear, does it show anything different from these results? Are they largely in line? I think you mentioned they are, but are there any issues that weren't brought up in the Pew work which you think is worth underlining?

Question 8

I just wondered, I found the Malaysia findings to be quite shocking, given that they also have a share in the South China Sea disputes, and also they also seem to be very favourable towards Obama personally. Certainly my experience of just chatting to Malaysian think tankers and other people is that he was a huge success. Can I just ask, are

these findings pre-Obama visit which was I guess in May? Do you have any kind of thoughts or comments on why they view the US as a threat and China as an ally?

Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer

The report that we published really confirms... Your report confirms the results we had last year, maybe one question that we used to ask and that was not raised here was the desirability of US and European leadership. It's striking that even though Europeans perceive more and more US leadership as waning, they still want more US leadership and Americans on the other hand increasingly want more European leadership. What does it mean? European leadership is another question.

A new question that we ask in the report last year was about Asia, the United States and EU. When we asked Europeans and Americans if the Asian region was rather an opportunity or a threat, it was considered as a great opportunity, even more than their partners, the European Union and America on the other hand. But when we just took China, then it became a threat. One question that distinguished the European perception and the American perception of China was that the Americans, more than 50 per cent, it was almost 60 per cent perceived China as a military threat. Europeans are not there at all. They perceive China more as an economic threat rather than military.

Then very last piece of answer on the drone question, it's I think very important. We're just starting to see the results, I guess, of the consequences of the use of drones by the current Obama administration. This is going to become a tool that is going to be used more and more as an indirect way of war, because we just don't want to send out troops. Of course, it contributes very much to the resurgence of anti-Americanism, wherever it is used.

That's a big reason why also recently Obama refused to send drones in Iraq to help Prime Minister Maliki because it would have caused more damage than resolution.

Robin Niblett

If I got the question as well, I think it was partly about whether, if he'd had to use tanks, surely that would be worse. I suppose the impression, my personal perspective would be that you think extremely carefully before you use tanks. Maybe the decision to use drones is that much easier. So actually, it isn't the either/or. Because they're used, you use them more, and then the kind of opposition that Alexandra was mentioning comes up.

Rod, in particular, Malaysia, or maybe specifically Malaysia in the interests of time?

Roderic Wye

I don't know [indiscernible] so I don't know whether it's pre or post. It's interesting. Malaysia, yes, has a say in South China Sea disputes, but it's not in the sort of front line in the way that Vietnam and the Philippines are. So I think the sort of concerns about Chinese behaviour impact less on public opinion, public perceptions in Malaysia. One of the interesting things again, from this survey, is that the sort of lack of concern over, if you like, the human rights question, the freedom question... In Malaysia it's quite stark

that they didn't much care one way or the other about freedoms in China where other countries did.

I think that may have a bit of a bearing on it, but just as you said, the European perceptions are to some extent dictated by their views on human rights. In Malaysia that is not a factor.

Bruce Stokes

In Malaysia, we went out in the field 23 May, so I think that was after the president was there. When he had these events that happen around the time you're surveying, they tend to have some impact. On drones, the only thing I'd point out is in Europe, there's an incredible gender gap on drones. A bigger gender gap than we've seen on almost any question.

European women and American women are particularly offended by drones. One way to describe this is, 'boys like their toys and they're playing their video games'. But women actually find this very offensive, I think in part because the non-combatant casualties are often children and women in these attacks. So it is one of the things that factors in here. It's in part because European women in particular are particularly offended by the use of force in general. Questions we've asked, German Marshall Fund has asked, others, so that may feed into it.

The elite and public perception question, I think very interesting question. We last year asked a question only in the United States about elite and public opinion about China. We hope to repeat that at some point, and what was interesting was how the elites in America, these were China scholars and former military officials and public officials, how they saw the China challenge totally different from the public.

The public, their biggest concerns were jobs, the fact that the Chinese owned all this debt, and the trade imbalance. The elite opinion was, we're worried about cyber security, we're worried about China in the South China Sea. They were all of these geo-strategic concerns. So what was interesting was how the publics and the elites on the China issue in the United States are totally out of touch with each other. It does seem to me that that bears watching, because they're not listening to each other at all.

There was a question on the young/old divide on US/China. What's interesting is that all over the world, young people have a more favourable view of China than older people, in many of the countries, not all of them. They have a more favourable view of the United States than older people. Frankly, we don't know why that is. It seems to me it could be one of two things.

It could be that younger people don't carry the baggage that people my age do of the Cold War and Red China and all of these things that we carry around in our heads that affect our image of each other, whereas younger people came of age at a time of globalization, after the Cold War, possibly they're just more open to other countries, carry less baggage about them.

A more cynical interpretation would be that younger people haven't experienced enough life yet. And when they bear the scars of life, by the time they're in their 50s, they'll be more cynical about each other, less open to each other. I think we won't know, but it's a very important question that bears watching, whether this generation of people, say under the age of 30 in the world, are just more open to each other than people in my generation.

Their world, we do know that a significant portion of one's world view is shaped when you're young and you carry a lot of that baggage with you for the rest of your life. This would actually be very positive baggage, it would seem to me. We have to go back and survey the same people when they're 50 and see how they feel about each other.

Robin Niblett

Thank you very much indeed, Bruce, for bringing us this poll, Alexandra, Rod, for your contributions. Just one quick point on the elite versus public opinion, I know that Rory and Xenia Dormandy have put out a report recently on elite and public attitudes in Europe and Asia to US power. Go to the website and have a look at its main conclusions if you want there.

Certainly the polling we did in the UK, three years, we're doing one again this summer, on UK public and elite attitudes to UK ambitions, policies, to specifically to James's question, we tried to dig into this business of who follows who, and how do you connect. I think it is possible for politicians to connect their public policy goals which may not be exactly aligned with public ambitions or fears, but actually you can tip them over in various ways and connect them.

There are particular ways that you can look at perhaps a fear or a hope that the public level and connect it in to something that may look quite different. Foreign aid is a classic example. Foreign aid is all about giving money to people, it doesn't help them to improve their standard of living, it doesn't work. But if you say that foreign aid is also partly about helping countries grow, you won't get immigration coming of illegal immigrants to your countries, ah, then you're connecting it. There is a way of actually not being contributory but connecting it.

My last comment, the thing I'm really taking away from this meeting as well, many interesting points, but that the will to power is as important as power. There's a sense right now that maybe China is grabbing the will to power and America is letting go of it. So it's not what you have, your capabilities, it's willpower. This is a subtext of some of the polls that you demonstrated to us, Bruce. Thank you.