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Understanding Hawkishness in Chinese Public Opinion

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Abstract

As tensions and competition between the United States and China rise, hawkish sentiments are gaining prominence in both countries. What do such trends mean for future diplomacy and cooperation? In this report, I share findings from recent surveys on Chinese public opinion concerning Sino-U.S. relations. The surveys show that hawkishness, which I define as strategic pessimism towards cooperation, is correlated but distinct from widely used attitudinal measures of favorability. The survey data also suggests that Chinese respondents are less emotional in their positions than what we see on the Chinese internet and media reporting. Furthermore, the surveys reveal that hawkishness in the Chinese public is more a reflection of internal factors than a reaction to external pressure. Overall, the survey results suggest a relatively coherent and cautiously optimistic Chinese public that sees options for diplomacy even as greater competition and rivalry seem inevitable.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- Hawkishness is distinct from favorability and the two concepts should not be treated interchangeably. It is possible for U.S. policymakers to influence Chinese public opinion with a focus on maintaining optimism about the future rather than worrying about whether positions will be viewed positively or not. For instance, holding out the possibility for mutually beneficial engagement for the future while simultaneously pushing back on Chinese economic opportunism in the present is a viable policy approach.

- Chinese netizens are not sensitive to moralistic rhetoric and U.S. policymakers need not assume that moralizing rhetoric coming from Chinese elites animates public sentiment. For U.S. policymakers the implication is that making moral appeals should be done with specific audiences in mind. While a domestic American audience may appreciate a morally driven approach, Chinese audiences will likely require a different angle. U.S. efforts to get Chinese leaders to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, might be more effective in underscoring the economic and reputational risks faced by China rather than appealing to moral obligations.

- While Chinese netizens are outwardly incensed by value-based criticism of China, they are unlikely to change their views on Sino-U.S. relations in response to criticism. The implication here is that U.S. policymakers need not worry that promoting democratic values and priorities will necessarily result in a public backlash within China. At the same time, such criticisms are unlikely to yield sympathy or change in attitude within China.

- Many Chinese netizens perceive Western countries as fearing China's rise and harboring intentions to contain China's future growth and influence. U.S. policymakers can pursue counter-narratives that communicate American confidence as well as openness to a more influential China. The heart of the challenge here is to signal confidence and strength in America's negotiating position without creating a sense of urgency for China to pursue aggressive policy goals for fear of diminishing leverage in the future.

- Chinese netizens remain open to diplomacy even as they anticipate rising competition. Unfortunately, Chinese incumbent leaders have been articulating a bleak narrative concerning the future of relations with the West under the competition framework and it is becoming increasingly important to offer counter narratives. These narratives need not be encompassing in scope, but there are narrower arenas such as energy security, trafficking, or money laundering, where earnest and open-minded negotiation could serve as testament that diplomacy remains a viable approach.

Introduction

Are U.S. and Chinese national interests incompatible? Are their differences irreconcilable? It was not long ago that diplomacy and engagement were the norm in the relationship.[1] It was a belief in common interests that encouraged American trade representatives to endorse China's bid for WTO accession and a preference for diplomacy that prompted Chinese officials to downplay crisis situations, such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade or the EP-3 plane collision in 2001. Increasingly, however, soft-spoken diplomacy has given way to hard-nosed scolding and the space for cooperation has narrowed. To be sure, the geopolitical environment and balance of power have shifted over the last ten years and with them so have the strategic calculations that drive foreign policy postures. Such shifts in strategic mindset, however, are likely to both affect and reflect shifts in public opinion.[2]

In this report, I consider some of the ways that growing rivalry in U.S.-China relations is being internalized within the Chinese public mood. While public opinion is unlikely to be the main driver behind foreign policy, public opinion is almost always a consideration for political leaders, both democratic and authoritarian. Moreover, modern diplomacy is more public and decentralized, meaning that leaders and policymakers have more tools for influencing and mobilizing public sentiment.[3] The changing nature of public discourse is also making it difficult to distinguish between genuine public sentiment, vocal extremism, and state-guided nationalism. This attribution challenge presents itself in both open societies, like the United States, as well as closed ones, like the People's Republic of China.

Public opinion is also an area of strategic imbalance. Whereas Chinese policymakers have near unfettered access to the American public mood, less is known about how Chinese citizens view their political or economic options. This disparity arises due in large part to difficulties in accessing the Chinese public; namely, the censored nature of China's internet media and restrictions on public polling that make it difficult for non-state actors to survey citizens. These barriers have left Chinese public opinion relatively understudied. Gaps in our understanding of the Chinese citizen are also a function of skepticism over the influence public opinion plays in China's authoritarian policy space. Nevertheless, both academic and mainstream commentary on China routinely references rising nationalism and hawkishness

within the Chinese body politic as cause for concern in the bilateral relationship.[4] Further research is thus warranted to avoid under or over-estimating the role of public hawkishness.

The rest of this report is divided into three sections. First, I summarize some of the relevant literature and arguments linking public opinion to foreign policy, with a focus on the U.S.-China relationship. Second, I introduce data from two online surveys designed to capture Chinese netizen opinions on relations with the West and the United States. I analyze this data to explore covariates and potential catalysts for hawkish sentiment among Chinese netizens. In the third section, I outline implications and policy recommendations that emerge from the research.

Public Opinion and the Bilateral Relationship

In less than a decade, relations between the United States and China have undergone a sea change from dialogue grounded in engagement to confrontation centered on competition. The transformation, though often discussed within the framework of foreign policy and interstate relations, has had a notable spillover into the realm of public opinion. In general, what we have seen is that public sentiment has soured on both sides of the relationship and that mutual enmity is intertwined with domestic political factors including partisan divides and support for central authorities.[5]

In a recent Pew Research poll, 76 percent of American respondents reported negative attitudes toward China—the highest percentage since Pew began collecting such data in 2005, when 35 percent reported a negative sentiment.[6] This finding is echoed by a recent Chicago Council report on partisan sentiments toward China.[7] According to the Carter Center and RIWI, a little over 60 percent of Chinese respondents hold "unfavorable" or "very unfavorable" views of the United States.[8] Likewise, surveys from UC San Diego's China Data Lab reveal that average Chinese netizens have a relatively low (4.77 on a 10-point scale) level of favorability toward the United States.[9]

Such trends coincide with growing hostility in diplomatic relations. In the United States, a "China threat" narrative emerged early in the Trump administration and Covid-19 only furthered the rift. In China, a growing

sense of national pride and assertiveness has paved the way for aggressive, so-called "wolf-warrior," diplomacy. Unsurprisingly, the souring public mood in the United States reflects some of the deeply entrenched partisan divides of American politics. According to a recent study by the Chicago Council Survey, 42 percent of Republicans considered China an adversary, as compared to 17 percent of Democrats. Similarly, whereas 67 percent of Republicans viewed limiting China's global influence as a top policy priority, only 37 percent of Democrats thought so. One important implication that emerges from such partisan differences is that average American views on national security and foreign policy are not uniform and sensitive to political narratives and elite cues.

The picture in China is murkier. As a one-party state, the Chinese body politic does not exhibit distinct political groupings or divides. While there are likely to be particularistic interest groups within the state and factional groupings centered around core elites, such domestic-level concentrations are not known to overlap with foreign policy in predictable patterns. One of the few patterns that have emerged is that higher levels of foreign policy hawkishness have trended together with increased levels of support for the Chinese government.[10] Due to the sparsity of data and general opacity in China's political fault lines, it is unclear to what extent these sentiments are related and whether increased hawkishness amongst the Chinese public is helping buoy support for the regime.

In the absence of abundant data points and unfettered debate, it can be tempting to generalize based on the information available. Familiar and outspoken nationalists, like China's deputy foreign spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, enjoy a public pedestal and have proven highly effective in exploiting it.[11] But do they speak for the broader public? Based on research in democracies, we know that those with more extreme views tend to be more outspoken and that their opinions tend to have an outsized effect on the public discourse.[12] Research on Chinese internet discourse suggests some of the same dynamics might be at work, whereby more radical nationalist voices drown out moderates. This same research also notes the presence of nuanced perspectives and agendas within the Chinese public that do not fit into simple dichotomies[13]. According to some studies, actual levels of nationalism are relatively constant,[14] while hawkishness is concentrated in smaller segments of the online community.[15]

Furthermore, because the Chinese discourse environment is so heavily infiltrated by the state, it is reasonable for netizens to feel greater ease in posting hawkish comments than dovish ones. Someone who is overly aggressive in their nationalism might get censored for errors in etiquette reasons, but those who propose engagement are likely to be censored for errors of spirit.[16] To the extent that this kind of biased expression occurs, it can also lead to a form of systemic social desirability bias that crowds out pro-engagement voices. Bias might also encourage public displays of patriotic nationalism, whereby citizens want to be seen expressing or supporting hawkishness nationalism. Likewise, webhosts and media outlets will prefer publishing and promoting hawkish content that gets more views without attracting attention from authorities. Put simply, there is a political and economic logic that favors hawkishness because nationalistic content is safer and thus more likely to attract readers, likes, and shares.[17]

It is also worth questioning whether Chinese nationalism, rising or not, implies a higher risk for conflict. Hawkishness is commonly understood as a preference for aggressive and confrontational policy. If the Chinese public is hawkish, and leaders are responsive to public opinion, then we might conclude that the greater risk for conflict is intuitive. Yet, as Duan Xiaolin points out, the link between public opinion and policy preferences remains unclear and Chinese nationalists are a diverse crowd with many holding strong preferences for avoiding conflict.[18] This should not be surprising. On a very general level, the public should always prefer diplomacy over conflict. Indeed, the idea that hawkish nationalism represents a preference for confrontation is misleading in so far as it prioritizes means over ends. As theorists point out, proud nationalists who have confidence in China's rise also have time on their side and should thus be uninterested in a confrontation in the present.[19] Instead, I will consider hawkishness as a form of pessimism for diplomacy, either due to an inherent preference for confrontation or insecurity about the future. In effect, what this means is that someone can be hawkish on foreign policy not because they hold hostile attitudes but because they lack faith or confidence in diplomatic alternatives.

Public Opinion in China

China's hawkish foreign policy posture and aggressive public nationalism are relatively recent developments. During the 1980s and 90s, Chinese diplomats were notably cautious and pragmatic. This was due to overriding objectives, like attracting foreign investment and securing entry into the WTO. It also helped that most Chinese citizens of the time were focused on domestic issues, allowing leaders to pursue international cooperation and diplomacy, including typically sensitive issues like territorial disputes, with relatively fewer domestic audience constraints.[20]

A more assertive foreign policy position in the Chinese public emerged gradually, beginning in the mid-1990s, around the time a popular book titled "China Can Say No" was published and during a period of highly visible saber-rattling over the Taiwan Strait. Na

tional pride surrounding the Beijing Olympics and disillusionment with the liberal economic model following the global financial crisis of 2008 only further emboldened the voice of those calling for China to push back against Western influence and stake its own claim on the international stage. The rise of "wolf-warrior" diplomacy is thus seen as part of a broader assertive awakening in China's foreign policy.[21] That said, neither novelty nor strategy should be overstated in describing China's growing assertiveness. As Peter Martin argues, the "wolf warrior" approach has long been baked into the career culture of Chinese diplomats.[22] Nevertheless, there seems to be a greater tolerance within the current Chinese leadership to take up more confrontational positions on issues evoking strong nationalist sentiments.[23]

Some caution that the link between nationalism and hawkishness is overstated and that critical portions of the causal linkage are plausible but not demonstrated.[24] Not only does China lack an institutional mechanism, like elections, for translating public opinion into political pressure, the Chinese state also wields vast capacity to shape and direct the public discourse. This is especially true regarding foreign policy issues—an area in which the public relies overwhelmingly on heavily curated official media for information. When it comes to official diplomacy or state-level discussions, Chinese media outlets are prohibited from publishing original content and are instead limited to stories, headlines, and quotes, published by Xinhua. Moreover, vast censorship capacity combined with economic leverage gives

the central and local governments indirect influence over the broader media market and even over individual netizens online. On the rare occasion that sensitive stories, debates, or commentaries slip through the cracks, there is an army of "fifty centers," netizens who are paid to post pro-government content, on the ready to shape and distort public discourse in ways that are favorable to the state.[25]

Given the amount of sway the CCP holds over media and public discourse, it is plausible that Chinese leaders can both amplify and mollify hawkish public sentiments. The fact that in many cases leaders have looked the other way suggests that public hawkishness is desirable, or at least instrumental for the regime. It is possible, for instance, that ginning up hawkishness is a way of boosting domestic regime support. At the same time, it is also argued that popular nationalism serves as a constraint on China's leaders, who feel compelled to adopt more confrontational postures so as to avoid being called out as soft or insufficiently patriotic.[26] This apparent contradiction resonates with a broader narrative in which the CCP is characterized as objectively strong but politically brittle, and that the CCP's contemporary legitimacy rests on the perception that they are acting to promote China's national interest whether that be economic, military, or otherwise.[27]

Unpacking Public Hawkishness

How hawkish is the Chinese public? Government influence over Chinese public opinion makes it difficult to tease out genuine public sentiment. The lack of nuanced insight can also feed into generalizations about the Chinese public as being uniformly nationalistic and hawkish. We know this to be false, as previous research has shown that only certain portions of the population are more inclined toward hawkishness. Jessica Chen Weiss, for instance, finds that those born after the 1980s are particularly prone to consume and express hawkish sentiments.[28] Younger generations are more reliant on the internet and social media for their news diet. The young have also lived through fewer of the hardships experienced by their parents and grandparents and have not experienced periods of sustained international conflict.

Heterogeneity aside, it is hard to ignore the widespread backlash coming from Chinese voices whenever the international community raises issues on

matters such as China's human rights record, its environmental commitments, or its handling of the Covid-19 outbreak.

One possibility is that Chinese public opinion is sensitive to elite cues and that rising public hawkishness is a direct reflection of the aggressive posturing and nationalistic rhetoric coming from China's senior diplomats and leaders. Such an interpretation, however, only further disempowers the Chinese citizen vis-a-viz the state and discounts legitimate grievances and concerns about the international environment. Another possibility is that Chinese citizens see the world from a more realist, zero-sum perspective whereby mutually beneficial engagement with an adversary may seem like an improbable idea. A third and related possibility is that Chinese audiences may not hold overtly hawkish positions but are emotionally or morally incensed by criticism directed toward China. As Jackson Woods and Bruce Dickson show, Chinese nationalism is grounded in a collective sense of victimhood concerning China's history with the West.[29] Still, it is possible that some portion of public opinion is performative and that Chinese citizens are not as hawkish in private as they are in public.

Data on Chinese Public Opinion

To further probe Chinese public sentiment on the Sino-U.S. relationship, I conducted two rounds of online opinion polls targeting Chinese netizens. The first wave of the poll took place in April of 2021, involving around 3000 respondents. The second wave took place in late September and early October of 2021, involving around 2500 respondents. Sampling for the surveys was done anonymously with the help of Chinese recruiters who sampled netizens from across all of China's provinces and major cities.

Unsurprisingly, descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that the sample is younger, better educated, and more affluent than the average Chinese citizen. That said, internet-based surveys have been shown to mirror scientific samples, at least in terms of substance if not in composition.[30] Moreover, the online platform has been shown to work better for sensitive questions than face-to-face enumeration.[31] Online polling and recruitment allow for respondent anonymity as their identities are unknown to the researchers who are the only ones with access to response data.[32] The feasibility and anonymity features of

TABLE 1: Survey Sample Distribution

	Wave 1	Percent	Wave 2	Percent	CNNIC2020
Age					
18-25	1351	40.23%	1180	45.40%	*
26-30	783	23.32%	623	23.97%	*
31-40	696	20.73%	553	21.28%	20.40%
41-50	384	11.44%	160	6.16%	18.70%
51-60	130	3.87%	66	2.54%	12.50%
>60	14	0.42%	17	0.65%	10.30%
Education					
Junior High	170	6.15%	170	6.15%	59.70%
Secondary	639	23.12%	639	23.12%	21.50%
Bachelor	1,816	65.7%	1,816	65.7%	10.00%
Graduate	139	5.03%	139	5.03%	8.80%
Gender					
Female	1,805	53.75%	1,403	50.76%	49.00%
Male	1,553	46.25%	1,361	49.24%	51.00%
Income					
<20K	999	29.75%	754	27.28%	*
20k-30k	251	7.47%	155	5.61%	*
30k-60k	696	20.73%	647	23.41%	*
60k-150k	1,133	33.74%	983	35.56%	*
>150k	279	8.31%	225	8.14%	*
Total		**3358**		**2764**	

p-values report difference in proportion tests across treatment categories. CNNIC2020 refers to the 2020 annual report statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center.

online recruitment are why the method is becoming increasingly common when running survey experiments in restricted information environments.[33]

Overall, the picture emerging from both survey waves, summarized in Table 2, suggests a more moderate view on Sino-U.S. relations than one might conclude from observing public discourse in Chinese censored media environment. Looking at the categorical scale of hawkishness, used in Wave 1, we see that, while a vast majority view the relationship as tensely "competitive," they nevertheless view relations as "manageable." Still, it is notable that only a small portion of the public, less than 15 percent, consider the relationship to be a "compatible and cooperative one." Looking at the 10-point scale used in Wave 2, we see that a slight majority of respondents lean in a cooperative direction, not an overtly hawkish one.

Comparing across covariates in Table 3, I find that *hawkishness* is, unsurprisingly, negatively correlated with the *U.S. Feelings Thermometer*. In other words, netizens who are hawkish also tend to be less favorable toward the United States. Consistent with previous surveys, respondent *Age* is also negatively correlated with hawkishness, meaning that younger respondents are on average more hawkish. I also find some evidence, in Wave 2 of the survey, that more educated respondents are less hawkish. Other variables, such as *income* level, *urban* residency, *time abroad*, and *CCP membership* do not appear to have notable correlations with hawkishness. Perhaps more interestingly, I find that *Satisfaction* with the central government is negatively correlated with

TABLE 2: Hawkish Sentiments

Chinese views on Sino-US relations	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Freq.	%	Mean	Std.
Incompatible, destined for conflict	413	13.79		
Competitive, but manageable	2,169	72.44		
Compatible, with room for cooperation	412	13.76		
Incompatible (*10-point scale)			*4.2	*2.4
Total	**2,994**		**2390**	

TABLE 3: Hawkish Covariates

Hawkish Covariates	(1)	(1)
	Wave 1	Wave 2
USA Feeling (5-point)	-0.128*** (-11.82)	-0.459*** (-8.66)
Govt. Satisfaction (10-point)	-0.0360*** (-6.54)	-0.197*** (-7.43)
Age	0.00209 (1.85)	-0.00389(-0.61)
Male	0.0498** (2.61)	-0.297** (-3.09)
Education	0.00574 (0.36)	-0.250** (-3.07)
Income	0.00300 (0.39)	0.0354 (0.89)
Urban hukou	0.0154 (0.76)	0.0181 (0.18)
Time Abroad	0.00860 (1.00)	0.0136 (0.29)
CCP member	-0.0182 (-0.71)	0.176 (1.30)
Constant	2.386*** (24.80)	7.493*** (19.08)
N	2975	2387

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

hawkishness. This suggests that while respondents are likely forming their foreign policy opinions based in part on how they feel about their own government, there is no evidence that public support for the Chinese state translates into support for confrontational foreign policy. This makes sense. If citizens have high faith in their leaders, then they may also have confidence that their leaders would be able to succeed in diplomacy as well. Likewise, because government satisfaction is correlated with optimism about China's political economy, it makes sense that those who see China's economic power growing with time would see less need for confrontation in the present.

A nuanced take on hawkishness may also reflect the paradigm through which respondents view the Sino-U.S. relationship. Table 4, for instance, shows that a vast majority of respondents (roughly 80 percent) view rivalry with the United States in terms of material, economic stakes. Far fewer (roughly 13 percent) interpret tensions in terms of a security rivalry, and even less (roughly 7 percent) perceive a moral conflict. This is reassuring insofar as an economic rivalry scenario is most amenable to diplomacy, especially when compared to moral-based and emotionally driven conflicts.[34] The findings also suggest that Chinese Netizens are perhaps more pragmatic in their foreign policy outlooks than much of the social media milieu and frequent "wolf warrior" outbursts suggest.

It is possible that respondents hold baseline perceptions grounded in pragmatic and economic interpretations of rivalry but are nevertheless susceptible to elite signaling that emphasizes less tractable security or moralistic frames. To explore this possibility, the first survey wave included an experiment involving select phrasings from Chinese President Xi Jinping which respectively underscore zero-sum, non-zero-sum, and moral-based tensions in China's relationship with the West and the U.S. The three treatment conditions are summarized below:

- (Zero-Sum) In a recent speech, China's president explained that "the East is rising, and the West is declining." Do you agree with this position? (在近期的讲话中，中国领导人提出了"东升西降"的说法。你同意吗?)[35]

- (Non-Zero-Sum) In a recent speech, China's president explained that "we should reject the outdated Cold War and zero-sum game mentality,

TABLE 4: IR Paradigms

Chinese interpretations of Sino-US tensions (Wave 1)	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Economic conflict (non-zero-sum)	2,349	79.49	79.49
Security conflict (zero-sum)	387	13.10	92.59
Moral conflict (moralist)	219	7.41	100.00
Total	**2,955**	**100.00**	

adhere to mutual respect and cooperation." To what extent do you agree with this position? (在近期的讲话中，中国领导人提出了"要摒弃冷战思维、零和博弈的旧理念，要坚持互相尊重与合作"的观点。你同意吗?)[36]

- (Moralistic) Inspired by Xi Thought, China's state council recently directed citizens to uphold traditional values and defend China's honor from moral attacks from abroad. To what extent do you agree with this position? (国务院近期提出了新时代公民要坚持传统美德和抵制国外道德攻击。你同意吗?)[37]

If respondents are sensitive to these signals, we should expect them to shift preferences in-line with the treatment they were shown. As Table 5 summarizes, however, we see little indication that respondents are internalizing such signals to update their perceptions of the underlying rivalry. In no instance is there any indication that the randomly assigned rhetoric treatment has any measurable impact on respondents' qualitative assessments of rivalry, nor does there appear to be any impact on overall hawkishness. Taken together, the findings suggest that respondent sentiments are relatively stable and not particularly sensitive to domestic framing. Again, this finding stands in contrast to conventional interpretations of Chinese public opinion on foreign policy as being pliant and politicized.

External Factors

In addition to domestic factors, Chinese citizens presumably form some of their attitudes toward the United States in response to policy and rhetoric coming out of Washington D.C. In particular, the popular victimization frame suggests that respondents might feel under threat from or that they are being unfairly treated by the United States. It has, for instance, become commonplace for Chinese diplomats to aggressively protest and deny external criticism of China—especially when it concerns issues that considered to be of internal concern, such as human rights or ethnic policy. In other words, hawkishness in Chinese public opinion might operate in part as a reactionary and emotional response to external criticism. By the same token, we might expect that praise for China's achievements, in addition to criticism, might endear citizens in a more positive direction.

To explore these emotional factors, I embedded an experiment in both waves of the survey whereby respondents were primed with one of three statements attributed to western governments indicating criticism, either over China's perceived *economic opportunism* and *human rights abuses*, or *praise for developmental achievements*, and then asked to write down some of their feelings in response to the statements.

- Western governments often criticize China over its human rights record. In a few words, please describe how such criticism makes you feel (西方国家经常批评中国的人权问题。 请用几个形容词来描述你对这种批评的感受):

- Western governments often criticize China over its economic policies. In a few words, please describe how such criticism makes you feel (西方国家经常批评中国的经济政策。请用几个形容词来描述你对这种批评的感受):

- Western governments often criticize China, but they also praise China's achievements in reducing poverty and promoting development at home and abroad. In a few words, please describe how that makes you feel (西方国家经常批评中国, 但同时也赞赏中国国内外的发展和扶贫的成就。请用几个形容词来描述你对这种批评的感受):

TABLE 5: Xi Rhetoric Treatment

	(1) Treatment	(2) Controls
Xi Realist Treatment	-	-
Realist Rhetoric	0.0628 (0.47)	0.0738 (0.55)
Moralist Rhetoric	-0.0823 (-0.61)	-0.0870 (-0.64)
Constant	-1.797*** (-18.90)	-2.852*** (-4.38)
Xi Moralist Treatment	-	-
Realist Rhetoric	-0.00426 (-0.02)	0.0132 (0.07)
Moralist Rhetoric	0.103 (0.60)	0.121 (0.70)
Constant	-2.408*** (-19.30)	-1.739* (-2.17)
Xi Neo-Liberal (Baseline)	-	-
N	2955	2947

t statistics in parentheses
$^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

The random nature in which these statements were presented to different portions of the sample means that we can attribute differences in downstream outcome variables to the distinct set of sentiments provoked by the statements. There are several potential mechanisms that could be at work here. An updating logic suggests that different frames of criticism and praise will impact how Chinese respondents perceive external pressure and that this will motivate them to then update their perceptions of Western motives and the bilateral relationship with the United States. An alternative, emotional mechanism,

operates in a simpler manner whereby external criticism provokes hawkishness as a reactionary response without changing the respondent's underlying assumptions about Western motives for criticism.

While there are numerous ways in which one might characterize the motives of a foreign state, a close reading of media reports alongside discussions with colleagues and former students, resulted in four distinct ways that external pressure tends to be internalized and interpreted by Chinese observers. These interpretations are summarized in Table 6 based on how frequently they were chosen by respondents. Interestingly, most respondents interpret Western criticism as motivated by a fear of China's rise. Only a handful interpreted criticism as it is presented by Western governments: as a desire for a more liberal China.

These interpretations, however, are not fixed. Comparing across interpretation likelihood, conditional on treatment assignment, summarized in Table 7, we see that criticism on the human rights issue moves respondents to think that Western governments either misunderstand China or that they harbor an anti-China bias. Interestingly, mixed praise and criticism also encourage respondents to consider Western criticism as a misunderstanding. This is important because the *misunderstanding* interpretation is most strongly associ

TABLE 6: Perceptions of External Criticism

Perceived U.S. Motives	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Desire for a more liberal China	52	1.73	49	2.01
A desire to contain China	765	25.45	615	25.19
A misunderstanding of China	149	4.96	96	3.93
Anti-China bias	283	9.41	217	8.89
Fear of China's rise	1,757	58.45	1,464	59.98
Total	**3,006**	**100.00**	**2,441**	**100.00**

TABLE 7: Criticism Treatment

	(1) Wave 1	(2) Wave 2
A desire for a more liberal China		
HR criticism	-0.139 (-0.42)	0.231 (0.52)
Mixed Praise	-0.175 (-0.50)	1.042** (2.68)
Constant	-3.425*** (-15.44)	-3.943*** (-11.71)
A desire to contain China		
HR criticism	0.141 (1.40)	-0.193* (-1.65)
Mixed Praise	-0.184 (-1.64)	-0.270** (-2.30)
Constant	-0.834*** (-11.66)	-0.715*** (-8.83)
A misunderstanding of China		
HR criticism	0.749** (3.29)	0.553** (2.15)
Mixed Praise	0.840*** (3.64)	-0.093 (-0.32)
Constant	-3.035*** (-16.51)	-2.921*** (-14.23)
Anti-China bias		
HR criticism	0.482** (3.19)	0.214 (1.15)
Mixed Praise	0.0368 (0.21)	0.266 (1.45)
Constant	-2.027*** (-17.56)	-2.079*** (-14.93)
Fear of China's rise (Base Outcome)		
N	3006	2441

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Pragmatism

If Chinese netizens are less hawkish, less politicized, and less sensitive than a "wolf- warrior" narrative implies, then perhaps they should be more open to pragmatic approaches to foreign relations, which consider opportunities for coexistence even as they brace disagreement, competition, and even conflict. As summarized in Table 8, Chinese netizens are generally pragmatic about future cooperation. Looking across both survey waves, over 80 percent of respondents thought that it is either "mildly" or "definitely" worth listening to arguments about future cooperation on things like conflict resolution, trade promotion, climate change, and denuclearization.

In Table 9, I also explore several plausible covariates of pragmatism. The *hawkishness* measure and the *U.S. Feeling* thermometer are both associated with pragmatism in an intuitive direction. Importantly, both measures are highly significant, indicating that, while they likely capture related dispositions, they nevertheless encapsulate distinct foreign policy calculations. As noted earlier, it is possible for someone to have positive feelings toward the United States, while still holding hawkish positions in their overall outlook of the Sino-U.S. relationship. Likewise, it is entirely possible and intuitive to imagine confident regime supporters to be less hawkish in their outlook

TABLE 8: Open-Minded to Cooperation

Pragmatism	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Total nonsense	33	1.10	37	1.49
Not very helpful	348	11.63	291	11.74
Possibly worth listening to	1,793	59.91	1321	53.29
Definitely worth listening to	819	27.36	830	33.48
Total	**2,993**	**100**	**2,497**	**100**

TABLE 9: Pragmatism Covariates

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	(1) Internal	**(2) External**	**(3) Internat**	**(2) External**
Hawkishness	-0.312*** (-14.95)	-0.313*** (-15.02)	-0.099*** (-17.67)	-0.099*** (-17.69)
USA Feeling	0.071*** (5.66)	0.070*** (5.62)	0.055*** (3.74)	0.054*** (3.71)
Male	0.076*** (3.54)	0.076*** (3.56)	0.076** (2.88)	0.074** (2.82)
Education	0.010 (0.59)	0.008 (0.50)	0.016 (0.74)	0.015 (0.70)
Income	0.001 (0.12)	0.001 (0.07)	-0.045*** (-4.50)	-0.045*** (-4.51)
Urban Registration	-0.014 (-0.64)	-0.015 (-0.68)	0.030 (1.10)	0.030 (1.09)
Time Abroad	-0.012 (-1.26)	-0.012 (-1.27)	0.013 (1.02)	0.014 (1.06)
CCP Member	0.066** (2.30)	0.063** (2.20)	0.061* (1.67)	0.058 (1.59)
Government Satisfaction	0.048*** (7.57)	0.047*** (7.50)	0.000 (0.04)	0.000 (0.03)
Liberalize China		-0.026 (-0.31)		0.093 (0.95)
Contain China		-0.052** (-2.07)		0.057* (-1.82)
Misunderstand China		0.051 (1.01)		0.017 (0.25)
Anti-China Bias		-0.065* (-1.74)		-0.077 (-1.62)
Constant	3.503*** (36.86)	3.065*** (27.36)	3.508*** (46.91)	3.501*** (34.11)
N	2952	2916	2387	2338

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

precisely because they envision a future in which China continues to grow its relative power.

As anticipated, those respondents who perceive external pressure from the United States as motivated by a desire to contain China, are the least pragmatic about the future. The remaining variables do not reveal a clear picture of the correlates of pragmatism. The only consistent variable is the *male* gender, but this may simply reflect a different baseline interpretation of pragmatism. Other variables, like *CCP membership* and *government satisfaction*, correlate positively with pragmatism, but the relationship is not always significant.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings presented in this report suggest that Chinese netizens have relatively pragmatic and stable interpretations of China's rivalry with the United States and that these interpretations are an amalgam of internal attitudes and domestic calculations as well as perceptions about the external environment.

On the internal side, I show that hawkishness, which I define as pessimism about the prospect for cooperation cannot be reduced to simple negativity toward the United States, even if the two attitudes are correlated. This contrast is also relevant when juxtaposed with the idea that Chinese nationalism is endogenous with regime support. My findings suggest this is only partly true. Respondents who express greater satisfaction with the Chinese government are also more likely to hold negative feelings toward the United States, but they are not more hawkish. While this may seem counterintuitive, it also suggests a more rational calculus at work in shaping respondent expectations for cooperation and conflict. Views on cooperation, for instance, appear to be not simply a function of feelings but also of diplomatic efficacy and time horizons. It is thus unsurprising, for instance, that respondents with high regard for their leaders also place greater confidence in their ability to effectively manage diplomatic relations with the United States. It is also unsurprising that respondents who are optimistic about China's economic future are less inclined to risk it with confrontation in the present. The idea that hawkishness in the Chinese public mood is more rational than ideological is further supported by the observational and experimental findings

concerning popular paradigms in Chinese foreign policy thinking. First, the survey results show that most respondents view tensions with the United States from a non-zero-sum paradigm that prioritizes economic competition rather than zero-sum realism or moralistic emotion. Second, experimental treatments designed to signal the preferred paradigm of China's preeminent leader, Xi Jinping, do not appear to significantly align respondents with the proposed paradigm. Taken together, the findings again suggest that, for most Chinese netizens, views on relations with the United States are relatively stable and grounded in economic thinking.

The surveys also offer some insight into how Chinese netizens perceive external pressure. For an overwhelming majority, U.S. criticism is seen as motivated by a fear of China's rise, followed by a containment motive. These perceptions dovetail with recent studies of nationalism suggesting that Chinese citizens hold conflicting emotions of national confidence and national victimhood.[40] A smaller proportion views external pressure as being biased or misguided. Only a handful of individuals deem Western pressure as benevolent. These interpretations are formed, at least in part, in response to how Western countries engage China. For instance, offering mixed praise for China's achievements alongside criticism appears to soften interpretations while criticism alone seems to increase the belief that China is being placed under unfair and malign scrutiny. Such tendencies should not be overstated, however. For instance, while criticizing China on the issue of human rights appears to provoke some emotional backlash, the most common reaction among Chinese respondents is to discount the criticism as a misunderstanding.

Looking further down the thought process, the survey results show that Chinese respondents remain generally open-minded about future opportunities for cooperation even in an age of heightened competition.[41] While hawkish respondents are clearly less optimistic, I find that government satisfaction is positively correlated with pragmatism. Notably, CCP members are slightly more pragmatic than non-CCP members, reinforcing the idea that respondents with greater satisfaction or connection with the government are generally optimistic about the prospects for diplomacy.

Finally, perceptions of the external environment appear to have only a limited impact on pragmatism. A belief that the United States is aiming to contain China's rise is negatively and significantly correlated with pragmatism.

Even so, the relationship here is modest and the difference in effect, as compared to more benevolent interpretations of Western criticism, is small. Given that the Western criticism experiments did not have a large impact on perceptions, it again appears that Chinese respondents have relatively stable interpretations of U.S. foreign policy as well as rational beliefs about the prospects for diplomacy that are less sensitive to external criticism or individual interpretations of that criticism.

Policy Implications

Implications from the research are four-fold. First, the survey evidence suggests that Chinese netizens, even if they might be nationalistic, are not profoundly hawkish in their foreign policy outlook. By and large Chinese netizens see rivalry with the United States in terms of economic competition. The silver lining in all this is that Chinese netizens remain open to diplomacy alongside competition. Diplomats and strategists would be wise to engage and sustain this attitude. Even on the most sensitive of issues, such as Taiwan, there is a strategic interest in keeping time horizons long and not playing into what appears to be an alarmist narrative from China's leader that "the world has entered a new period of turbulence and change."[42]

Moreover, the survey results suggest that Chinese netizens are not easily moved by moralistic and rhetorical appeals, either foreign or domestic. For U.S. policymakers, this means that the Chinese public has an opinion when it comes to policy and that it is not simply reacting to cues from China's political leaders. In other words, the Chinese public is a distinct audience that could be factored into the broader diplomatic strategy. Identifying areas of divergence between elite preferences and public opinion will not be easy, but it is a task worth investing in. Take, for instance, criticisms of China's response to Covid-19, which arguably served to galvanize Chinese nationalism. While these criticisms have focused largely on lack of transparency, few have appealed to the intense hardship Chinese citizens continue to endure under Beijing's "zero-covid" policy.

The surveys also show that Chinese netizens, even if they tend to vocally protest foreign criticism, are unlikely to change their views on Sino-U.S. relations in response to criticism. Practically speaking, this implies that U.S.

policymakers need not fear that promoting democratic values and priorities will necessarily result in public backlash within China. At worst, Chinese observers appear to deflect such criticism as "misunderstanding." Consider, for instance, the recent Summit for Democracy hosted by the United States, "to renew democracy at home and confront autocracies abroad" in December of 2021. Chinese diplomats and media personalities were furious about the summit and netizens were vocal in their criticism.[43] Yet, the survey evidence provided here suggests that such displays may be more performative than genuine. From a policy perspective, endeavors like the Summit for Democracy can thus be disentangled into distinct audiences. While American voters and international partners may see U.S. claims on democracy as a commitment on values or rallying of like-minded partners, Chinese recipients likely see it as a smokescreen for economic rivalry.

Indeed, the surveys suggest that Chinese netizens already perceive the United States as being both fearful of China and intent on containing China. The task for U.S. strategists could thus turn to counter-narratives that communicate confidence on the part of the United States, and openness toward a more influential China. The point here is not that U.S. policymakers ought to be more careful in their messaging. Their primary audience is domestic. At the same time, the findings do indicate that taking note of the Chinese public as a constituency reveals opportunities and points of leverage that might otherwise go underutilized. Economic sanctions, a key tool for Washington in its attempts to pressure Beijing, are a good case in point. If sanctions are perceived as broad attempts to contain or undermine China's economy, they will likely provoke a nationalist backlash and raise pessimism among Chinese citizens. If on the other hand, sanctions are more surgical in their targeting and specific in their duration, they are less likely to feed into dominant narratives about the unfair treatment of China.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

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