

U.S.-CHINA SECURITY PERCEPTIONS SURVEY: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Public and elite attitudes in the United States and especially China are exerting a growing influence on the bilateral security relationship. The U.S.-China Security Perceptions Project analyzes the content of these attitudes through original surveys and workshops conducted in both countries. The project's findings have implications for policymakers seeking to reduce the likelihood of future bilateral conflicts.

Survey Findings

- There is a low level of strategic trust between the United States and China, which could make bilateral relations more turbulent.
- Despite this lack of mutual trust, only small minorities of all respondents in both countries saw the other country as an enemy. A majority of U.S. and Chinese elites and the American public as well as a plurality of the Chinese public viewed the other country as competitor. Substantial minorities of all respondents saw the other country as a partner.
- Majorities of all U.S. and Chinese respondents felt their own country should play a shared leadership role in the international system. Majorities of U.S. elites thought the world would be more stable if the United States remains the leading superpower, but Chinese elites felt that a balance of power between Washington and Beijing would be more conducive to global stability.
- U.S. and Chinese elites prioritized strengthening the bilateral relationship, with an emphasis on improved economic cooperation.
- Chinese respondents—especially government elites—cited U.S. arms sales to Taiwan as a major source of tension. U.S. elites—especially retired military officers and business elites—saw alleged Chinese cyberattacks and intellectual property infringement as particularly problematic.

Recommendations for U.S. and Chinese Policymakers

Emphasize cooperation over competition. Capitalize on support among elites in both countries for strengthening bilateral ties. Sustained top-level leadership is needed to build public support and provide a strong foundation for managing potential crises in the relationship.

Keep extremist views in perspective. Most respondents were not hawkish or adversarial toward the other country. Minority extremist perspectives, such as those often expressed in social media, should not be allowed to hijack policy.

Build mutual trust. Deepening official and unofficial exchanges, engaging in a more meaningful dialogue on strategies and interests, and keeping bilateral commitments will increase trust, as will explaining the intentions underlying policies like the U.S. rebalance to Asia and China's military expansion.

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Reconcile divergent views of global order. American and Chinese elites' differing preferences for the global distribution of power could cause tension unless the two countries candidly discuss how to coexist and accommodate each other's interests.

Prevent the Taiwan issue from derailing broader cooperation. Washington should not underestimate the significance China attaches to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Beijing should not allow this issue to prevent it from recognizing Washington's consistent support of the One-China policy. Both sides should understand fully the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue and avoid sending wrong signals that negatively impact bilateral relations.

Establish rules on cybersecurity. Mutual understandings will reassure both sides, especially business elites, who have historically constituted a stabilizing force in U.S.-China relations.

CHINA STRATEGIC CULTURE PROMOTION ASSOCIATION

The China Strategic Culture Promotion Association is a national, nonprofit civil society group composed of experts, scholars, and social activists who are engaged in studies of international issues, the Taiwan issue, and cultural issues. The association was founded in Beijing on January 5, 2011, aiming at promoting security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and encouraging peaceful development on both sides of the Taiwan Strait through studies, dissemination, and exchange of Chinese strategic culture.

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