Trends in Global Attitudes toward China

As an economic powerhouse and a geopolitical center of influence, China has invested significant resources into enhancing its soft power. To this end, China has opened hundreds of Confucius Institutes, initiated the massive Belt and Road Initiative, and has expanded its health and humanitarian assistance worldwide. Public opinion about a country can be understood as one key measure of its soft power. Yet, too little is known about global attitudes toward China. Have China’s massive efforts to boost its national appeal succeeded in the eyes of the international public? What factors are associated with rising and falling views about China around the world?

The data. Researchers used data spanning 2005 to 2018 from the Global Attitudes and Trends (GAT) survey. The GAT is an annual worldwide public opinion survey initiated in 2002 by the Pew Research Center. Using GAT, researchers of this study analyzed how people in different countries viewed China (i.e., “very favorable” to “very unfavorable”). This article incorporates survey results from 59 countries and 388 country-year observations, excluding China.

Researchers also used data from both the United Nations Human Development Index to measure a country’s socioeconomic development level and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index to measure its level of democracy. To measure China’s economic ties with surveyed countries, the researchers incorporated export data and foreign direct investment (FDI) data from the World Integrated Trade Solution and the Statistical Bulletin of China’s Outward Foreign Direct Investment, respectively.

China’s global image is deteriorating overall. Despite China’s focused expenditure of resources to enhance its soft power, research reveals that, overall, between 2005 and 2018, the percentage of people who held favorable opinions of China at the country level has been declining over time.

Factors that affect attitudes. According to the analysis, attitudes toward China are shaped by two important factors: socioeconomic development and democracy. Developed countries were less likely to exhibit favorable opinions toward China. Similarly, countries with more democratic political institutions tended to exhibit more negative attitudes toward China. Countries with higher levels of democracy were also more likely to experience a decline in attitudes toward China over the surveyed period.

INSIGHTS

- Higher levels of a country’s economic development and democracy predicted a sharper decline in attitudes toward China.
- Countries where China had higher rates of foreign direct investment had a more positive perception of China.
- A larger share of China’s export to a country was correlated with unfavorable opinions of China.

Global trends in favorable opinions of China, 2005–2018

Note: Data has been pooled across countries; and survey conducted to ensure comparability of results across countries.
Which economic ties affect attitudes toward China? In countries where China had higher rates of FDI, the public had a more positive perception of China. However, the amount which China exported to other countries was negatively correlated with the percentage of people who held a favorable opinion of China.

Percentage of respondents with favorable opinion of China and its correlates

DATA

- Additional sources included the United Nations Human Development Index, Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, World Integrated Trade Solution, and China’s Statistical Bulletin.

Individual education and attitudes. The impact of individuals’ education on their attitudes toward China also varied by the socioeconomic development levels of the countries in which they lived. In the most developed societies, education played a negative role in shaping people’s opinions of China. In less developed or developing countries, however, education correlated with a more favorable opinion of China. Researchers conjecture that in developed countries, people with higher levels of education would focus more on differences in values and political ideals between China and their own countries and thus would more likely hold an unfavorable opinion of China. However, in less developed countries, more educated persons will focus on economic benefits that China has brought and thus will likely hold a more favorable attitude toward China.

A snapshot of public opinion from around the world. The analysis also revealed the following:

- To properly interpret public opinion data toward China, researchers compared the attitudes of the same respondents toward the U.S. as a reference point. Authors found that, on the whole, China is favored in South America, Russia, and Africa, while the U.S. is favored in Europe.
- Countries neighboring China (e.g., Japan, India, and South Korea) favored the U.S. more, while countries neighboring the U.S. (e.g., Canada and Mexico) favored China more.
- A Pew Research Center survey conducted in March 2020 further revealed that 66% of American adults expressed an unfavorable view of China, the lowest opinion toward China in the data series since 2005.

Understanding the drivers of global attitudes. Despite the government’s focused commitment to enhancing its appeal abroad, China has lost ground over time in terms of securing favorable attitudes from people in other countries. The decline in attitudes toward China appears most pronounced in highly developed countries (e.g., the U.S.), democratic countries, and neighboring countries (e.g., Japan and India). At a time of tremendous flux in international relations, this research suggests that to craft effective foreign policy objectives, countries, including China, would do well to better grasp the sources of their international appeal.

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