

# **AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION ON CHINA AND US FOREIGN POLICY**

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*EAI Background Brief No. 569*

Date of Publication: 14 October 2010

## **Executive Summary**

1. Apprehension or even concern over China's future economic and international trajectory has been a consistent thread in US public opinion over a range of historical periods and geopolitical contexts.
2. Yet, American public opinion on China has fluctuated widely, albeit momentarily, in response to perceptions of the strength of US global political and economic leadership, China's rising international stature, the state of bilateral ties, and unexpected developments such as the 1989 Tiananmen incident. These opinions are highly subjective and malleable.
3. How China is viewed by the average American is more important now given China's rise. A poll by Pew Research Center in December 2009 showed that over half of Americans (53%) viewed the rise of China as a major threat to the US, while 44% believed that China was the world's most important economic power.
4. Similarly, a Gallup poll found that the proportion of Americans who think China is the world's leading economic power had quadrupled between 2000 and 2009. In contrast, the percentage of Americans who viewed the US as the leading economic power had dipped from 65% in 2000 to 37% in 2009.
5. Interestingly, while the US economic standing has dipped in American eyes, a separate poll indicated that a considerable percentage of Americans (44%) believe that the US, as the most powerful nation in the world, should go its own way in international matters, not worrying about whether other countries agree with it or not.
6. The results seem to suggest that a considerable number of Americans believe that the best way for the country to maintain its dominant position is through military power and that the US can afford to cede to China in the economic sphere.

7. American public opinion does affect US foreign policy toward China. This is largely due to the American public preoccupation with domestic economic issues which are closely intertwined with the Sino-American relationship. These types of issues have also become increasingly salient due to the upcoming US mid-term election on 2 November 2010.
8. If not properly managed, these issues can snowball into bigger problems. The resultant negative publicity will likely stoke public opinions, thus making it difficult for politicians on both sides to maintain stable relations.
9. An American return to robust economic growth will likely produce a more rational approach toward, and public discourse on, China's increasing influence in international affairs. On its part, China will also need to be more attuned to the concerns and fears of ordinary Americans as they grapple with a China that has intruded into many aspects of their lives.