

June 7, 2013

## Opinion Brief: Americans See Potential Opportunity in Building US-China Ties, But Most Are Cautious to Trust China

*President Obama and President Xi Jinping meet today in California to privately discuss the US-China relationship and its many attendant issues. The US-China relationship is of obvious importance to the Obama administration and its pivot to Asia, and several recent polls show that Americans also recognize China's growing influence and Asia's importance to the United States. While the Chicago Council Survey found that for the most part Americans appear ready to embrace developments in Asia as an opportunity for the United States, many recognize that over the longer term China's rise could be a negative development for the competitiveness of the United States. Other polls have highlighted public anxiety over China's economic growth, but these surveys also reveal a desire to build a strong relationship with China in the longer term.*

This report summarizes findings from the 2012 Chicago Council Survey, 2012-2013 Pew Research surveys, the 2012 German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends, and the 2012 Gallup poll. The Chicago Council Survey was conducted online, while the other surveys were telephone polls. This difference in methodology could account for some of the varying responses on certain questions. For more on methodology, see the end of this report.

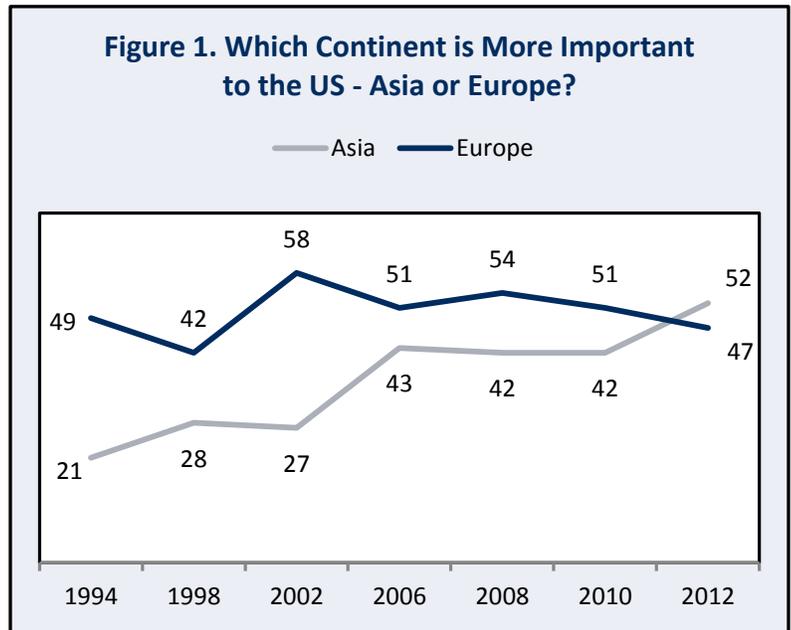
### Key Findings:

- Americans sense that China's influence in the world is increasing while US influence is decreasing, although more Americans still think that the US had an edge in 2012. When asked to choose whether the US or China is the current global economic leader, Americans are evenly divided between the two nations.
- China's emergence as a world power does not invoke a great sense of threat for Americans, but many are concerned about the impact that China's economic growth could have/has had on the American economy. Half say that if China's economy grows as large as the US economy, it would have both positive and negative effects.
- Even with some concerns about US debt to China and China's economic strength, majorities of Americans prefer that the US work on friendly engagement and strengthening ties with China.

### More Americans Now View Asia as More Important than Europe

For the first time in the history of Chicago Council surveys going back to 1994, the 2012 poll found slightly more Americans select Asia (52%) over Europe (47%) when asked which continent is more important to the United States (Figure 1).

In an open-ended follow up question, those who selected Asia over Europe attributed their choice to Asia's growing economic power and technological advances. In the words of one respondent, *"Many state-of-the-art technologies come from Asia, and it's in the best interest of the US to develop strong ties as we move into the future."*



### Americans Expect China's Influence to Grow; More Now Express Negative Views of the Country

The Chicago Council poll found that the US public sees China's influence on the rise and America's influence is on the decline. Americans continue to view the United States as the most influential country in the world today (an average score of 8.5 out of a possible score of 10), but they expect US influence to decrease in ten years (to 8.1). By contrast, they expect China's influence to continue to climb, narrowing the gap with the US in ten years (from 7.4 to 7.8). China is currently rated second most influential to the United States among the countries presented. Nearly half viewed China as mostly a partner (48%) to the United States, an increase from 2004 (41%), but nowhere near the majorities that consider Japan (80%) and South Korea (65%) mostly partners.

Several polls in 2012 and 2013 reported more unfavorable than favorable ratings of China among Americans. Just-released Pew results from March-April 2013 show that American views of China have declined steadily from 51 percent favorable in 2011 to 37 percent today, similar to drops in other countries' ratings of China. Pew's previous April-May 2012 survey indicated that most Americans consider China a competitor (66%) rather than an enemy (15%) or a partner (16%). But only 26 percent of Americans thought that the United States could trust China (68% lack trust). Some of the decline in favorable views of China might be a reaction to concerns about the impact of Chinese competition on the US economy (especially in the context of American economic difficulties), similar to American fear of Japanese economic strength during the 1990s. Nevertheless, the same survey showed that two in three Americans rated US-China relations as good (65%).

The German Marshall Fund's June 2012 Transatlantic Trends survey also found a very slight majority of Americans having an unfavorable opinion of China (52%, with 41% favorable). In contrast to Chicago Council findings, Transatlantic Trends showed a reversal in opinion on whether Asia is more important than Europe for US national interests: 55 percent of Americans

chose Europe in 2012, an increase of 17 percentage points over 2011 (when 51 percent chose Asia).

### **China's Economic Power: Both an Opportunity and a Challenge**

Taken together, the survey results from various polls about China's economic rise reveal somewhat mixed opinions. The Chicago Council Survey found that three in four Americans (76%) expect that someday China's economy will grow to be as large as the US economy. For the most part, the public does not seem to view this development as entirely negative, even though a majority says that China practices unfair trade (67%).

Consistent with previous Chicago Council surveys, about half of Americans believe Chinese economic growth will impact the United States in equally positive and negative ways (49%; 40% mostly negative; 9% mostly positive). Half (52%) see US debt to China as a critical threat. Americans have become markedly more aware of the debt situation over time. In 2006, only 24 percent believed that China loans more money to the US than the other way around, compared with 70 percent today.

At the same time, the German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends from June 2012 found that Americans tend to see China's economic development as mostly a negative for the United States. Six in ten said that China is "a threat to our jobs and economic security", compared to three in ten who say that China is "more of an opportunity for new markets and investment" (5% say both; 5% say neither/don't know).

Pew's May 2012 survey found that Americans are closely divided on whether the United States (40%) or China (41%) is currently the world economic leader, and reveals some degree of concern about this competition. Solid majorities said that the large amount of American debt held by China (78%), the loss of US jobs to China (71%) and the US trade deficit with China (61%) are "very serious" problems for the United States. Twice as many Americans said that China's economic strength (59%) worried them more than its military strength (28%), and a majority said it is very important to be tough with China on trade and economic issues (56%).

Beyond economic issues, Pew found that about half of Americans also described cyber attacks from China (50%), China's impact on the global environment (50%) and China's policies on human rights (48%) as "very serious" problems for the United States.

Pew also conducted a March-May 2012 elite survey among government officials, retired military, business leaders, scholars and the news media. There was much less concern among these experts than the general public on these specific economic issues; only cyber attacks from China are considered a very serious problem by at least half across all five groups (and especially among retired military).

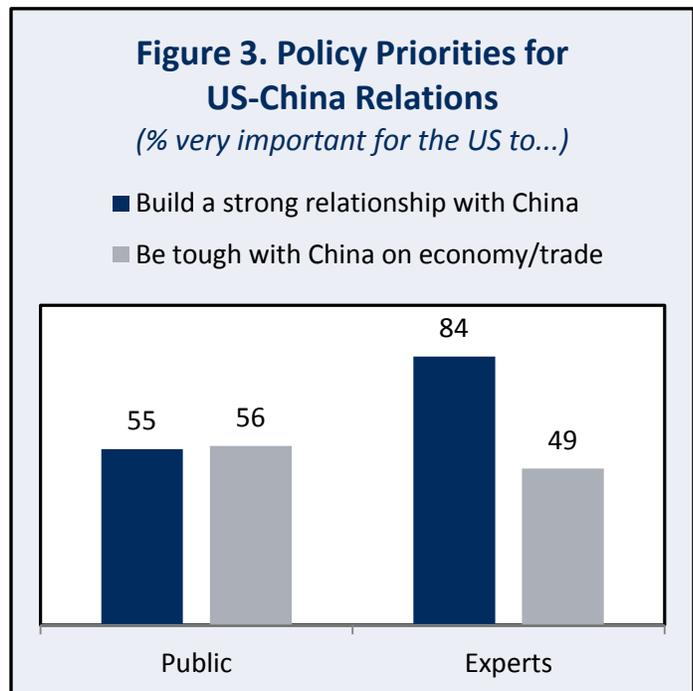
**Majority Support Friendly Engagement with China**

While the American public is concerned about US debt to China, China’s overall emergence as a world power does not invoke a great sense of threat for Americans. The Chicago Council poll found only four in ten (40%) view China’s development as a world power as a critical threat, down significantly from a majority in 2002 (56%), though up slightly since 2004) (Figure 2). Most favored pursuing friendly cooperation and engagement (69%) over actively working to limit the growth of China’s power (28%).



A Pew survey conducted in May 2012 found a higher percentage of Americans that viewed China’s emergence as a world power a “major” threat to the well-being of the United States (52%), but this question wording differs from the Chicago Council’s question which could impact results. Half also considered China’s growing military power a “very serious” problem for the US (49%), though these levels were much lower than other threats listed, including Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, Islamic extremism and international financial instability. At the same time, a majority said it is “very important” for the US to build a strong relationship with China (55%). Pew found even greater support for building a strong relationship with China (84%) in the expert survey (Figure 3).

When asked specifically about countries being potentially dangerous for the United States, China is a top mention. A May 2012 Pew survey asked which country represents the greatest danger to the United States, and Americans volunteered China more than any other country (26%; 16% Iran, 13% North Korea), though in January 2012 Iran was the top mention. A February 2012 Gallup poll asked what country in the world is the United States’ greatest enemy, and 23 percent named China, though more named Iran (32%). The 2012 Transatlantic Trends survey found that half (51%) of Americans considered China a specific military threat.



To hedge against military threats in East Asia, most Americans perceive clear dividends from having a US troop presence in the region.

According to the 2012 Chicago Council Survey, six in ten (59%) believed that the American presence increases stability in the region. A slight majority (54%) also supported shifting military

and diplomatic resources away from the Middle East and Europe toward Asia, but this endorsement for the “pivot” was rather soft (9% strongly, 45% somewhat).

#### **A Note on Methods**

The Chicago Council’s 2012 biennial survey of public opinion was conducted from May 25 - June 8, 2012. GFK Custom Research conducted the survey for The Chicago Council online using a randomly selected sample of 1877 adults age 18 and older from their large-scale, nationwide research panel. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 2.8$  percentage points.

The 2012 Chicago Council Survey was made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation. The full report on the 2012 Chicago Council Survey, “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” is available at [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

For more information about the 2012 Chicago Council Survey, please contact Dina Smeltz, senior fellow, Public Opinion and Global Affairs ([dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org](mailto:dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org); 312-821-6860).

The Pew Research Center surveys were based on several telephone surveys conducted nationwide by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, including:

- March 4-March 18, 2003, with 1002 adults 18 and older, with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.5$  percentage points
- April 30-May 13, 2012, among 1004 adults 18 and older, with a margin of error of  $\pm 3.7$  percentage points
- January 11-16, 2012, among 748 adults 18 and older

The Gallup poll referenced was conducted by telephone February 2-5, 2012, with a sample of 1,029 adults nationwide, and a margin of error  $\pm 4$  percentage points.

The German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends survey was based on telephone interviews conducted nationwide between June 2 and June 27, 2012. TNS opinion was commissioned to conduct the survey; the sample size was approximately 1,000 respondents with a margin of error of  $\pm 3$  percentage points.