

Problems of Misperception in U.S.-China Relations

by Peter Hays Gries

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Abstract: China's relations with the West deteriorated dramatically following the Tibet and Olympic torch relay controversies in the spring of 2008. Because of its focus on the balance of material power, realist International Relations theory can do little to help us understand such developments. Instead, it is the political psychology of international relations that provides the most leverage on the role that misperceptions play in generating mistrust and insecurity in U.S.-China relations.

*"When we were [the] Sick man of Asia,
We were called The Peril.
When we are billed to be the next superpower,
We are called The Threat.*

*...
When we had a Billion People,
You said we were destroying the planet.
When we tried limiting our numbers,
You said it was human rights abuse.*

*...
Why do you hate us so much?"*

- Chinese poem "Silent Protest,"
Spring 2008¹

"We do have to get tough on China. . . This country manipulates its currency to our disadvantage, they engage in broad-based intellectual property theft, industrial espionage. . . What do we get in return from them? Well, we get tainted pet food, we get lead-laced toys, we get polluted pharmaceuticals."

- Hillary Clinton, May 4, 2008²

¹"Wusheng de kangyi." Accessed May 9, 2008 @ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4Z8z1MM8i0>. Also posted on the website of the PRC Embassy in Brunei @ <http://bn.china-embassy.org/eng/zgxw/t432275.htm>. Accessed May 9, 2008.

²Cited in "Hillary's China-Bashing," *Pomphret's China*, May 6, 2008. Posted @ http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/pomfretschina/2008/05/why_we_need_china.html.

“China is rising, and it’s not going away. They’re neither our enemy nor our friend. They’re competitors.”

- Barack Obama, April 26, 2007³

The spring of 2008 was not a very happy time for relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Americans were distressed by the Chinese government’s crackdown on Buddhist demonstrators in Tibet, and the Chinese were upset by the American media’s coverage of the Tibetan protests and by protests in San Francisco during the Olympic torch relay. But there were no significant military conflicts or major economic disputes. There were no deaths, such as occurred when three Chinese journalists perished when a U.S. airstrike hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, or when a Chinese pilot disappeared following a collision between a Chinese fighter and a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft near Hainan Island in April 2001. And yet China’s relations with the West in general and the United States in particular deteriorated. And while the summer 2008 Beijing Olympics went off without any major hitches, the Chinese and American finger pointing that accompanied the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008 revealed that mutual mistrust lingered. Why?

Structural realists argue that the only thing that matters in U.S.-China relations is the balance of material power. Therefore, as Bob Ross put it, “common arguments about misperceptions in policymaking. . . do not apply to the U.S.-China conflict.”⁴ On the contrary, I contend that a series of misperceptions and misunderstandings significantly undermined mutual trust on both sides of the Pacific in 2008, and that heightened distrust and suspicions have a real impact on U.S.-China relations. Specifically, I argue that differing identities and ideologies lie at the heart of many of these misperceptions. Heightened mutual distrust, furthermore, increases the likelihood of a security dilemma in which rising threat perceptions translate into tougher foreign policies that can become self-fulfilling prophecies, spiraling bilateral relations towards conflict.

³“Transcript: The Democrats’ First 2008 Presidential Debate,” *New York Times*, April 27, 2008. Accessed November 24, 2008 @ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/us/politics/27debate_transcript.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=all.

⁴Robert S. Ross, “Introduction,” in *Re-Examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 395 (note 7).



Protestors gather outside of a Carrefour supermarket in Guangzhou, China, April 2008, to oppose Tibetan independence.

Olympian misperceptions

It all began at the top of the world. To mark the 49th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule, on March 10, 2008, hundreds of Buddhist monks began a series of protests in Lhasa and other Tibetan cities. The subsequent weeks witnessed both continuing protests and state repression. Sympathetic towards the plight of the monks, the Western media roundly condemned PRC repression. Without physical access to Tibet, CNN and other Western visual media used stock footage from elsewhere while reporting on the events in Tibet. This led many Chinese to protest that the Western media was deliberately misrepresenting the Tibetan situation. One group of Chinese nationalists created a popular website, anti-CNN.com, in Chinese and English, “to expose the lies and distortions in the western media.”⁵

The situation deteriorated further the following month. The Olympic torch relay, which had begun in Greece at the end of March and was to work its way around the world to China in April, became an occasion for major protests and counter protests. In London and Paris on April 6 and 7, protestors were roughed up while trying to extinguish the flame. On April 9 in San Francisco, organizers were forced to change the planned relay route to avoid protestors. Westerners were appalled by the strong-arm tactics of the Chinese security detail; Chinese were horrified by the failure of the host countries to protect the torch bearers. Many Chinese were particularly upset with France, and protestors demonstrated outside of Carrefour supermarkets across China.

Things did not improve as the torch made its way through Asia at the end of April. A huge outpouring of 20,000 overseas Chinese in Canberra frightened the Australian media, and scuffles broke out in both Nagano and

⁵ See <http://www.anti-cnn.com/>. Accessed May 9, 2008.

Seoul between overseas Chinese and outnumbered Tibetan and other local protestors, generating alarm bells across both Japan and South Korea.

As a result of these events, Chinese and American views of each other appear to have deteriorated significantly. A July 2008 Chicago Council for Global Affairs survey revealed that 67 percent of Americans believed that China engages in “unfair trade” practices, a 9 percentage point increase from their 2006 survey. A full 40 percent of respondents in the 2008 survey viewed China as a “critical threat” to vital U.S. interests.⁶ John Pomphret has gone so far as to declare the end of the era of Chinese “soft power.”⁷

Very different Chinese and American national identities lie at the core of this tragedy of mutual misperceptions. For many Chinese, narratives of a “Century of Humiliation” have primed them to perceive virtually all Western behavior through a prism of victimization, leading to a Chinese view of all American policies as designed to block China’s rise and humiliate the country. Meanwhile, a liberal fear of the state primes many Americans to reduce the complexities of Chinese politics to a simple narrative of brute force: “Oriental despots” or “Red Communists” trampling individual rights. Ideology and identity, in short, appear to fill in the gaps where knowledge falls short. In the absence of substantive knowledge about each other, both Chinese and Americans frequently end up navel gazing, constructing negative images of the other that support cherished images of the self.

Victims no more?

For many Chinese, the root cause of U.S.-PRC tensions is American ignorance of China. They claim that while Chinese understand America, Americans do not understand China.

While it is certainly true that Americans do not know much about China, the claim that Chinese understand much more about the United States is more problematic. Given the global influence of American popular culture, politics, and economics, it may well be true that Chinese are exposed to more information about the United States than vice-versa. But knowledge is not the same as understanding. Indeed, the poor quality of Chinese understandings of American political culture makes the United States the perfect *tabula rasa* upon which Chinese can construct an “Other” against which to define who they are.

⁶“Aware of China’s Rise, Worried Americans Still Prefer to Engage,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs *Global Views 2008* @ http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202008/2008%20POS_Chinas%20Rise.pdf. Accessed December 1, 2008.

⁷“The Ugly Chinese,” *Pomphret’s China*, May 1, 2008. Posted @ http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/pomfretschina/2008/05/the_ugly_chinese.html. Accessed May 13, 2008.

Most nations are born out of the devastation of wars, and modern China is no exception, having suffered tremendously at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialism, beginning with the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century continuing through the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and then China during World War II. This contentious past has had a profound impact on Chinese national identity and worldviews today. But it only does so in an indirect way, as the past does not speak for itself. Instead, it is evolving Chinese histories or stories of their past that most directly impact the way Chinese today understand the world and their place in it.

Outsiders would be wise, therefore, to listen to those stories. During Mao Zedong's rule, Chinese told the story of their recent past through a Marxian and nationalist framework: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led the working and peasant classes in a victorious struggle against their rival Guomindang (GMD), the urban bourgeoisie and rural landlords, and foreign imperialists. With the imposition of Western sanctions following the massacre near Tiananmen Square in 1989, the CCP began a "Patriotic Education Campaign" in the early 1990s that contributed to the emergence of a new "victimization narrative" that overtook the Maoist "victor narrative" by the end of the decade. The "century of humiliation" became the new master narrative of modern Chinese history, and Western and Japanese "Others" became the villains against which Chinese righteousness was constructed.⁸

Viewing the world through the prism of the "century of humiliation," it is easy to see how many Chinese nationalists would interpret the spring 2008 Western protests against the Tibetan crackdown and the Olympic torch relay as further examples of China's victimization at the hands of the outside world, the goal of which is to humiliate the PRC and prevent its rise. For instance, at an April 19 protest outside of a Carrefour supermarket in Qingdao City, Shandong Province, a man held up a placard that read:

Say NO to Carrefour!!!

Say NO to French Imperialism!!!

Strongly protest the 1860 Anglo-French invasion of China;

Strongly protest the 2008 slander of Our Olympics.⁹

That this Chinese man is still protesting the second Opium War 148 years later is emblematic of how the trauma of the "century of humiliation" persists today. The direct line drawn between the "century of humiliation" and events today demonstrates the power of the new victimization narrative to structure the Chinese interpretation of contemporary international affairs. Within this Chinese prism, the idea that French, British, and American protestors may

⁸For more on "victor" and "victim" narratives of the "century of humiliation," see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (University of California Press, 2004).

⁹My thanks to Wang Zheng for sharing this photo at a conference at the University of Victoria.

genuinely care about the human rights of Tibetans, Han Chinese, and Africans in Darfur is dismissed outright. In short, a new nationalism has emerged in today's China that powerfully shapes Chinese perceptions of American actions and intentions.

Liberal fears

U.S. national identity lies at the heart of many American misunderstandings of China today. Given the paucity of American knowledge about China, U.S. discourse on it frequently tells us less about China than about the longstanding U.S. debate over the very meaning of being "American."¹⁰

In *Founding Brothers*, Joseph Ellis contends that a fundamental tension lies at the heart of the American national identity. The United States, he argues, has two "founding moments." The first was the Declaration of Independence, the "spirit of '76" first embraced by the Jeffersonian Republicans. This strain of American Liberalism first championed individual liberty against the hated tyranny of King George, but lives on today in a visceral fear of concentrated or coercive state power. The second "founding moment" was the constitutional settlement of 1787-1788, first celebrated by Hamiltonian Federalists for transforming a weak confederation of states into a genuine American nation, but later celebrated by proponents of a strong America. The tension between America's "two foundings" has led to an ongoing American debate over issues like state and federal sovereignty, freedom and equality, and the proper role of state power. This debate, Ellis argues convincingly, "was not resolved so much as built into the fabric of our national identity."¹¹

American misperceptions of China and subsequent prescriptions for U.S.-China policy are very much embedded in this ongoing debate over American national identity. It is the "spirit of '76" that appears to dominate U.S. views of China today. The Jeffersonian Republican strain of American Liberalism has, at its heart, a fierce insistence on individual liberty set against an authoritarian state. In American national narratives, the United States won its independence and freedom against the tyranny of King George and the British. But our fear of the individual's enslavement at the hands of a strong state lives on today in our fear of communism. Decrying a "China threat" and the evils of communism becomes a way of defining what it means to be a freedom-loving twenty-first century American. It is, therefore, not surprising that American politicians frequently use China as a tool to construct patriotic images of themselves before the American electorate. Since it is fairly safe to

¹⁰This argument draws its inspiration from Richard Madsen's compelling *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹¹Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2002), pp. 9 & 16.

say that China will remain “communist,” at least in name for the medium-term future, it is also likely that at a very deep-rooted level, many Americans will continue to fear “China’s rise.”

Those on both ends of the American political spectrum who advocate a tougher policy toward China partake of this “Spirit of ‘76.” On the left, the campaign rhetoric of both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton adhered to this narrative of protecting individual liberty against an authoritarian state. Similarly, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, as well as human rights advocates, decry the lack of political liberties in China. They are joined on the right by religious conservatives who lament not just “godless communism,” but the lack of religious and other political liberties in China. For instance, New Jersey Congressman Christopher Smith, a Christian conservative, has held dozens of hearings on Capitol Hill to deplore China’s lack of religious freedoms. “China’s continued repression of religion is among the most despotic in the world,” Smith argues. “Today, numerous underground Roman Catholic priests and bishops and Protestant pastors languish in the infamous concentration camps of China for simply proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹²

This bi-partisan “Spirit of ‘76” drove the spring 2008 protests against China’s Tibet policies and the Olympic torch relay. These Americans rallied around the idea of defending religious freedom, and the idea of liberty in the face of tyranny. This spirit explains the tremendous sympathy that ordinary Americans feel about the plight of Tibetan Buddhists. One of the most fundamental Chinese misperceptions of the United States is to view American “Spirit of ‘76ers” as “anti-China,” when they actually know and care little about China, but are instead anti-state power, in any of its forms, including if not especially “communist.”

But the Federalist celebration of American nationhood also seems to live on in those Americans who think not primarily about the symbolic threat that “Chinese tyranny” presents to American Liberty as about the material threat that “China’s rise” represents to the American nation. The very idea of “China’s rise” appears to generate insecurities about the America’s fate in the twenty-first century. In some ways, 9/11 and “China’s rise” appear analogous to Shays’ Rebellion of 1786-1787 in that they all prompted a Federalist fear of national disintegration. It is this fear that generates a willingness to sacrifice individual liberties for the sake of state power and security. It is hard to imagine a “Patriot Act” or a “unitary executive” theory in an America—especially during a Republican controlled Washington—that was not facing the threats of Islamic fundamentalism and “China’s rise.”

¹² Chris Smith, “Google. . .China. . .and US: Moral challenges we face,” *National Review*, April 20, 2006. Accessed March 18, 2008 @ <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/smith200604200556.asp>.

Political psychologies of U.S.-China relations

While differing national identities and ideologies, and the failure to recognize those differences, lie at the heart of much misperception in U.S.-China relations, a variety of more routine cultural and psychological differences also pose challenges for U.S.-China relations. These can be systematically studied using the survey and experimental techniques common in political psychology. I present three examples below: 1) an experimental study of the impact of cross-cultural differences in self-esteem on emotional responses to international scenarios, 2) survey data on the impact of beliefs about shared contentious pasts on foreign policy preferences for the future, and 3) survey evidence of the impact of political ideology on American attitudes and policy preferences towards China.

First, cross-cultural differences in self-esteem impact emotional responses to hypothetical international scenarios. Many Chinese, as mentioned above, were appalled that Western protestors in places like London, France, and San Francisco would be allowed to disrupt the torch relay. This dismay has both cultural and psychological dimensions. While the norm that one should be courteous towards guests is prevalent in the West, it largely applies at the personal level, and certainly is not elevated above more fundamental values like the freedom of speech. For Chinese, however, the cultural norm that a host should take good care of his or her guests is much stronger, and applies not just at the personal but also at the collective level. That the British and French police did not do a better job of protecting the Olympic flame, therefore, was seen as at best impolite, but more widely as an intentional assault on China's dignity. Many Chinese came to identify the Olympics in general—and the Olympic torch in particular—with Chinese national pride. As the Qingdao protestor's reference to "*Our Olympics*" reveals, the Beijing Olympics were not easily separable from Chinese nationalism.

While the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda effort to use the Beijing Olympics to boost its nationalist legitimacy is partially to blame for this prevalent Chinese view, there is also a more fundamental psychological dynamic involved. While cross cultural psychologists have found that Americans consistently score higher than Chinese on psychological measures of self-esteem at the individual level,¹³ my own research indicates that Chinese consistently score much higher than Americans on collective self-esteem at the national level. For instance, Chinese respondents are more likely to agree with statements like "Being Chinese is an important part of who I am" than Americans are to agree that "Being American is an important part of who I am."

¹³ See, e.g., Cai Huajian, Jonathon D. Brown, Deng Ciping, and Mark A. Oakes, "Self-esteem and culture: Differences in cognitive self-evaluations or affective self-regard?" *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, Sept. 2007, pp. 162–170.

This cross-national difference in the locus of self-esteem has implications for Chinese and American understandings of events like the Olympics. In the spring of 2006, well before the spring 2008 protests began, several colleagues and I implemented a large experiment with over 500 Chinese and American university students. One half of the students were randomly assigned either symbolic gain or loss versions of a Beijing Olympics scenario. It was a 2 (nation = U.S. or China) by 2 (valence = gain or loss) design, with four resulting conditions: U.S. gain, U.S. loss, China gain, China loss. The U.S. gain condition, for instance, read, "Sports analysts now predict that the U.S. will double the Chinese medal count at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In their view, the U.S. will be the only sports superpower in the 21st century." The U.S. loss condition, by contrast, read, "Sports analysts now predict that China will double the American medal count at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In their view, China will be the only sports superpower in the 21st century." The Chinese gain and loss versions simply reversed "U.S." and "China" and were translated into Chinese. After reading one of these randomly assigned scenarios, Chinese and American participants were asked to rate the statement "I feel proud" on a 1-7 "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" scale.

A statistical analysis of the resulting data revealed a highly significant interaction between nation (United States, China) and valence (gain or loss), and demonstrated that the Chinese students experienced both *more* pride than the American students in the gain condition, and a greater *loss* of pride than the American students in the loss condition. Indeed, the Chinese students were twice as sensitive to national gain/loss as Americans were when it came to national pride. By contrast, when Chinese and American students were presented with individual level gain or loss scenarios like "You have been dating your boy/girlfriend for over three months, and realize that you love him/her. You decide to take a risk and tell him/her that you love him/her. He/She responds by saying that he/she loves you too/doesn't love you anymore and wants to break up," there were no statistically significant differences in the pride scores of the Chinese and American students.

Explaining this empirical finding is a more difficult matter. First, is this evidence of a Chinese oversensitivity to the plight of their nation, an excessive concern with China's international "face"? Or is it evidence that Americans can more easily disassociate themselves from the fate of their nation, or that they kid themselves into believing that they don't care? Second, are these differences a product of the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures, such that Chinese have more of their psychological well being invested in the good of their groups? Alternatively, could these differences have historical origins, with the Chinese experience of victimization at the hands of Western imperialism making them more sensitive to their international status? Or are they simply the product of the current balance of material power, such that Americans have less to worry about or take pride in, confident in U.S. global preeminence? While the use of an experimental

design allows us to confidently state that national origin (Americans vs. Chinese) caused these differences in national pride scores, further research is needed to clarify why the differences emerged.

Contentious pasts and uncertain futures

Survey research methods can empirically demonstrate the ways in which the past matters for present-day international relations. In spring 2007, a group of colleagues and I conducted a survey of 181 Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean university students that included eleven questions about their shared pasts, threat perception in the present, and foreign policy preferences for the future.¹⁴ This survey did not discuss the United States, but it nonetheless provides insight into the ways that history matters for Chinese foreign policy today. A “beliefs about the past” scale included two positively and two negatively worded statements about either colonial Manchuria (China-Japan), colonial Korea (Korea-Japan), or tributary Chosun Korea’s relations with Ming-Qing China (China-Korea). For example, for the colonial Manchuria case, the statements read, “Colonial Manchuria prospered,” “Japan’s policies helped colonial Manchuria develop,” “Japanese rule was bad for colonial Manchuria,” and “The Chinese people suffered at the hands of Japanese.” A five item “threat perception” measure consisted of three general threat items, and two specifically military threat items. For the Chinese students in the Japan condition, they read, “The world would be a safer place if Japan was weaker,” “Japan is a threat to China,” and “China should be suspicious of Japanese intentions,” “The recent increase in Japanese defense spending undermines Chinese security” and “Japan seeks to avoid military conflict with China.” After reverse coding the final item, the five items were averaged together.

Finally, two individual items were used to tap foreign policy preferences towards the relevant “outgroup,” one broad and one very specific. For instance, for the Chinese students in the colonial Manchuria group, this item read “China should adopt a friendlier foreign policy towards Japan.” A very concrete policy item was also used, taking advantage of the fact that all three nations have maritime territorial disputes with each other. Thus, for Chinese students in the China-Japan group, this item read, “Both Japan and China claim sovereignty over the contested Diaoyu Islands that lie between China and Japan. Our government should aggressively defend its sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands, even if it means heightened tensions with Japan.”

Running simple correlations among these four variables for all 181 Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean university students revealed both that

¹⁴The following section draws from Peter Hays Gries, Qingmin Zhang, Yasuki Masui, and Yong Wook Lee, “Historical beliefs and the perception of threat in Northeast Asia: Colonialism, the tributary system, and China-Japan-Korea relations in the 21st century,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2008.

beliefs about the past had an impact on threat perception in the present, and that perceived threat translated directly into a preference for tougher foreign policies in the future. This evidence strongly suggests that beliefs about the past do indeed matter for contemporary international relations in general and Chinese foreign policy in particular.

Party, ideology, and American attitudes towards China

A wide variety of actors, interests, and institutions exert influence on U.S. policy toward the PRC. Does political ideology play a significant role? Can any generalizations be made about differences between American liberals and conservatives in their attitudes towards China? The dominance of structural or system level theorizing in international relations has led to a dearth of solid research on the domestic determinants of foreign policy. And national opinion polls generally have lacked enough nuanced questions about China to discern any impact of political ideology. As a result, surprisingly little is known about how the political orientation of the typical American influences his or her perception of China's rise, attitude towards the Chinese government, prejudice towards the Chinese people, and preferred U.S. policies toward China.

To better understand the impact of party affiliation and political ideology on U.S.-China policy, a colleague and I conducted our own surveys, and found that political orientation does, indeed, have a major impact on American views of China.¹⁵ In an Internet survey conducted in February 2008, 156 American adults were asked 38 questions about China that were used to construct five separate China scales. First, a six item "symbolic threat" scale tapped the threat that China is perceived to pose to American political and religious values. It included items like "Chinese values and beliefs are quite similar to those of Christian Americans" (reverse coded). Second, a six item "material threat" scale tapped the competitiveness or realistic threat that China's rise was perceived as presenting for U.S. military and economic dominance. Items included "The recent increase in Chinese defense spending undermines U.S. security" and "China's rise will help stabilize East Asia and promote world peace" (reverse coded). Third, an eight item "prejudice" scale was composed of eight "The Chinese people are. . ." statements. Four were negative ("uncooperative," "devious," "aggressive," and "dishonest"), and four were positive ("friendly," "trustworthy," "peaceful," and "honorable") and reverse coded. Higher values, therefore, indicated greater prejudice or negative views of the Chinese people. Fourth, an eight item "negative Attitudes towards the Chinese government" scale was composed of eight "The Chinese government is. . ." items, using the same eight adjectives used in the prejudice

¹⁵The following section draws from Peter Hays Gries and H. Michael Crowson, "Political Orientation and U.S. China Policy," *under review*.

scale. Fifth and finally, a ten item “containment policies towards China” scale tapped respondents’ preferred U.S.-China policy. It included items such as “The best way to deal with China is to maintain our military dominance and seek ways to contain its influence in the world,” and “Our government should adopt a friendlier foreign policy towards China” (reverse coded). Higher values indicated a preference for tougher U.S. policies to contain China.

The results from our survey were overwhelming. Self-reported “conservatives” (on a 1-7 scale) perceived significantly greater threat in China’s rise, held more negative views of the Chinese government, exhibited more prejudice towards the Chinese people, and advocated a much tougher U.S.-China policy than self-reported “liberals” did.¹⁶

Political party affiliation has a similar impact. Overall, Republicans held much more negative views of China and preferred tougher China policies than did Democrats. Furthermore, using multiple regressions we were able to control for alternative explanations such as education/income, gender, and age, finding that while these variables had some impact on American views of China, their impact was negligible compared to the impact of political ideology. Political ideology, in short, has a clear impact on the ways that Americans perceive China, likely compensating for a lack of knowledge about China.

Misperception in international relations theory

Mainstream international relations theory largely dismisses the possibility of ever understanding the role of perceptions and intentions in international affairs. For instance, “offensive realists” like John Mearsheimer contend that since there is no way to know the intentions that drive other states, the only thing a rational state can do is to build up its military capabilities and prepare for the worst.¹⁷ Thus according to Mearsheimer, the “tragedy of world politics” is that conflict is inevitable because other state’s intentions and views are unknowable. On the contrary, I believe that one tragedy of world politics is the failure of scholars and diplomats alike to systematically seek understanding of how others view the world, allowing misperceptions and conflicts to fester. As Robert Jervis argued in his 1976 classic, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, “Perceptions of the world and of other actors diverge from reality in patterns that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand.”¹⁸ I believe that the survey and experimental research

¹⁶The correlations (Pearson’s *rs*) between conservatism and symbolic threat, material threat, prejudice, negative attitudes towards the Chinese government, and containment policy were .586, .564, .281, .434, and .608 respectively. All *ps* < .001.

¹⁷John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

¹⁸Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 3.

presented above demonstrate that the scientific study of patterns of misperception is not only possible, but is urgently needed.

The challenges of studying perception and misperception in U.S.-China relations are daunting, but they must be overcome if we are to avoid another U.S.-China conflict. China and the United States fought twice in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the United States could easily be dragged into another conflict involving either China and Taiwan or China and Japan. While that probability is low, the stakes are too high to simply cover our eyes and hope for the best.

