

Living with a Rising Giant

July 30 2010, By Hilary Hurd Anyaso

How do Americans feel about the rise of China and its dominance in the world?

A new book co-authored by a Northwestern University professor finds that despite objections to China's record on human rights, its repressive policies in Tibet and a growing trade deficit with the [United States](#), two-thirds of Americans favor peaceful engagement with China as opposed to trying to limit its rise.

Titled "Living With the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China" (Columbia University Press, June 2010), the book is co-authored by Benjamin Page, Gordon Scott Fulcher Professor of Decision Making and faculty associate, Institute for Policy Research, at Northwestern, and Tao Xie, associate professor and assistant dean at the School of English and International Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

"Some observers seem to think the American public would be quick to fight or would be quick to be protectionist, and that's just not the case," Page said.

Americans' attitudes toward China, however, are tempered by serious concerns about China's escalating power.

"The biggest worry is that China's economic strength will turn into military strength and eventually might be used against U.S. interests," Page said.

Americans also are concerned about human rights in China, but Page added, are not in favor of U.S. interference. And democracy is another issue related to human rights.

"Americans don't like authoritarian regimes and want to see democracy around the world," he said. "Like with [human rights](#), Americans lean toward trusting the historical process and assume that with time China will become more democratic. But democracy in this case is very tricky, because it would have to happen within the Communist Party."

The book is designed to help general readers, policymakers, students and scholars understand how ordinary Americans think and feel about China.

The future peace and prosperity of the world is likely to depend heavily on the relationship between the United States -- the world's dominant military and economic superpower -- and China, a rapidly rising power whose military and economic strength may match that of the United States within a few decades, according to the book.

As news stories remind us daily, Page said, the relationship between the United States and China is crucial to the world and could make the difference between peace and war and prosperity and an economic mess.

Below Page continues the conversation about the book and U.S.-China relations with Hilary Hurd Anyaso, law and social sciences editor at Northwestern.

What influences Americans' views of China?

The official relationship is always important. But perhaps the most important thing is what China is and what it does in the real world. The size of China is hugely important, the economic strength and the consumer goods that we import, the future prospects for military

strength, all of those affect attitudes.

Is there a disconnect between how Americans actually feel about China and what U.S. policymakers think Americans feel about China?

It's clear that policymakers want to do a lot of different things than what most Americans want to do -- that is, the policy preferences of ordinary Americans are not always followed. So that's one kind of disconnect. But I think you may be right about the disconnect in perceptions -- policymakers may not have a good understanding of what ordinary Americans think. I hope the book will help.

What are some of the more complicated matters that the U.S. has to navigate with China?

Taiwan is the trickiest. There's just a huge gulf between official U.S. policy and what the Chinese think. The U.S., of course, is continuing to sell weapons to Taiwan. The Chinese government and pretty much all of the Chinese people think of Taiwan as a province of [China](#). In this connection, one of the things that we found is that the American public really does not want to fight about Taiwan. There's very low support about using U.S. troops or military force to defend Taiwan.

How do Americans benefit from the relationship with China? How do the Chinese benefit?

The biggest benefits are the material benefits. Americans get a whole lot of cheap consumer goods. And the survey evidence shows that they are very appreciative of that. At the same time, of course, the Chinese get a wonderful market for selling those goods, which has made a huge

difference in their economic growth. It has led to big opportunities, increasing wages and lots of jobs making those goods that they export.

What is the greatest threat to U.S.-China relations?

The greatest threat is Taiwan. The status quo is probably OK but that is the strange situation in which the U.S. claims that there is a one-China policy, but at the same time gives military aid to Taiwan. But as long as Taiwan doesn't try to be independent, that's stable. The biggest single danger is that at some point, which almost happened a short time ago, the Taiwanese might have a government that insists on independence and that could lead to a major struggle that the U.S. could get dragged into.

Provided by Northwestern University

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