

Tomorrow's China offers scope for hope as well as cause for concern

Fergus Hanson, Andrew Shearer

The Australian

2 December 2009

P. 14

China's rise will be the defining geopolitical development of our age. Australia has had a foretaste this year of what it could be like living in close proximity to a powerful and assertive China. Remember Chinalco's abortive grab for resources giant Rio Tinto and Stern Hu, still languishing in a Chinese jail? And the ham-fisted diplomatic bullying that accompanied the Australian visit of exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer?

Even Barack Obama, the wildly popular leader of the world's only global superpower, encountered mostly push-back on his recent visit to the Middle Kingdom.

So, is this the sort of China we can expect to be dealing with in the future? This is one of the big questions hanging over the conference Kevin Rudd has convened this week to flesh out his ill-defined Asia-Pacific community proposal. It is one that even the China experts can't answer.

But one way we can get an idea about the direction in which China may head is by knowing a bit about the inclinations of the Chinese people. Public opinion isn't always an accurate predictor of a country's foreign policy, particularly in an authoritarian one-party state. Yet even the unelected leadership in Beijing can't afford to ignore entirely how China's people view its position in the world.

An opinion poll released today by the Lowy Institute, with the support of the MacArthur Foundation, sheds interesting light on how the Chinese see the world around them. When it comes to external threats, the US looms large in Chinese fears. Half of all adults say the US poses a threat to China's security, with one-third saying it poses the greatest threat of five countries included in the survey. (Only 14 per cent identified Japan and India each as the most threatening.) For those who feel threatened by the US, the top-ranked explanations are that the US may seek to restrain China's influence, and potential support it may provide to separatists.

Concern with the US also extends to its alliances: almost half the respondents see Australia's alliance with the US as a primarily negative influence on Sino-Australian relations.

China's rise poses particular challenges because of its rapid military modernisation, mercantilist policies, authoritarian political system and secretive strategic culture. Not surprisingly, a deep fault line of mistrust runs across the Pacific Ocean. This is reflected in opinion polls in the US and Australia. In a CNN poll last year, 51 per cent of Americans said they considered China a military threat. And a Lowy Institute poll this year found 40 per cent of Australians see China's development as a world power as a critical threat to Australia's vital interests, and 41 per cent consider it likely China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years.

Worryingly, younger and better-educated Chinese seem more nationalistic and more insecure than their elders on some topics. The generation that has come of age since Deng Xiaoping opened up China to the outside world in 1978 may be expected to be more comfortable with the West. But almost two-thirds of 18 to 24-year-olds say the US poses a threat compared with about one-third of those 55 or older.

It is not all doom and gloom, however. Attitudes to Australia are generally positive. Moreover, the Chinese seem to share at least some of the concerns of the West. One of the poll's most striking results is that non-military perils, including climate change and food and water shortages, dominate threat perceptions. Environmental issues topped a list of nine possible

threats at 76 per cent. Despite China's non-responsive system, its leaders will have to weigh these concerns at Copenhagen.

And maybe China and the West are not as far apart as is commonly assumed when it comes to values. The poll reveals a surprisingly positive response to Australian democracy, with 57 per cent agreeing Australia has a good political system and 68 per cent that it has attractive values. These results are consistent with a World Public Opinion poll last year that found about six in 10 Chinese favoured the people's will having greater influence on government.

One possible explanation for the positive response to Western values and political systems is a burgeoning confidence in China's authoritarian capitalist model, widely seen as vindicated during the global financial crisis. But the other is more hopeful: that many Chinese people are genuinely attracted to models that offer political as well as economic freedom.

Fergus Hanson and Andrew Shearer are researchers at the Lowy Institute.