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**Examining China's Assertiveness
through the Eyes of Chinese IR Scholars**

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Abstract

China's assertive diplomacy in recent years has ignited intense debates among International Relations (IR) scholars. Some argue that China's assertive behavior is rooted in its perception of increasing power and capabilities. Others suggest that it is U.S. policies that triggered China's assertive reactions. Relying on an original survey of China's IR scholars conducted in Beijing in 2013 and using structural equation modeling (SEM), we empirically examine Chinese IR scholars' attitude towards Chinese power versus the United States, their perceptions of U.S. policy in Asia, and their preference for an assertive Chinese foreign policy. We find that both the power perception and policy reaction arguments make sense in accounting for Chinese IR scholars' attitude regarding China's assertive diplomacy. However, our research suggests that a more pessimistic view on Chinese power is more likely to be associated with a preference for an assertive foreign policy.

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Introduction

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, China's diplomacy has moved towards a more confident or even assertive direction in international politics. Economically, the Chinese Premier refused to re-value the Chinese currency as the United States requested and instead started to lecture about U.S. economic mismanagement during the 2008 financial meltdown (Pomfret, 2010). Diplomatically, China responded furiously to Obama's decision of arms sales to Taiwan and meeting the Dalai Lama in early 2010, threatening to place sanctions on American companies. Politically, China reluctantly cooperated with Western countries, especially the United States, to punish either North Korean or Iranian provocations to the international order. Many other examples, from the Copenhagen Conference to the diplomatic standoffs between China and its neighbours, have also been listed as indications of China's assertive behaviour since 2008 (Swaine, 2010, 2011; Swaine and Fravel 2011; Perlez 2012; Ross 2012; He and Feng 2012). In particular, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis with the Philippines, the still on-going flare-ups with Japan on the *Senkaku/Diaoyu* disputes, and the recently intensified tension with Vietnam in the South China Sea seemingly have further intensified regional concerns over China's rise.

It is worth noting that some scholars have started to question the validity of the discourse regarding China's assertiveness in diplomacy. For example, through critically examining the "assertiveness" meme in the U.S. pundit and academic circles, Johnston questions: "How new and assertive is China's new assertiveness?" (Johnston, 2013). Although the extent and the nature of the assertiveness are still debatable, it is clear that China's foreign policy has shifted to a new direction, albeit temporarily. The goal of this paper is not to debate the temporal origins or intensity of China's assertiveness. Instead, it focuses on examining the perceptual roots of China's policy changes. As David Shambaugh (1991) points out, behaviour is principally a function of perception. In order to make sense of Chinese behaviour, we need to dig into the mindset of Chinese leaders. However, it is difficult to gauge what political leaders really perceive due to the political hierarchy and the complex nature of the decision-making process in any state system, especially China.

In this research we examine Chinese leaders' perceptions and attitudes regarding Chinese foreign policy through the eyes of China's International Relations (IR) scholars. We use Chinese IR scholars as a "proxy measure" to make sense of Chinese leaders' perceptions because Chinese IR scholars serve as the mediator between the Chinese leadership and the general public (Shambaugh, 1991; Saunders, 2000). Based on an original opinion survey of Chinese IR scholars at the annual conference of the Chinese Community of Political Science and International Studies (CCPSIS) in Beijing in July 2013, we empirically test the perceptual roots of Chinese scholars' preference for an assertive diplomacy.

In particular, we examine two competing arguments about China's assertiveness. Some scholars suggest a "power perception" argument in which China's assertiveness is rooted in Chinese leaders' changing perceptions regarding its power status versus the United States. In other words, as the

United States and other Western countries were troubled by their economic downturn, Chinese leaders became overly confident with China's rise and thereby started to say "no" to the United States as well as show its "teeth" to its neighbours (Nye, 2010; Green, 2010).

Others advocate a "policy reaction" argument, which attributes China's assertiveness to a nationalist reaction to unfriendly international forces, especially from the West, which threatened to block China's rise. Continuous economic growth also instigated the rise of nationalism in Chinese society, which in turn pushed the Chinese government to react to Western criticisms and "plots" with more fury and toughness (Carr, 2010; Small, 2010; Swaine, 2011; Ross, 2012). In other words, China's assertiveness in diplomacy grew from an intentional reaction to the strategic pressure from the United States and the outside world.

There are three parts in the paper. First, we briefly introduce our original survey conducted in the summer of 2013. Second, we develop two hypotheses based on the current debate about China's assertive diplomacy and test them by using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. We suggest that both the "power perception" and "policy reaction" arguments make sense in explaining China's assertiveness in diplomacy. However, our findings suggest that a more pessimistic perception regarding Chinese power is more likely to be associated with a preference for an assertive foreign policy. In other words, it is not a confident or an overly confident China but a lack of confidence instead, which is more likely to trigger an assertive foreign policy in China. In the conclusion section we discuss the implications of our findings for China's future international relations.

The 2013 Beijing Survey: Measuring the Perceptions of Chinese IR Scholars

In collaboration with Tsinghua University's Institute of Modern International Relations in Beijing, we conducted a targeted survey at the annual conference of CCPSIS on 6-7 July 2013. Our survey targeted the CCPSIS conference participants, including academic scholars, policy analysts, and graduate/undergraduate students, who are interested in international relations. We took the CCPSIS conference participants as a sample of the general population of Chinese IR scholars.

There were two reasons we designed this targeted survey for the CCPIS conference. First, unlike the general public, the views of IR scholars or experts can be more valuable in the study of foreign policy and international relations. There is an increasing research trend of using elite views to make sense of international relations. For example, in 2012, the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project launched a "U.S.-China Security Perceptions Project" with the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association, and the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. The "U.S.-China Security Perceptions Project" aims to evaluate different views between the general public and experts in both the United States and China regarding U.S.-China security issues. The final report was released in December 2013 and suggested

that the U.S. public and experts had different perceptions on U.S.-China policies (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).¹

Second, the views of Chinese IR scholars can provide a unique way to understand China's foreign policy and international relations. With widespread use of the Internet and social media, the foreign policy decision-making process in China is no longer a "one man's rule" (Ning, 1997; Nathan and Scobell, 2012). Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the public has a direct impact on Chinese foreign policy, China's policymakers face increasing pressure from the society in the process of making foreign policy decisions. As a sub-elite group in the Chinese society, Chinese IR scholars play a mediator role in connecting the general public and policymakers in China's political hierarchy. These "America watchers" are better informed than the general public on international relations in general and U.S.-China relations in particular. By measuring how these IR scholars perceive Chinese power, U.S. policies, and Chinese foreign policy, we can more confidently infer how China's policymakers view international relations.

It is worth noting that we are not the first to study the influence of Chinese IR scholars on China's international relations. In his path-breaking book *Beautiful Imperialist*, David Shambaugh examines how China's "America Watchers", i.e. IR scholars who specialised in U.S.-China relations, perceived the United States between 1972 and 1990. He concludes that China's distorted and biased perceptions of the United States contributed to the fluctuations of U.S.-China relations during the Cold War (1991). In the 1990s and early 2000s, other scholars followed Shambaugh's footsteps to explore China's changing perceptions of the United States through the eyes of the America Watchers (e.g., Wang, 2000; Chen, 2003, Zhang, 2005). There is no doubt that already existing research had paved a unique path in the study of China's international relations through the eyes of Chinese IR scholars.

However, so far, with reference to published scholarly work, no Large-N survey research method has been systematically employed to examine the perceptions of Chinese IR scholars. Previous studies have instead employed qualitative content analysis to read, interpret, and summarise the views of these scholars contained in their publications. This lack of survey research on Chinese IR scholars may have been a result of the difficulties involved in obtaining a random sample of China's IR scholars given China's huge population and diverse academic and research systems.

Our 2013 survey in Beijing uses the annual conference of CCPSIS as a polling platform to examine Chinese IR scholars' attitudes and opinions on international relations. It is by no means the best sampling approach since we cannot control who participates in the conference. In addition, our sample does not necessarily reflect the full range of Chinese IR scholars' views. Our research is better seen as a preliminary attempt at a pilot study in using survey methods to reveal Chinese IR

¹ Following a similar methodology, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also conducted an opinion survey on "strategic elites" in eleven Asia Pacific economies in early 2014, which aimed to explore regional perceptual trend lines on power and order in Asia.

scholars' attitudes and opinions. It can potentially provide a baseline for survey research on Chinese IR scholars in the future.²

Our 2013 survey research shares the same premise with the Pew project in that we believe that China's IR scholars play a distinct role in influencing China's foreign policy decision-making, although identifying the causal mechanism is beyond the scope of this survey research. The major purpose of our project is to measure Chinese IR scholars' perceptions and attitudes about China's international relations, including Chinese power versus the United States, China's reactions to U.S. policy, and China's foreign policy. Using Chinese IR scholars' opinions as a proxy measure, we can then infer how Chinese policymakers may believe and perceive the same issues.

We distributed the questionnaire at the conference registration table and collected them with the assistance of the conference staff. In order to keep the sample as random and representative as possible, the survey was totally voluntary and accessible to all participants at the conference. The total number of conference participants is normally around 800. We collected 360 completed questionnaires with a response rate of around 45 per cent.

There were a total of 44 questions, including six demographical and sociological questions (gender, age, occupation, overseas experience, degree, and citizenship) and 38 issue-specific questions. Differing from existing, general-public-focused surveys, we included more professional questions while ignoring some general preference-related questions. For example, we asked respondents how they perceived the U.S. re-balancing policy towards Asia in 2011 and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement advocated by the United States. In order to answer these questions, respondents should have acquired some professional knowledge of international relations and U.S.-China relations. These professional questions do not appear in general-public-focused surveys. In order to distinguish our survey from other general public surveys, we did not include general preference questions such as whether the respondent favours or disfavours the U.S. or what their first impression is about the United States.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics on the six demographical/occupation variables. The survey indicates that most participants are Chinese citizens (98.6 per cent). Self-identified foreigners in the survey are only 1.1 per cent. This result vindicates the identification of our survey target as Chinese IR scholars. In addition, there are more males (62.7 per cent) than females (37.3 per cent). About half of the respondents are students (including PhD students) and a majority of the participants are between 20 and 40 years old. One distinct feature of the survey is that about one-third of participants hold either a Master's degree (36.9 per cent) or a Doctoral degree (30.1 per cent). This result suggests that our sample indeed represents a distinct group of people, i.e. highly educated IR scholars or future IR scholars in Chinese society.

² The 2013 survey is the second survey we have conducted at the CCPSIS. The descriptive results of the 2012 survey have been published in the *Journal of Contemporary China*. Based on the 2012 survey results, we have revised and updated the questionnaire in 2013.

Table 1: The profile of survey participants in 2013

Variable	Measurement						N/A	Total
Gender	Male	Female						
	62.7%	37.3%				0.8%	360	
Overseas Experience	Yes	No						
	70.6%	28.9%				0.3%	360	
Citizenship	Chinese	Non-Chinese						
	98.6%	1.1%				3.2%	360	
Highest Degree Obtained	Bachelor	Master	Doctoral					
	32.6%	36.8%	30.1%			1.1%	360	
Occupation	Student	Faculty	Researcher	Media	Others			
	50%	26.1%	8.3%	6.7%	7.8 %		0.3%	360
Age	<20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	>60		
	6.4%	58.9%	22.8%	10%	0.8%	1.1%	0.0%	360

Note: N/A indicates missing data.

Testing China’s Assertiveness: Power Perception or Policy Reaction?

Inspired by the debate over China’s assertiveness in diplomacy in recent years, we generate two hypotheses related to Chinese leaders’ perceptions regarding China’s relations with the United States. First, Chinese leaders’ perceptions of Chinese foreign policy may be shaped by their perceptions regarding China’s power status in the international system, especially with reference to the United States. The “power perception” argument of China’s assertiveness suggests that a rising power’s perception or a more optimistic perception regarding China’s power status versus the United States contributes to a preference for an assertive foreign policy. Therefore, the “power perception” hypothesis about Chinese foreign policy is the following:

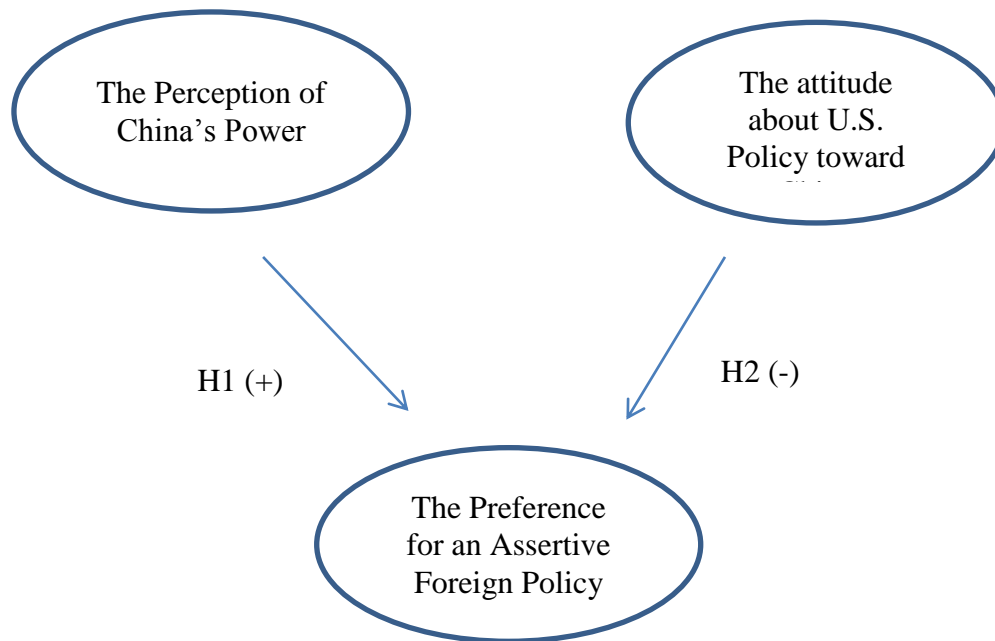
Hypothesis 1 (power perception): The more optimistic the perception regarding China’s power status, the stronger the preference for an assertive foreign policy.

A contending hypothesis can be generated from the “policy reaction” argument because Chinese leaders’ perceptions regarding U.S.-China relations are mainly rooted in their negative reaction to external pressure, especially U.S. policy. For example, a report released by the International Crisis Group coined China’s recent foreign policy behaviour in the South China Sea as “reactive assertiveness.” It means that China’s assertiveness is mainly a reaction to outside challenges. Based on this argument, if Chinese leaders have a negative view of U.S. policy toward China, they will be more likely to adopt an assertive policy as a response. On the other hand, if Chinese policymakers

perceive a positive view of U.S. policy towards China, they will choose a less assertive and prudent policy in international relations. Therefore, the “policy reaction” hypothesis on U.S.-China relations is the following:

Hypothesis 2 (policy reaction): The less positive the view of U.S. policy towards China, the stronger the preference for an assertive foreign policy.

Figure 1: The conceptual model of perceptions of power perception, policy attitude, and assertiveness preference



Note: The relationship between variables is indicated by the sign in the parenthesis.

Figure 1 summarises the conceptual model among these three variables. In order to test this conceptual model, we need to first measure the three variables: (i) the perception of China's power versus the United States; (ii) the attitude towards U.S. policy; and (iii) the preference for an assertive foreign policy. The survey questionnaire was designed around these three themes. However, using a single, observed variable derived from a specific survey question cannot accurately measure the multi-dimensional nature of people's attitudes (Zhang, 2010). For example, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) advocate a hierarchical and multi-dimensional model to measure people's foreign policy attitudes. In the same vein, Chittick, Billingsley, and Travis (1995) suggest a three-dimensional model to measure American foreign policy beliefs.

Therefore, in our survey, Chinese IR scholars' attitude about China's power status versus the United States encompasses four dimensions: (i) military power; (ii) economic power; (iii) political power; and (iv) cultural power. This multi-dimensionality issue also applies to attitudes about U.S. policy since it is

less accurate to use a single issue, such as the Taiwan issue, to measure attitudes about U.S. general policy towards China. In our survey, we use three perceptual indicators to gauge Chinese IR scholars' attitude to U.S. policy in Asia: (i) their opinions regarding the U.S. rebalancing strategy; (ii) the U.S.-Japanese alliance; and (iii) the U.S. TPP agenda. As for Chinese IR scholars' preference for an assertive foreign policy, we rely on two indicators: their perceptions about the so-called "Chinese assertiveness discourse" and their own perceptions on China's current foreign policy.

It is worth noting that we did not directly ask: "whether you prefer a more assertive foreign policy". Instead, we asked the two related questions "what do you think about the popular discourse in the West that Chinese foreign policy that has taken an assertive direction" and "how do you evaluate China's current foreign policy?" If a participant's answers to these two questions indicate that he or she thinks that China's foreign policy is too assertive, then we can infer that this participant prefers a "less assertive" foreign policy. These two questions together, strengthen the content and criterion validity of the measurement for this preference variable.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for all indicators for the three latent variables: policy attitude, power perception, and assertiveness preference

Variable Name/ survey question	Measurement					
<i>"Policy Attitude" Indicators</i>						
USPIVOT The U.S. claimed a "rebalancing toward Asia" policy. How do you describe this policy for China's security?	Security Threat	Potential Threat	Potential opportunity	Clear opportunity	Not Clear	
	23.2%	51.3%	19.3%	2.0%	1.4%	
USJAPAL How do you describe U.S.-Japan alliance for China's security?	Military Threat	Potential Threat	No influence	Good for China's security	Very good for China	Not Clear
	26.3%	61.2%	3.4%	5.6%	0.8%	2.0%
USTPP The United States is actively promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in Asia. How do you describe this policy for China?	Serious challenge to China	Potential Challenge	Neither challenge, nor opportunity	Potential economic opportunity	Clear economic opportunity	Not Clear
	17.1%	53.2%	3.1%	19.3%	2.2%	2.5%
<i>"Power Perception" Indicators</i>						
CHIECO Do you think that China will overtake the U.S. in economic power in the next ten years?	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know	
	10.3%	29.2%	50.1%	9.2%	1.1%	

CHIMIL Do you think that China will overtake the U.S. in military power in the next ten years?	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know	
	0.8%	8.6%	57.7%	32.3%	0.6%	
POLISYSM Some believe that political system is also a source of power. Do you think that China will overtake the U.S. in this power in the next ten years?	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know	
	1.4%	13.5%	47.5%	34.3%	3.4%	
CULPOWER Some believe that culture is also a source of power. Do you think that China will overtake the U.S. in this power in the next ten years?	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know	
	2.2%	16.9%	50.3%	28.6%	1.1%	
"Assertiveness Preference" Indicators						
CHASSERT Some state that Chinese foreign policy turned more assertive after the 2008-2009 world financial crisis, what do you think?	Strongly Agree	Somewhat agree (with reservations)	Somewhat disagree	Totally disagree	Not clear	
	5.9%	63.1%	21.8%	7.8%	1.4%	
CHFPGEN How will you describe Chinese foreign policy in general?	Very strong	Strong	Somewhat weak	Very weak	Not Clear	
	2.6%	36.5%	51.7%	3.4%	5.7%	

Note: N= 360. We recode the "not clear" and "do not know" answers as missing in empirical analyses.

Table 2 summarises the descriptive statistics of all the indicators for these three latent variables. It is interesting to see that a majority of the respondents held a negative attitude towards the U.S. rebalancing policy, the U.S.-Japanese alliance, and the TPP agenda. Regarding the four "power perception" indicators (economic, military, political, and cultural), a majority of the respondents believed that it is either "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" for China to surpass the United States in the next ten years. Surprisingly, it seems that Chinese IR scholars do not have an overly confident perception of China's rise. As for the "assertiveness preference" indicators, the results show that almost 70 per cent of respondents either "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that China's foreign policy had taken an assertive direction since the 2008 financial crisis. However, about 55 per cent of respondents thought that China's current foreign policy was either "somewhat weak" or "very weak."

The next step is to empirically test both our measurement model and the structural relations among the three latent variables: power perception, policy attitude and assertiveness preference. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to perform these two tasks. There are three advantages for using

the SEM technique. First, all the variables mentioned above are latent variables that need to be measured by observed variables in the data set. Rather than being guided by intuitive and ad hoc rules, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), an application of SEM, provides a more rigorous and parsimonious technique to test the quality of the measurements through convergent validity and discriminant validity tests.

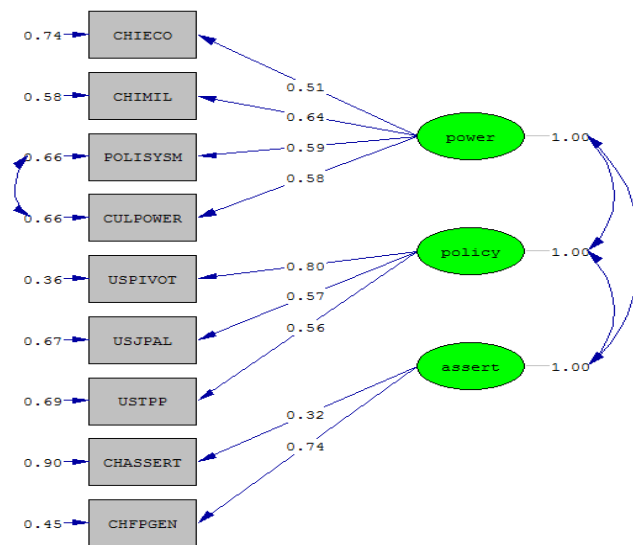
Second, via the SEM, we can test complex “path” relations among latent variables hypothesised in the model. For example, we can test both the direct effect of the power perception variable on the assertiveness preference variable and the indirect effect of it through policy perceptions in one model. Due to the multi-dimensional nature of power, a linear or OLS (ordinal least squares) regression cannot capture the complex relations between power perceptions and policy preferences. Last, SEM provides a unique analysis that simultaneously deals with the measurement question and structural prediction. These analytical techniques “offer considerable advantage of estimating predictive relationships among ‘pure’ latent variables that are uncontaminated by measurement error” (Kelloway, 1998, p.2-3; also Kaplan, 2000).

A Two-Step Research Design

Based on Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) suggestion, we adopt a two-step approach in performing SEM analysis. First, we will run a CFA to test whether the observed variables can measure our three latent variables: power perception, policy attitude, and policy preference, for assertiveness. As mentioned before, the survey questionnaires were designed by focusing on three perceptual themes: power, policy, and policy preference. Therefore, our CFA model is based on our survey design and guided by theory instead of intuitive and ad hoc rules. After testing the goodness of fit, our second step is to construct the structural model to test the relations among power perception, policy attitude, and policy preference as suggested in our hypotheses.

Since all observed variables (factor loadings) are ordinally coded and most have less than 5 values, we compute a polychoric matrix instead of a Pearson matrix while constructing the measurement model. In LISREL, we run PRELIS to get the polychoric correlation matrix and the asymptotic covariance matrix. From the “correlations and test statistics table” in the PRELIS printout (see appendix), we see that we fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is underlying bivariate normality in the ordinal variables ($p > .01$). It should be noted that some of the variables’ Chi-square tests are close to the critical value (the p value is near .01). However, since a Chi-square test is sensitive to sample size, we use the RMSEA (test of close fit) to test the bivariate normality. From the RMSEA test, we see that all variables meet the bivariate normality criterion. We can conclude that it is a reasonable assumption that the ordinal variables have an underlying continuous latent construct. We thereby justify our decision to use a polychoric matrix in constructing our CFA model.

Figure 2: The CFA result of perceptions on power perception, policy attitude, and assertiveness preference



Chi-Square=25.08, df=23, P-value=0.34607, RMSEA=0.016

Note: The factor coefficients are standardised.

Table 3: The CFA statistics for power perception, policy attitude, and assertiveness preference

Standardised factor coefficients of Factor Loadings* and R ²	Perception of China's Power	Attitude about U.S. Policy	Preference for Assertive Foreign Policy
CHIECO	0.51, R ² = 0.26		
CHIMIL	0.64, R ² = 0.42		
POLISYSM	0.59, R ² = 0.34		
CULPOWER	0.58, R ² = 0.34		
USPIVOT		0.80, R ² = 0.64	
USJPAL		0.57, R ² = 0.33	
USTPP		0.56, R ² = 0.31	
CHASSERT			0.32, R ² = 0.10
CHFPGEN			0.74, R ² = 0.55
Goodness of fit Statistics Chi-square = 25.08 (p = 0.34607), df = 23 RMSEA = 0.016 GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99			
Correlation between factors	Power ↔ Policy	Power ↔ Preference	Preference ↔ Policy
	0.05	0.22	-0.26
Chi-square differences for standard vs. "non-discriminant" CFA models (Δdf = 1, p = 0.000)	Power ↔ Policy	Power ↔ Preference	Preference ↔ Policy
	177.69	19.16	20.02

Note: All values statistically significant at the level of P < 0.05. N=359.

In LISREL, we run a CFA with the polychoric matrix. Figure 2 and Table 3 show the CFA results. From the goodness of fit indices, we have a good fit to our model. According to the RMSEA index, our model has a very good fit to the data (RMSEA = 0.016 < 0.05). Both the GFI and AGFI shows that our model has a good fit to the data (GFI = 0.98 > 0.90; AGFI = 0.97 > 0.90). Based on the Chi-Square test, our model also has a good fit (p = 0.34607 > 0.05). Based on the T-test, we see that all measurement loadings are statistically significant. The significant loadings strengthen our confidence in the good fit of the model.

More important, from the standardised measurement loadings, we see that the values of all coefficient loadings, except for CHASSERT, are larger than 0.5. It is a clear signal that the two latent

variables, power perception and policy attitude, are well-configured in the model. The R-square of the loading indicates how much the variation of the indicators can be explained by the latent variable. This result indicates a good result for a convergent validity test that examines whether the observed variable loadings can be fully explained by the latent variables.

For the latent variable “policy” (attitude about U.S. policy), all three loadings are significant and larger than 0.5. It indicated a good fit of the factor configuration. For the latent variable “power” (perception of China’s power), LISREL suggested adding an error covariance between POLISYSM (political power) and CULPOWER (cultural power). Since political power is closely related to cultural dimension of power, we accepted the suggestion of adding the error covariance between POLISYSM and CULPOWER. For the latent variable “assert” (preference for assertiveness), we have one strong indicator (CHFPGEN) and a weak one (CHASSERT). Technically, we can drop the weak indicator (CHASSERT) in order to improve the convergent test result. However, since our model is guided by our theory and the construct of survey design, we do not want to change the model for the sake of data fitting. We decided to keep the weak, but still significant, loading of CHASSERT for the factor of “assert”.

Further, we test the discriminant validity of the model to make sure that all three latent variables represent three different concepts. To begin with, the correlation between the three latent variables does not exceed 0.70, a signal of measure distinctness (Ping, 2004; Vieira, 2011). In addition, we run a series of CFA model tests for each pair of latent variables to check whether they are different from each other. First, we set our original model as the “standard model.” Second, we set the covariance between two latent variables to 1 and construct a “non-discriminant model,” which means that we assume that these two variables are the same construct. We then compare the Chi-square difference between the standard model and the “non-discriminant model.” The null hypothesis is that the two models are indistinct. The null hypothesis will be rejected if the Chi-square difference between the two models is significant. From Table 3, we see that the difference is significant for all three pairs, thus rejecting the null hypotheses. We can conclude that the three latent variables are three different concepts and our model has discriminant validity.

From the factor loadings in the CAF, we see that peoples’ opinions regarding China’s military power is the most reliable measurement of power perception (the latent variable). The latent variable can explain 64 per cent of the variation in people’s opinion on military power (R-square = 0.64). It is understandable since military power is the most important dimension of power in a traditional sense. Surprisingly, economic power has relatively less weight than political and cultural power in measuring people’s general perception of power. It seems that Chinese IR scholars understand well that more money does not equal to more power in international politics. As mentioned before, all loadings for the latent variable “power perception” is higher than 0.5 and statistically significant, which indicates a good fit for the measurement model. It also reflects the value of CFA, which can help capture the multi-dimensionality of the construct.

For the “policy attitude” latent variable, the most reliable measurement is people’s attitude towards the U.S. rebalancing policy in East Asia. The latent variable explains 80 per cent variation of the “U.S. rebalancing” indicator. Comparatively, people’s attitudes toward U.S.-Japanese alliances and U.S. TPP policy hold less, but still significant, weight than the U.S. rebalancing policy. As for the loadings of “policy preference,” people’s direct evaluation on China’s foreign policy (CHFPGEN) is the most reliable measurement, in which 74 per cent of variation is explained by the latent variable. In comparison, people’s opinion about the assertiveness discourse does not hold similar weight as another measurement of the latent variable. However, since it is significant we decided to keep it in the CFA model.

Table 4: The structural model among power perception, policy attitude, and policy preference for assertiveness

Structural Models	Standardised Coefficient	SE	R ²	Hypot	Result
Power Perception→ Policy preference for assertiveness	0.24*	0.12		H1	Support the opposite direction
Policy Attitude→ Policy preference for Assertiveness	-0.27*	0.12	0.12	H2	Supported
Power Perception→ Policy Attitude	0.05	0.08			
Goodness of Fit Statistics			0.003		
Chi-square = 25.08 (p = 0.34607), df = 23; RMSEA = 0.016; GFI = 0.98; AGFI = 0.97; NFI = 0.96					

*Significant at the 0.05 level. N=359.

After the CFA test we construct a structural model to test our hypotheses. Table 4 summarises the structural model results. Like the CFA model, the indices for the goodness of fit show a very good result. All major goodness of fit indicators, such as the RMSEA (0.016 < 0.05), GFI (0.98 > 0.90), AGFI (0.97) and NFI (0.96) show a good model fit. From the T-values we see that the two structural coefficients, power perception and policy attitude, have significant effects on policy preference for assertiveness. Since our hypotheses intend to examine the relationship between people’s attitude to Chinese power and U.S. policy on one hand and their preference for China’s assertive diplomacy on the other, the significant results of the structural model are good enough for analytical interpretation. We also tested the relationship between power perception and policy attitude. However, the standardised coefficient (0.05) shows that there is no significant relationship between these two variables.

From the structural model we see that policy attitude has a significant negative effect on people's preference for assertiveness while power perception has a significant positive effect. The two-variable model can explain 12 per cent of the variation of people's preference for assertiveness (R-square = 0.12). This result supports our hypothesis 2 that Chinese IR scholars' attitude regarding U.S. policy towards China has a negative relationship with their preference for assertive foreign policy. In particular, the more negative the attitude regarding America's China policy, the stronger their preference for an assertive foreign policy.

Our model suggests that there is a significant positive effect of people's power perception on their preference for an assertive foreign policy; however, the direction of the effect is different from hypothesis 1. Our research suggests that the more optimistic the perception regarding China's power versus the United States, the weaker the preference for an assertive diplomacy. In other words, it is not the increase of Chinese power but the decrease that leads to a preference for a more assertive foreign policy. This finding challenges the popular assertion, as discussed before, that a rising China or the perceived rise of China is more likely to lead to China becoming arrogant and assertive towards the United States.

Conclusion

Through the CFA and SEM techniques, our research challenges the popular view in both academic and policy circles that attribute China's assertive diplomacy and strong reactions towards U.S. policies to China's increase in military and economic capabilities. Instead, our research suggests that a more confident and stronger China is more likely to be associated with a less assertive policy. The strong negative reaction towards U.S. policies has a perceived positive effect on China's assertive diplomacy that is separate and independent from the perceived rise in China's power.

Although our research only focuses on revealing Chinese IR scholars' attitudes to international relations, there are two implications for U.S. policy towards China and future U.S.-China relations. First, our study suggests that China's assertiveness is driven by or a reaction to U.S. policies in Asia, especially its "pivot" strategies after 2011. Our research shows that Chinese IR scholars' attitudes regarding U.S. policies have a significant effect on their policy preference for assertiveness. Therefore, the current bilateral tension, i.e. China's assertive diplomacy, is more likely to be rooted in Chinese leaders' negative perceptions of U.S. pivot or rebalancing policy in Asia if Chinese IR scholars' perceptions indeed represent to some extent Chinese leaders' attitudes.

In other words, due to the negative concerns about U.S. policies in Asia, Chinese leaders are more likely to choose assertive policies as a response that is independent of China's rise in power. It is reasonable to believe that U.S. policymakers may also well justify the pivot or rebalancing strategy as a reaction to China's assertiveness and the Obama administration has continued the "rebalancing" efforts during the second term (Pempel, 2013). Although we do not want to get into a discussion over who made the first move, one thing is clear: this dynamic may lead to a vicious circle in bilateral

relations with China's assertiveness on one hand and the U.S. pivot policy on the other. If building mutual trust is the foundation of U.S.-China relations in the future, the leaders of both countries should consider how to correct their negative images in each other's eyes (Leiberthal and Wang, 2012).

Second, the United States does not need to exaggerate the danger of Chinese power. Our research suggests that the more confidence China's "America watchers" have in China's power, the weaker the preference they have for an assertive diplomacy. On the other hand, when Chinese IR scholars are pessimistic about China's power, they tend to have a stronger preference for an assertive diplomacy. Still, if we can extend Chinese IR scholars' attitudes in our survey to represent Chinese leaders' perceptions, the United States should welcome a China that is confident and powerful, rather than desperate and weak. Interestingly, our research does not find a significant effect of China's power perception on its policy attitudes toward the United States. This result reinforces the "policy reaction" hypothesis in explaining China's assertive diplomacy. It seems time for U.S. policy makers to reconsider the "problems of the pivot" (Ross, 2012).

Lastly, it is worth noting that there are two limitations in our research. On one hand, the limited and targeted sampling strategy constrains the external validity of our findings to apply to the general population of Chinese IR scholars. Although our survey was the first among similar survey research efforts, conducted in an anonymous and voluntary setting at a major IR conference in Beijing, the sample size is still limited. How to strengthen external validity through sampling technique is the major challenge for our future research on Chinese IR scholars.

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