

Brexit identities and British public opinion on China

WILFRED M. CHOW, ENZE HAN AND XIAOJUN LI*

As the Brexit negotiations drag on, there is much uncertainty about whether Brexit will actually happen and, if it does happen, what sort of deal—if any—will be struck to redefine the United Kingdom's relations with the EU. The events leading to the Brexit vote and the negotiations that continue at the time of writing reveal the significant divisions within British society,¹ particularly between those who support Brexit (Leavers) and those who oppose it (Remainers). This critical situation raises questions about what effects these 'Brexit identities' have on British foreign policy,² including its relationships with major players in the international community, among them emerging powers such as China.

As a former empire, Britain has a complex history with China, not least because of the nineteenth-century opium wars and the legacy of Hong Kong, which continues to haunt contemporary Sino-British relations. However, unlike the United States—which has maintained a strong ideological aversion towards the Chinese communist regime, taking numerous measures to contain the latter's challenge to American hegemony—Britain has more often perceived China as an avenue of 'opportunity' rather than a 'threat', according to Shaun Breslin.³ Especially since David Cameron's tenure as British prime minister, bilateral relations have entered a new 'golden era' marked by increased economic engagement between London and Beijing. While Theresa May's government did not sustain the previous administration's enthusiasm, discussion of a potential free trade agreement with China was a crucial element in her visit to Beijing in early 2018, amid economic concerns about a post-Brexit future. With May's resignation in June 2019, it remains to be seen how the British government will recalibrate its China policy.

Kerry Brown succinctly points out that in a hypothetical post-Brexit Britain, engaging with the People's Republic of China will necessitate 'acquiring a large

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¹ Anand Menon and John-Paul Salter, 'Brexit: initial reflections', *International Affairs* 92: 6, Nov. 2016, pp. 1297–318.

² Tim Oliver and Michael John Williams, 'Special relationships in flux: Brexit and the future of the US–EU and US–UK relationships', *International Affairs* 92: 3, May 2016, pp. 547–67; Richard G. Whitman, 'The UK's European diplomatic strategy for Brexit and beyond', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 383–404.

³ Shaun Breslin, 'UK–China relations in the context of Brexit: economics still in command', *China International Studies*, vol. 6, 2017, p. 78.

amount of cultural, linguistic, and political knowledge, which, outside of specialist elites, is not there in sufficient quantities at the moment'.⁴ But what is the real situation with respect to differences of opinion between elites and the mass public? How does the British public view China, and how should the UK's foreign policy address China's rise? In the context of Brexit, are there any discernible disparities in viewpoint between the Leavers and the Remainers? These are the questions we explore in this article.

Public perceptions of China and, more generally, public opinion on foreign affairs are critical for understanding how decision-makers craft foreign policy. This is not an uncontroversial claim: some scholars have questioned the value of public opinion for foreign policy-making, given the public's relative ignorance on the subject.⁵ Conventional wisdom also suggests that political and business elites should be the ones to shape foreign policy.⁶ However, recent studies have demonstrated the constraining effects of public opinion on the scope of foreign policy choices available to decision-makers.⁷ Others have shown that popular support can empower national leaders to overcome institutional barriers to interventions abroad;⁸ and, more broadly, can enable them to achieve foreign policy goals.⁹ Recent evidence suggests this is certainly the case for the United States,¹⁰ and can even apply in countries under authoritarian regimes such as China.¹¹

Furthermore, there is evidence that the public is aware—as are decision-makers—of its own relevance, direct or indirect, to foreign policy, and its corresponding impact on political leaders' electoral prospects. Should foreign policy choices diverge dramatically from public opinion, public approval for leaders in office drops,¹² directly affecting their electoral prospects.¹³ A recent study that surveyed current and former members of the Israeli parliament found that these MPs selected policies that aligned with public preferences. Failing to do so, according to these politicians, would have incurred significant political costs.¹⁴ In the British context, the consistency of foreign policy choices with public preferences

⁴ Kerry Brown, 'Britain's China challenge', *The Diplomat*, 30 Jan. 2018.

⁵ Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton, *The foreign policy disconnect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁶ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, 'Who influences US foreign policy', *American Political Science Review* 99: 1, 2005, pp. 107–23.

⁷ Ole R. Holsti, *Public opinion and American foreign policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, *War and democratic constraint: how the public influences foreign policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁸ Gustavo A. Flores-Macías and Sarah E. Kreps, 'Political parties at war', *American Political Science Review* 107: 4, 2013, pp. 833–48.

⁹ Christopher Gelpi and Joseph M. Grieco, 'Competency costs in foreign affairs', *American Political Science Review* 99: 2, 2015, pp. 440–56.

¹⁰ Austin Carson, 'Facing off and saving face: covert intervention and escalation management in the Korean War', *International Organization* 70: 1, 2016, pp. 103–31.

¹¹ James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Strategic reassurance and resolve: US–China relations in the twenty-first century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹² Matthew S. Gottfried and Robert F. Trager, 'A preference for war: how fairness and rhetoric influence leadership incentives in crises', *International Studies Quarterly* 60: 2, 2016, pp. 243–57.

¹³ James Campbell and Michael Lewis-Black, 'US presidential election forecasting: an introduction', *International Journal of Forecasting* 24: 2, 2018, pp. 189–92.

¹⁴ Michael Tomz, Jessica Weeks and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Public opinion and decisions about military force in democracies', *International Organization*, forthcoming.

is crucial for enabling and legitimizing the British government's execution of these policies.¹⁵ To do otherwise is to invite electoral loss for whoever holds power in parliament.

Given the public's role in foreign policy decision-making, understanding public opinion on China is critical for policy-makers. Surprisingly, there is a dearth of research on public opinion about British foreign policy towards China, despite a large volume of scholarship on what China's rise means for the international and regional orders.¹⁶ This article begins to address this knowledge gap by presenting the results of a public opinion survey we conducted in the UK after the Brexit referendum of 2016. Our research findings indicate that only a small minority of Britons report favourable views of China, and the majority are concerned about China's rising military power. They also view promoting trade and investment between the two countries as the top priority for the British government and support a free trade agreement with China. These findings suggest that while the British public at large finds China's rise disconcerting, it is also pragmatic in its understanding of how bilateral relations should be managed. These results parallel findings from recent public opinion surveys in Australia and Canada, showing that Australians and Canadians also hold generally unfavourable views of China but take a similarly pragmatic approach to bilateral relations with Beijing.¹⁷

Unlike the studies in Australia and Canada, however, our survey goes one step further by investigating how the variations in public perceptions can be traced back to the divisions in opinion over an ongoing event unique to Britain: Brexit. Our results show that views on China are clearly split between the two opposing Brexit identities.¹⁸ Those who subscribe strongly to the Leave identity, measured by their aversion to the EU and antipathy towards immigration,¹⁹ are also more likely to hold negative perceptions of Chinese global leadership and be more suspicious of China as a potential military threat. In contrast, those who espouse a Remain identity—that is, they believe that Britain would be better served within the EU and accepting more immigrants—are more likely to prefer closer engage-

¹⁵ Jamie Gaskarth, *British foreign policy: crises, conflicts and future challenges* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013), p. 61.

¹⁶ Yongjin Zhang, 'China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 795–816; Zhang Yunling, 'China and its neighbourhood: transformation, challenges and grand strategy', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 835–48; Wu Xinbo, 'China in search of a liberal partnership international order', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 995–1018; Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, 'Rethinking China's rise: Chinese scholars debate strategic overstretch', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1019–35.

¹⁷ Natasha Kassam, *Understanding Australian attitudes to the world 2019*, Lowy Institute poll (Sydney, 2019), pp. 8–9, <https://lowyinstitutepoll.lowyinstitute.org/files/lowyinsitutepoll-2019.pdf>; Paul Evans and Xiaojun Li, *Canadian public attitudes on China and Canada—China relations* (Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, 2019), pp. 1–13, <https://sppga.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/03/Report-of-Collected-Data.13March-2019.pdf>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 1 Sept. 2019.)

¹⁸ Elsewhere, scholars have used 'nationalist' versus 'globalist' as alternative descriptions of such divisions within contemporary British society; see Thomas J. Scotto, David Sanders and Jason Reifler, 'The consequential nationalist–globalist policy divide in contemporary Britain: some initial analyses', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 28: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 38–58.

¹⁹ Our measures attempt to capture the key elements of sovereignty and control specific to Brexit, through questions on the cultural threat from the EU and the UK's immigration policy. We explain this further in the section below on our research design.

ment with China and to have a more positive overall outlook on China's place within the global community.

This article is organized as follows. First, we review the existing literature on Sino-British relations in the context of Brexit. We then look at how the International Relations literature incorporates identity as a variable of explanation. Here, we discuss how the extant literature explains the role of Brexit identity in shaping Britain's foreign policy choices. The article then proceeds with an outline of the methodology and research design, followed by a detailed presentation of the empirical findings. We conclude with comparisons to surveys on China conducted in Australia and Canada, and discussion of the implications of Brexit identities for the future of Sino-British relations.

Sino-British relations in the context of Brexit

Existing literature on the 'rise of China' and the 'China threat' has a distinct US-centric flavour. While many writers reflect on the decline of US hegemony owing to the country's internal problems,²⁰ many more studies focus on the particular challenge posed by China—especially on China's challenge to US hegemony and the international 'liberal' order that the United States helps uphold, with an implicit tendency to equate the interests of the United States with those of a vaguely conceptualized West.²¹ In fact, as Breslin points out, 'not only the UK, but Europe as a whole, is often totally ignored in major [American] academic discourses on how best to manage China as a rising power'.²²

However, outside the United States, many western states do not necessarily share US perceptions of China. As many pundits would claim, 'with respect to the emerging geo-political struggles in Asia, Europe remains disengaged. Nor has it shown any interest to get involved in the global power struggles between Beijing and Washington.'²³ In the UK's case, immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, London's interest was to 'keep a foot in the door', to maintain commercial relations with Beijing rather than take the hard-line embargo approach pushed by Washington.²⁴ After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, one of the main obstacles to improving bilateral relations was cleared away, and Britain pursued a policy of 'economic engagement first' to enmesh China within the global economy.²⁵ As Breslin notes, threat perceptions

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye, 'The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 63–80; Peter Trubowitz and Peter Harris, 'The end of the American century? Slow erosion of the domestic sources of usable power', *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, pp. 619–39.

²¹ Christopher Layne, 'The US–Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 89–111; Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, 'US–China relations and the liberal world order: contending elites, colliding visions?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 113–31; Mark Beeson and Fujian Li, 'What consensus? Geopolitics and policy paradigms in China and the United States', *International Affairs* 91: 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 93–109.

²² Shaun Breslin, 'Beyond diplomacy? UK relations with China since 1997', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6: 3, Aug. 2004, p. 415.

²³ Jie Yu, 'After Brexit: risks and opportunities to EU–China relations', *Global Policy* 8: S4, 2017, p. 109.

²⁴ S. R. Ashton, 'Keeping a foot in the door: Britain's China policy, 1945–50', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15: 1, March 2004, pp. 79–94.

²⁵ Breslin, 'Beyond diplomacy?'.

in the UK with respect to China 'exist almost entirely in economic terms, and are more than balanced by an understanding of the economic opportunities that Chinese growth can offer'.²⁶

Perhaps such a verdict represents a general understanding of Britain's reduced global influence, releasing the UK from the responsibility of trying to contain China. After all, the United States is doing that. Indeed, in its relations with China and its presence in Asia more broadly, the UK has been described as behaving no longer as a 'Great Power' but rather 'as a subcontractor of valued skills and specialisms, and as a networked facilitator of international policy goals'.²⁷ From this perspective, Britain has more limited goals in the region, and its foreign policy operations are more constrained by a lack of resources. All these factors combined have created the overarching pragmatic foreign policy orientation that has characterized the British government since New Labour took power in 1997.²⁸

Relations between the UK and China entered a 'new phase' of the 'golden era' during Cameron's period in government, coinciding with Xi Jinping's visit to London in 2015.²⁹ This involved bold plans to promote close cooperation in numerous areas to facilitate bilateral trade and investment.³⁰ Each side voiced great enthusiasm for this crucial relationship, with claims that the two countries formed a 'global comprehensive strategic partnership' and that the UK had become China's 'best partner in the West'.³¹ Certainly, at the time, China was keen to make London a key location for internationalizing the Chinese yuan—this was prior to the Brexit vote—and to use London as an entry point to the EU. Moreover, the UK, with its traditional strength in banking and finance and as a popular destination for Chinese students and tourists, had much to offer China as an emerging power. This emphasis on the 'golden era' relationship even saw the British government ignore the Obama administration's consistent lobbying and unilaterally join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.³²

After Theresa May replaced David Cameron as prime minister, she continued the 'golden era', but as her government became embroiled in the complex Brexit negotiations, there was little attention or energy left to continue the previous government's policy momentum with China. At the same time, with the uncertain prospect of Brexit amid the political reshuffling in London, the value of Britain as a platform for China's economic internationalization also diminished. Without access to the EU single market, Britain would need to secure a favourable trade

²⁶ Breslin, 'Beyond diplomacy?', p. 415.

²⁷ Oliver Turner, 'Subcontracting, facilitating and qualities of regional power: the UK's partial pivot to Asia', *Asia Europe Journal* 17: 2, June 2019, pp. 211–26.

²⁸ Kerry Brown, 'Britain's relations with China under New Labour: engagement and repulsion?', in Oliver Daddow and Jamie Gaskarth, eds, *British foreign policy: the New Labour years* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 170–87.

²⁹ 'China, Britain to benefit from "golden era" in ties—Cameron', Reuters, 18 Oct. 2015.

³⁰ 'PM Theresa May: "Golden era for UK–China relations"', BBC News, 3 Sept. 2016.

³¹ Oliver Turner, 'The golden era of UK–China relations meets Brexit', *The Diplomat*, 18 Dec. 2018.

³² 'US anger at Britain joining Chinese-led investment bank AIIB', *Guardian*, 13 March 2015; Shahrar Hameiri and Lee Jones, 'China challenges global governance? Chinese international development finance and the AIIB', *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 573–94.

agreement with China as the world's second largest economy. But at the moment, how that might pan out is anyone's guess.

So far, we have discussed high-level government-to-government relations, with reference to the viewpoints of academics and other political and economic elites. But how does the British public perceive China, and what sort of bilateral relations do Britons think should be pursued between the two countries? Understanding public opinion on these issues has never been more important, given that the majority of Britons now consider China to be the world's leading economic power, with a more important role today than ten years ago,³³ and, as our survey shows, believe that negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with China after Brexit should be a top priority—higher, indeed, than FTAs with the United States, Japan and the Commonwealth countries.

Brexit identities and British foreign policy

Scholars have long noted that Britain's foreign policy decision-making is conditional upon the country's changing perception of itself and its role in the world.³⁴ Having clear 'national role conceptions, and the role performances that flow from each stance', can provide a strong narrative about British identity and garner public support for Britain's foreign policy.³⁵ Indeed, the question of Britain's self-identity has featured prominently in writings about the UK's relations with the United States and the EU, as well as in writings about the Commonwealth and Britain's imperial past.³⁶ The discursive power of the intersubjectivity inherent in what it means to be British fundamentally shapes how British elites as well as the wider society perceive the UK's rightful place within the international system.

This identity-based understanding of British foreign relations is expressed most tellingly in the 'special relationship' between the UK and the US. For example, a few months after the Brexit referendum, in a Christmas 2016 letter from Theresa May to the then new American president Donald Trump, she quoted a Christmas speech given by Winston Churchill in 1941, speaking about the special bond between their countries:

I spend this anniversary and festival far from my country, far from my family, yet I cannot truthfully say that I feel far from home. Whether it be the ties of blood on my mother's side, or the friendships I have developed here over many years of active life, or the commanding sentiment of comradeship in the common cause of great peoples who

³³ Kat Devlin, *5 charts on global views of China* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 19 Oct. 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/19/5-charts-on-global-views-of-china/>.

³⁴ Matthew Uttley, Benedict Wilkinson and Armida van Rij, 'A powder for the future? Global Britain and the future character of conflict', *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 801–16.

³⁵ Jamie Gaskarth, 'The national interest and Britain's role in the world', in Timothy Edmunds, Jamie Gaskarth and Robin Porter, eds, *British foreign policy and the national interest: identity, strategy and security* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 62.

³⁶ Anthony Forster, *Eurocepticism in contemporary British politics: opposition to Europe in the Conservative and Labour parties since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2002); Evgeniia Iakhnis, Brian Rathbun, Jason Reifler and Thomas J. Scotto, 'Populist referendum: was "Brexit" an expression of nativist and anti-elitist sentiment?', *Research and Politics* 5: 2, April 2018, pp. 1–7; Geoffrey Evans, 'Eurocepticism and Conservative electoral support: how an asset became a liability', *British Journal of Political Science* 28: 4, 1998, pp. 573–90.

speak the same language, who kneel at the same altars and, to a very large extent, pursue the same ideals, I cannot feel myself a stranger here in the centre and at the summit of the United States.³⁷

These words reflect a ‘special relationship’ between the two countries that extends beyond the ordinary bond among liberal-minded states. Instead, it is better understood and referenced as ‘sentiments, identities, collective imaginaries, and ... ideational resources upon which all foreign policy makers draw ... when choosing and rank-ordering friends and allies in the international arena.’³⁸ The British–American relationship has been shaped by this powerful discourse of common brotherhood based on a cultural and even ‘racial’ affinity between the two nations, which can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and persisted durably throughout the twentieth.³⁹ For exactly these reasons, ‘the wider British society—that is, the masses as well as the ruling elites—tends to evaluate the US as more positive and closer to the UK than any other comparable political entity in the modern world’.⁴⁰

Where Brexit is concerned, an identity-based approach has also featured prominently in scholarly commentary on the referendum result. As Gráinne de Búrca points out, to explain why people voted to leave the EU, one has to take into account Britain’s political and cultural distinctiveness and its experiences and perceptions of its EU membership.⁴¹ However, such experiences and perceptions are not uniform, and this diversity is reflected in a deep split within contemporary British society. This division between the ‘Remainers’ and the ‘Leavers’ indicates that there is no clear consensus on Britain’s appropriate place within the international system. Should it continue to be part of the EU, or be independent and seek to recover the glory of the past, or pursue closer relations with the United States?

Moreover, as Virdee and McGeever argue, the whole Brexit debate has revealed a powerful social force in British—or, more accurately, English—society that ‘comprises an imperial longing to restore Britain’s place in the world as *primus inter pares*’, and subscribes to ‘an insular, Powellite narrative of island retreat from a “globalizing” world’.⁴² For many scholars, British social divisions can no longer be described as falling along traditional class lines,⁴³ or between party affiliations,⁴⁴

³⁷ Victor Reklaitis, ‘This is the Churchill speech that Theresa May gave Trump a copy of’, *Market Watch*, 27 Jan. 2017.

³⁸ Srdjan Vucetic, ‘British national identity and the Anglo–American special relationship’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 14: 3, 2016, p. 272.

³⁹ Srdjan Vucetic, ‘A racialized peace? How Britain and the US made their relationship special’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7: 4, 2011, pp. 403–21.

⁴⁰ Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: a genealogy of a racialized identity in international relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 273.

⁴¹ Gráinne de Búrca, ‘How British was the Brexit vote?’, in Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger, eds, *Brexit and beyond: rethinking the futures of Europe* (London: UCL Press, 2018), p. 47.

⁴² Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, ‘Racism, crisis, Brexit’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41: 10, Aug. 2018, p. 1802.

⁴³ Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, ‘Britain after Brexit: a nation divided’, *Journal of Democracy* 28: 1, 2017, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁴ The UK in a Changing Europe, *Brexit and public opinion 2019* (London, 2019), <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Public-Opinion-2019-report.pdf>.

rather, English nationalism became the impetus for Brexit.⁴⁵ Indeed, the powerful Brexit narrative—dwelling on Britain's glorious past and its contemporary decline in status as a member of the EU—has been singled out as a key rationale for why nationalist Britons voted for Brexit.⁴⁶

Throughout the Leave campaign, substantial emphasis was placed on the argument that Britain should take back control over its affairs and regain British sovereignty from the EU, and on the related perception that immigrants were flooding in from the European continent. This sentiment, stronger in England than in other parts of the UK,⁴⁷ manifests on the one hand as nostalgia for Britain's former imperial glory, whereby the country has longstanding ties with the 'Old Commonwealth of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (as well as the US)',⁴⁸ and on the other as a xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiment that fuels a desire for Britain to regain control over itself because of the perception that it is no longer 'British'.⁴⁹ Such self-perception certainly has its socio-political origin in developments in British society, parts of which have experienced post-industrial economic restructuring and austerity, but also touches on a crucial issue in British foreign policy: where exactly the rightful place for the UK is in the international system, and what kind of relationship it should form with various states and actors within this system.

Recent studies have shown a strong sense of emotional attachment to being a 'Remainer' or a 'Leaver'; indeed, these identities have replaced party affiliations as the main identifiers not only in the Brexit debate but in relation to other, broader foreign policy issues.⁵⁰ Does public opinion towards China vary between the Leavers and the Remainers? If it does, do such divisions also apply to their perceptions of the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China on the international stage? Answering these questions will illuminate how Brexit identities shape public views on China, and what strategies the British government should undertake to deal with the 'rise of China' phenomenon in the light of these public sentiments.

Research design

To explore the questions outlined above, we designed a public opinion survey consisting of three main parts. The first part included questions that tap into the

⁴⁵ Anthony Heath and Lindsay Richards, 'Nationalism, racism, and identity: what connects Englishness to a preference for hard Brexit?', *LSE British Politics and Policy* blog, 2 Oct. 2018, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsand-policy/englishness-racism-brexit/>.

⁴⁶ Paul Beaumont, 'Brexit, retrotopia and the perils of post-colonial delusions', *Global Affairs* 3: 4–5, Oct. 2017, pp. 379–90.

⁴⁷ Ailsa Henderson, Charlie Jeffery, Robert Liñeira, Roger Scully, Daniel Wincott and Richard Wyn Jones, 'England, Englishness and Brexit', *Political Quarterly* 87: 2, 2016, pp. 187–99.

⁴⁸ Virdee and McGeever, 'Racism, crisis, Brexit', p. 1805.

⁴⁹ Virdee and McGeever, 'Racism, crisis, Brexit', p. 1811; Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo, 'Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19: 3, Aug. 2017, pp. 450–64.

⁵⁰ Ian Montagu, 'Remainer or Leaver? The emergence of the Brexit identity prism', *LSE Brexit* blog, 23 Oct. 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/10/23/remainer-or-leaver-the-emergence-of-the-brexit-identity-prism/>.

respondents' Brexit identities. As discussed in the previous section, the key elements of the Brexit debate revolve around the issues of sovereignty and control, which can be operationalized as how individuals perceive the UK's relationship with the EU and immigration to the UK. Accordingly, we first asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement 'Being a member of the European Union undermines Britain's distinctive identity', using a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. We then asked respondents whether they thought 'the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United Kingdom to live should be increased, decreased, or left the same as it is now'. Using these questions, we are able to construct a more nuanced measure of Brexit identities, as opposed to a simple dichotomous indicator based on directly asking how respondents voted in the referendum or how they would vote if another one were to be held.⁵¹

The second part of the survey included five questions about China and UK–China relations.⁵² The first question gauged respondents' overall opinion of China, using a five-point Likert scale from 'very favourable' to 'very unfavourable'. The second question asked respondents which elements of the relationship with China they thought should be given the highest priority by the British government. The choices were: 'cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism'; 'promoting trade and investment, including negotiation of some kind of free trade agreement or comprehensive economic partnership'; 'addressing cyber security'; 'advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China'; 'protecting British values and institutions at home from growing Chinese influence'; and 'addressing intellectual property rights'. Respondents could pick just one of these six options, or they could choose 'don't know'.

In the third question, we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that 'China's increasing military and defence capabilities in the coming decade pose a serious concern for Britain'. The answers fell on a five-point scale from 'definitely yes' to 'definitely no'. The fourth question was related to Britain's trade relations. Specifically, we asked respondents: 'If Britain were to pursue a free trade agreement with the European Union, the United States, and China, what is your opinion on the priority of forming trade relations with the following countries and regional bloc?' The answers were 'extremely important', 'very important', 'moderately important', 'slightly important', and 'not important at all'.

The final question concerned Sino-US rivalry and was posed in a prospective framework:

In the coming decade and in the context of competition between the United States and China, which country do you feel will ...

⁵¹ The UK in a Changing Europe, *Brexit and public opinion 2019*.

⁵² Many of the questions in this part of the survey were adapted from the following two studies: Stefano Burzo and Xiaojun Li, 'Public perceptions of international leadership in China and the United States', *Chinese Political Science Review* 3: 1, March 2018, pp. 81–99; Paul Evans and Xiaojun Li, *2019 & 2017 Canadian public attitudes on China & Canada—China relations report comparisons* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2019), <https://sppga.ubc.ca/news/2019-2017-report-comparisons/>.

- 1 be the largest economic power?
- 2 be the more responsible global leader?
- 3 do more to maintain global peace?
- 4 be more stable and predictable?
- 5 be more respectful to other people around the world?
- 6 be more committed to freedom of speech and expression?
- 7 do more for the poorest elements of their country?
- 8 do more to address climate change and environmental issues?

For each of these eight sub-questions, respondents could choose China, the United States or 'don't know'.

The last part of the survey included a battery of standard socio-demographic questions on age, gender, place of birth and residence, marital status, ethnicity, education, employment and income. We also asked about the respondents' political party affiliation, union membership and exposure to news on national politics. A detailed list of the survey questions is included in our online appendix.⁵³

We implemented the survey using a crowdsourcing platform based in the UK. Respondents were randomly drawn from the platform's online subject pool. The survey was administered between 15 and 19 November 2018, yielding a total of 1,600 responses.

The average age of our respondents was 37 years. About 66 per cent of the respondents were female. In terms of geographical locations, the majority of the respondents lived in England (85.3 per cent), followed by Scotland (8.5 per cent), Wales (4.6 per cent) and Northern Ireland (1.6 per cent). The sample was highly educated, with 31 per cent having a bachelor's degree and 13.1 per cent having a postgraduate degree. About 74 per cent were self-employed or employed full time, and they were generally spread across the spectrum of professions. The self-reported average household income was between £30,000 and £50,000 a year. The majority of our respondents self-identified with the Labour Party (40.6 per cent), followed by the Conservative Party (18.9 per cent), and the Liberal Democrat Party (8.1 per cent). More than a third of the respondents reported paying a great deal or a lot of attention to news about national politics via TV, radio, printed newspapers or the internet.

Overall, the above statistics suggest that our sample represented younger, wealthier, better-educated and more informed portions of the British population than the average.⁵⁴ These demographic profiles are similar to online samples surveyed in other studies conducted in the United States and China.⁵⁵ While recent works in public opinion research confirm that online samples in the US tend to differ from population-based samples on many demographic and political

⁵³ The online appendix can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GLM8OC>.

⁵⁴ According to the Office of National Statistics, the median age of the UK population was 40.2 in 2015, the median household income was £28,400 in 2018, and 27.2 per cent of the population aged 16–74 had a degree or equivalent or higher in 2012.

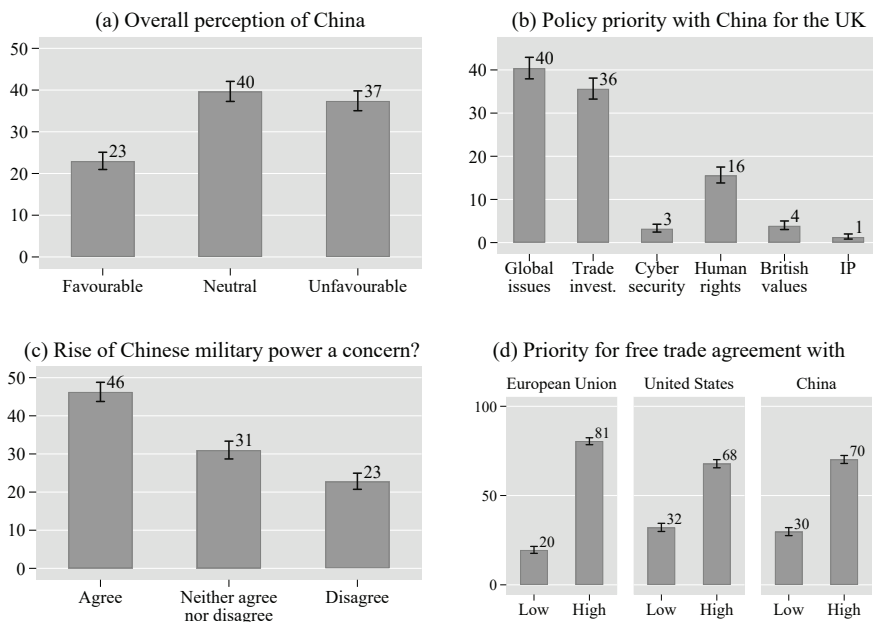
⁵⁵ For the United States, see Connor Huff and Dustin Tingley, "Who are these people?" Evaluating the demographic characteristics and political preferences of MTurk survey respondents', *Research and Politics* 2: 3, 2015, pp. 1–12. For China, see Xiaojun Li, Weiyi Shi and Boliang Zhu, 'The face of internet recruitment: evaluating the labor markets of online crowdsourcing platforms in China', *Research and Politics* 5: 1, 2018, pp. 1–8.

variables,⁵⁶ these same authors also show that researchers can still make credible and generalizable inferences based on online samples.⁵⁷

Overall views of China

We first examine British public perceptions of China. Figure 1(a) shows that only a minority of Britons reported favourable views of China: a meagre 2 per cent had very favourable views and another 21 per cent had somewhat favourable views of the country. In contrast, a total of 37 per cent did not have favourable views of China, with 7 per cent having very unfavourable views and 30 per cent somewhat unfavourable. Notably, 40 per cent held neutral views of China. This suggests that a substantial number of Britons do not have strong opinions on China, or perhaps do not think China is relevant for them.

Figure 1: Overall perception of China in the United Kingdom



Notes: This figure plots the percentages of the respective responses as well as the 95% error bars for the four main questions. Some responses (e.g. ‘very favourable’ and ‘somewhat favourable’) are grouped together for ease of presentation.

Source: Authors’ survey.

⁵⁶ See e.g. A. J. Berinsky, Gregory A. Huber and Gabriel S. Lenz, ‘Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk’, *Political Analysis* 20: 3, 2012, pp. 351–68; Scott Clifford and Jennifer Jerit, ‘Is there a cost to convenience? An experimental comparison of data quality in laboratory and online studies’, *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1: 2, 2014, pp. 120–31; Yanna Krupnikov and Adam Seth Levine, ‘Cross-sample comparisons and external validity’, *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1: 1, 2014, pp. 59–80.

⁵⁷ In the following analyses, we present unweighted results, which are very similar to results from the sample with post-stratification weighting on gender and age. These results are available from the authors upon request.

Regarding the list of issues that should be the British government's foreign policy priorities regarding China, 40 per cent of people picked UK–China cooperation on global issues such as climate change, epidemics and counterterrorism. Another 36 per cent thought the government should put more emphasis on developing further trading relations with China. None of the other issue areas received much attention, with the exception of 16 per cent thinking that the government should pay more attention to human rights issues in China (figure 1(b)).

In terms of whether the rise of Chinese military power should be a concern for the United Kingdom, 31 per cent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, while the majority of respondents selected 'agree' and only 23 per cent selected 'disagree' (see figure 1(c)). These results indicate that many Britons are to some degree anxious about the security aspect of China's increasing presence in the international arena.

Finally, we looked at public opinion on the priority of signing an FTA with China in comparison with signing similar agreements with the EU and the US (figure 1(d)). In the context of Brexit and the uncertainty surrounding future relations with the EU, 81 per cent of respondents thought it was extremely important or very important to have a trade agreement with the EU. A very high percentage (70 per cent) had a similar view on an FTA with China. Signing an FTA with the US came third. All in all, these results show us that Britons have a relatively pragmatic and mercantilist stance where China is concerned, which is consistent with Breslin's research findings, discussed above: even though people do not hold favourable views of China, these negative perceptions do not translate into ideological convictions about what the British government should do.

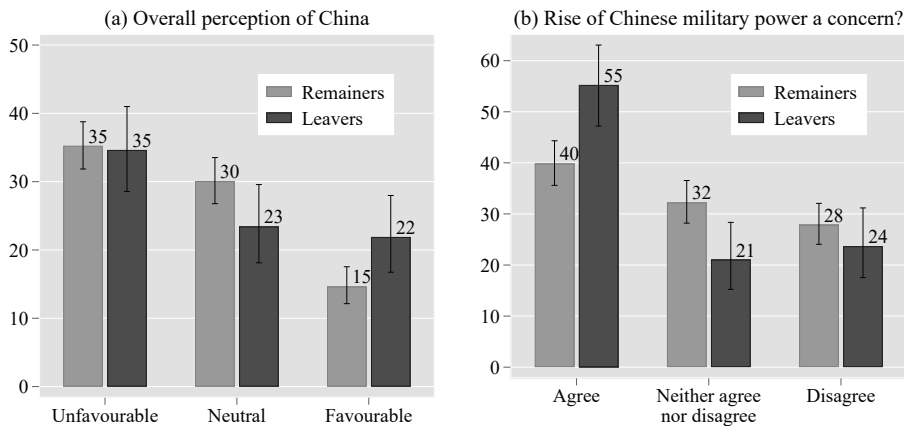
Brexit identities and views of China

In this section, we investigate how Brexit identities affect views of China and its relations with the UK. As noted in the section above on research design, we used two questions to measure Brexit identities. Owing to space constraints, in the remainder of the empirical sections of this article we report on findings using the question about the EU. Results using the immigration question, which are very similar to the ones shown here, can be found in the online appendix (see fn 53). About 10 per cent of our respondents strongly agreed with the statement that being a member of the EU undermines Britain's distinctive identity. On the other side of the spectrum, 32 per cent of respondents strongly disagreed that EU membership threatens their national identity. We focus on these two groups of respondents since they can be regarded as having the strongest Leave and Remain identities, respectively.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ We have also examined the questions using regression analyses that include the measure of Brexit identities as well as a battery of socio-demographic control variables. The results are similar to the simple comparisons presented here and can be found in the online appendix.

Figure 2 plots views on China and concern about Chinese military power for the Leavers and Remainers. We can see that those who identify more as Leavers tend to view China more favourably but are also more concerned with the rise of Chinese military power. Specifically, while the percentages of unfavourable views of China are similar for both groups (35 per cent), Leavers are nearly 50 per cent more likely than Remainers to have a favourable view of China (22 per cent compared to 15 per cent). On the other hand, 55 per cent of Leavers believe that the rise of China's military power poses a concern for Britain, compared to 40 per cent of Remainers who agree with that statement.

Figure 2: Brexit identity and views on China and the Chinese military



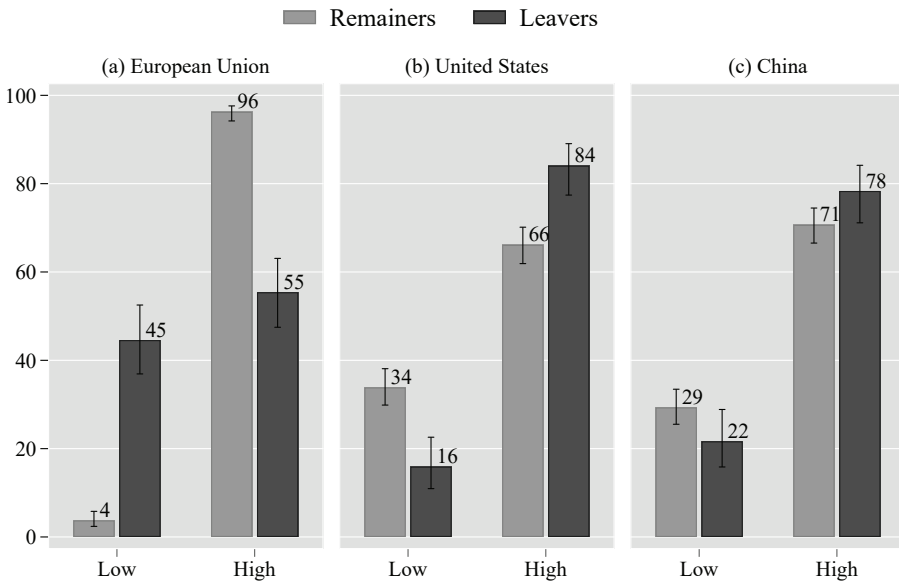
Note: This figure plots the percentages of the responses from both Remainers and Leavers as well as the 95% error bars.

Source: Authors' survey.

These seemingly contradictory findings suggest that the Leavers view relations with China through a pragmatic lens. If it leaves the EU, the UK will need to improve trade relations with countries outside Europe, such as China. This pragmatism can be seen in the Leavers' views on trade, presented in figure 3 overleaf, which illustrates the importance respondents attach to the UK having an FTA with, respectively, the EU, the US and China. Here, we can see that Leavers believed that FTAs with China and the US should be a higher priority for the UK government—78 per cent and 84 per cent of them considered an FTA with China and the US, respectively, to be a higher priority, compared to 55 per cent according priority to an FTA with the EU. In contrast, an overwhelming majority (96 per cent) of Remainers view a trade agreement with the EU as important, while lower majorities accord priority to such agreements with the US (66 per cent) or China (71 per cent).

The inference that Leavers adopt a pragmatic view gains additional validation from our question regarding the UK government's foreign policy priorities with

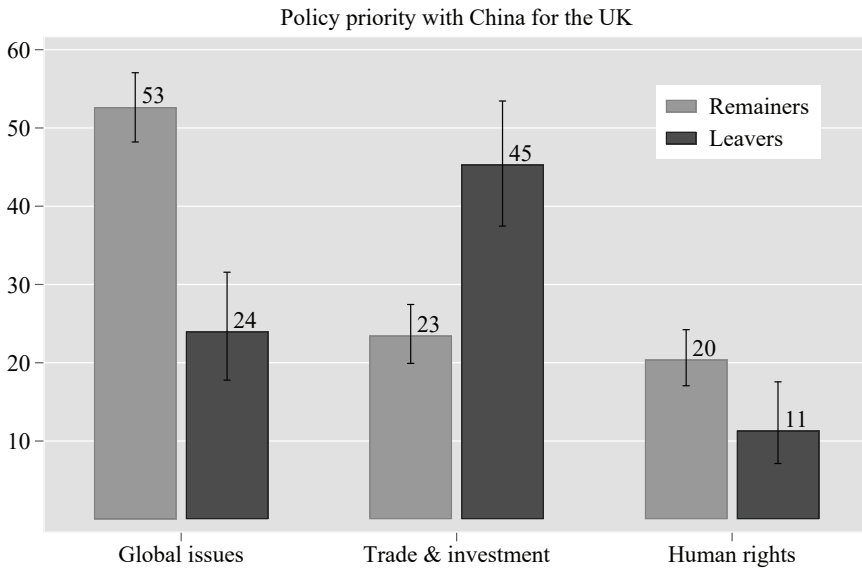
Figure 3: Brexit identities and preference for a free trade agreement



Note: This figure plots the percentages of the responses from both Remainers and Leavers as well as the 95% error bars.

Source: Authors' survey.

Figure 4: Brexit identities and UK foreign policy choices regarding China



Note: This figure plots the percentages of the responses from both Remainers and Leavers as well as the 95% error bars.

Source: Authors' survey.

China. Figure 4 presents the breakdown of the responses on three issues ranked highest by respondents: collaboration on global issues, trade and investment, and human rights in China. Once again, we see divergent effects across these three issues, driven by Brexit identities. Respondents with greater attachment to the Leave identity were predictably less inclined towards addressing global issues and meddling with China's human rights record, and were more in favour of promoting trade and investment with Beijing.

British views of the US and of China

In the light of the recent trade war between the United States and China, and the spectre of a 'technological cold war',⁵⁹ the most interesting issue is how British public perceptions of the United States and China vary. Specifically, because the existing literature tends to focus on the special relationship between the US and the UK, with emphasis on the cultural/racial affinity between the two nations, we want to explore what role Brexit identities play in British public perceptions of the two superpowers. To this end, we take a closer look at the list of eight issues we chose to compare Chinese and American leadership on the global stage.

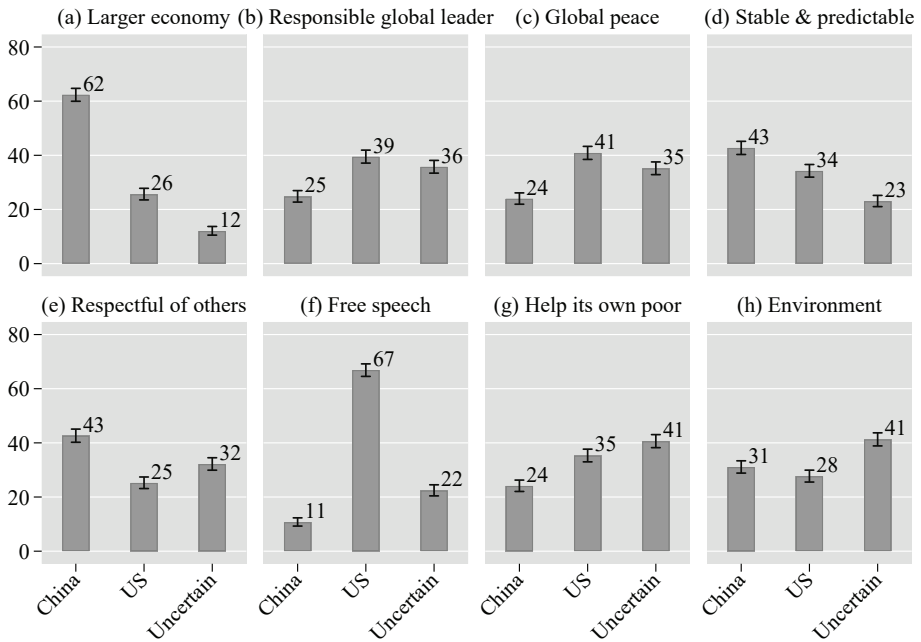
We first look at the overall responses, which are plotted in figure 5. In general, more respondents believed that in the next decade China will be the largest economic power, be more stable and predictable, and be more respectful to other people around the world. Conversely, more respondents believed that the United States will be the more responsible global leader, do more to maintain global peace, be more committed to freedom of speech and expression, and do more for its poorest people. As to which country will do more to address climate change and environmental issues, opinions were split, with the majority saying they were 'unsure'.

Do Brexit identities influence respondents' choice of one country over the other on these issues? To answer this question, we broke down the responses presented in figure 5 between Leavers and Remainers, with the results shown in figure 6. Across all eight categories, Leavers consistently held more favourable views of the United States than of China. Closer inspection reveals a number of more nuanced findings. In the question on which country will be the more responsible global leader, 56 per cent of Leavers believed that the United States will be more responsible. Indeed, the difference in support for the United States between Leavers and Remainers is nearly 27 percentage points. By contrast, a large minority (44 per cent) of Remainers were undecided. Overall, a large majority of them either favoured China or were uncertain whether China will be the more responsible global leader.

On the question of whether the United States or China will do more to maintain global peace, 61 per cent of Leavers felt that the United States will do more to maintain global peace than China, compared to 32 per cent of Remainers. Here

⁵⁹ Andrew B. Kennedy and Darren J. Lim, 'The innovation imperative: technology and US–China rivalry in the twenty-first century', *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 553–72.

Figure 5: Views of China and the United States over the next decade



Note: This figure plots the percentages of the responses from both Remainers and Leavers as well as the 95% error bars.

Source: Authors' survey.

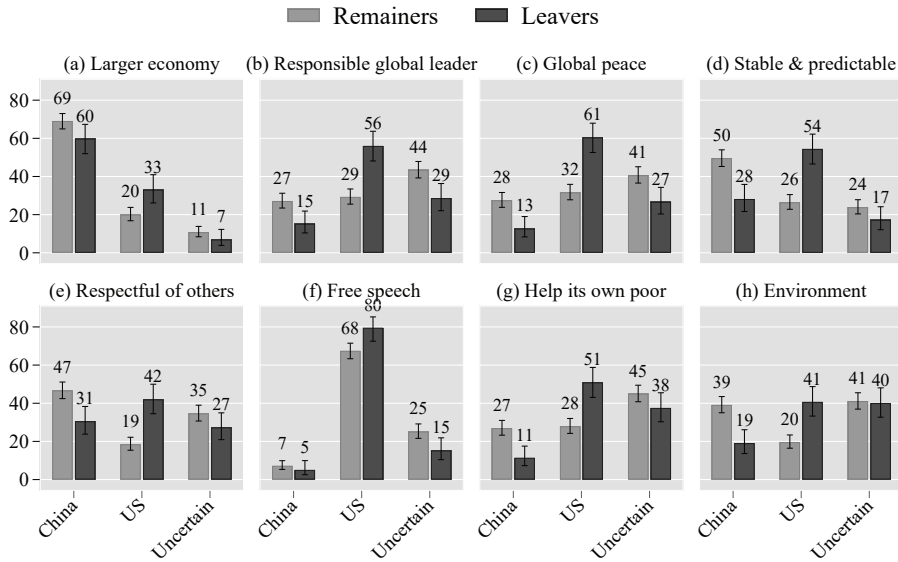
again, more Remainers were undecided (41 per cent) than opted for either China or the US. A similar pattern emerges regarding public perceptions of whether the United States or China will be more stable and predictable. These results suggest that in the area of global peace, Leavers strongly believe that the United States will be a better steward of global leadership than China.

For the other four categories of questions on political and social rights issues, we see similar results. While the contrast is not as distinctive, Leavers continued to have unfavourable views on how China cares for its own people and addresses environmental challenges. Although large numbers of Remainers (45 per cent) and Leavers (38 per cent) were uncertain on the question of which government would do more to help the poorest groups in its own country, 51 per cent of Leavers believed that the United States will do more, compared with 11 per cent for China. On environmental issues, Leavers and Remainers were completely split; 41 per cent of the former compared to 20 per cent of the latter felt that the United States will do more to address environmental issues, while 19 per cent of Leavers and 39 per cent of Remainers believe that China will do more.

On whether China or the US will be more respectful of other people, Leavers consistently preferred the United States. Specifically, 42 per cent of Leavers believed that the US will treat other people better, while 47 per cent of Remainers surprisingly believed that China will do better than the US on this score. On

protecting freedom of speech, both groups seemed to take broadly the same view. Taken together, the results suggest that while Remainers seem to care more about political protection and human rights, when asked to compare Chinese and American leadership in these categories, Leavers continue to have more unfavourable views of China than Remainers in most categories.

Figure 6: Brexit identities and views of China versus the US



Note: This figure plots the percentages of the responses from both Remainers and Leavers as well as the 95% error bars.

Source: Authors' survey.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the outcome of the Brexit process remains unclear. Yet regardless of the direction and magnitude of the eventual separation between the UK and the EU, if indeed it happens at all, the future will entail not only a 'recalibration of the ambitions and modalities of the UK's other bilateral and multilateral relations in Europe' but also a comprehensive strategy on how to further a multidimensional diplomatic orientation outside the EU, particularly with regard to the United States and China.⁶⁰

Our survey research contributes to an understanding of what this future may look like as envisioned by the British public. Two important findings are worth highlighting. First, Britons generally do not have positive views of China. However, these negative views primarily stem from security concerns associated with rising

⁶⁰ Richard G. Whitman, 'The UK's European diplomatic strategy for Brexit and beyond', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 384–5.

Chinese military power rather than from economic and trade issues, which are viewed as a priority for UK's China policy. Second, while Britons continue to see the United States as the more responsible global leader and a defender of global peace, they have more confidence in China as the largest economic power, and a more stable and more predictable polity.

These findings are comparable to recent surveys conducted in two major Commonwealth countries. In Australia, there have been similar concerns over the rise of China's military, with more than three-quarters of Australians wanting their government to resist Chinese military activities in the region, though they are equally wary about China's much larger economic presence in the country. Canadians, on the other hand, seemed to take a pragmatic view, similar to that of Britons, expressing greater support for increased economic ties to China with a majority supporting an FTA between Canada and China.⁶¹ Furthermore, like their British counterparts, more Canadians picked China as likely to be the largest economic power and the more stable and predictable country in the near future, compared to the United States.⁶²

These parallel patterns notwithstanding, a unique finding from our study is the extent to which Brexit identities cleave British public views: the Leave vs Remain division within British society generated a sharp dichotomy in the responses on almost every question in our survey. This suggests that policy-makers and researchers will need to keep Brexit identity issues in mind when considering future policies towards China; as we show above, Brexit identities predict the division of public opinion better than traditional variables such as party affiliations. In this regard, our results buttress recent reports on the decline of party affiliation as a source of political identity, and the emergence of Brexit as a new locus of political division.⁶³

Given the continuing reshuffling of political parties and their support bases within British society, Brexit identities will have profound implications for the direction of British foreign policy orientation, especially as the rivalry between the United States and China on the global stage intensifies. So far, we have seen London trying hard to consolidate the 'special relationship' with Washington,⁶⁴ while at the same time pushing for a fresh narrative on how Britain should reconstruct its place in response to China as the emerging new power.⁶⁵ However, such a balancing act may no longer be viable, with the escalation of the trade war between the United States and China putting increasing pressure on the UK, as an American ally, to choose a side on issues ranging from the UK's participation

⁶¹ Evans and Li, *Canadian public attitudes*, pp. 1–3.

⁶² Paul Evans and Xiaojun Li, 'Xi's China a source of worry and wonder for Canadians', *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 26 Oct. 2017.

⁶³ Sarah Hobolt and James Tilly, 'The Brexit identity divide', *Brexit and Public Opinion 2019 Report* (London: The UK in a Changing Europe, 2019), pp. 18–25.

⁶⁴ Zoe Drewett, 'Donald Trump and Theresa May praise "special relationship" after day at Downing Street', *Metro*, 4 June 2019, <https://metro.co.uk/2019/06/04/donald-trump-theresa-may-praise-special-relationship-day-downing-street-9805291/>.

⁶⁵ Richard G. Whitman, 'Brexit or Bremain: what future for the UK's European diplomatic strategy?', *International Affairs* 92: 3, May 2016, p. 516.

in China's 'belt and road' initiative⁶⁶ to whether Britain should ban the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei from participating in building the 5G infrastructure in the UK.⁶⁷ Driven by Brexit identities, the divergence between public opinions of China and of the United States will only make these choices more difficult.

⁶⁶ Jim Pickard, 'Hammond to seek UK deals in China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Financial Times*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/9fo54218-66af-11e9-a79d-04f350474d62>.

⁶⁷ Dan Sabbagh, 'May to ban Huawei from providing "core" parts of UK 5G network', *Guardian*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/apr/24/may-to-ban-huawei-from-supplying-core-parts-of-uk-5g-network>.