

PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA AND OTHER GREAT POWERS AMONG KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the perception of great powers in the eyes of students in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan using data collected through an online survey. The research has compared the perceptions of China's and other Great Powers' economic, political, and military authority among the youth of Central Asian countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. To analyze these perceptions, young people from Kazakhstan

and Kyrgyzstan (N = 262) took part in a survey in the spring of 2021. Responses were analyzed to reveal the differences in perception by applying descriptive and inferential statistical methods, i.e., one-sample t-test. An association of geodemographic factors with the perception towards global powers was discovered by applying the chi-square test statistical method. The early research

revealed that the role of the other Great Powers was seen mainly in political terms, while China's role was mostly economic, however, recent studies made it clear that China's political influence is increasing in the region. Another finding from this research is that China's position on human rights and environmental issues is more negatively perceived than that of the other Great powers.

KEYWORDS: China, power, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, perception.

Introduction

The significance of Central Asia is rooted in its geostrategic position: it lies on the ancient Silk Road and possesses reserves of oil, natural gas, and other minerals. For centuries, it has been the bridge connecting the East and the West, and today it still plays this critical role in the global economy. It is manifested in China's Belt and Road Initiative and other projects, such as the TAPI and NABUCCO. Oil and gas-rich fields make the region attractive for China, which seeks to improve economic and political relations with each of the Central Asian states.¹

In *The Grand Chessboard* Brzezinski assumes that only control over the Eurasian Balkans (Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, and Afghanistan) may ensure stable global hegemony at a certain stage, which is why America must conduct an active policy in Central Asia and contain China's rising power. Therefore, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the U.S. recognized the newly independent states and supported them financially with credits and loans. The U.S. obtained military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to secure the logistical support to the troops in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Initially, China and Russia did not react to the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia, however, following the Andijan events, which led to a change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, at the 2005 summit the members of the SCO requested that the U.S. put a deadline on withdrawing the bases from the region.²

Even though certain scholars and commentators speak of a great power rivalry in the region that is similar to that of the 19th century, both the U.S. and Chinese officials emphasize the fact that their policies are not designed to undermine Russian influence. EU representatives in particular refrain from competing with Russia in their rhetoric.³ Along with Russia, the EU, Turkey, India and Iran have economic, political and security interests in this strategically important region. The EU has long been one of its largest trading partners, but China surpassed the EU and others in 2010.⁴

¹ See: A. Berdiyev, N. Can, "The Importance of Central Asia in China's Foreign Policy and Beijing's Soft Power Instruments," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, 2020, pp. 15-24.

² See: L. Sagbansua, N. Can, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Turkic Republics and Turkey: Economic and Business Dimensions," *Canadian Social Science*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 80-87.

³ See: E. Sancak, N. Can, "The Economic-Political Relations of Post-Soviet Russia in Eurasia Region," *International Journal of Business and Management Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 2012, pp. 423-442.

⁴ See: F. Godement, "Seeking an Alliance by Any Other Name?" in: *The New Great Game in Central Asia. European Council on Foreign Relations*, available at [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/China-Analysis_The-new-Great-Game-in-Central-Asia_September2011.pdf], 31 August, 2021.

Niklas Swanström states that India and Russia are interested in strategic cooperation with China in connection with the region. Though China initially refused any relevant proposals, the U.S. presence in the region following the 9/11 attacks changed China's position. The close U.S.-India relations were perceived as a rival alliance by Chinese foreign policy makers, and led to the SCO becoming a platform for a China-Russia alliance. In addition, Russian oil and natural gas reserves have become a foundation for a deepened relationship between the two countries.⁵

In the last two and a half decades, after investing billions of dollars throughout the region, as China turned into the number one trading partner for most Central Asian countries, some observers assert that China is now the core power in Central Asia. Despite the recent phenomenal growth in trade and investment, China's growing influence in the region is still far from making Central Asia its own "backyard." The influence of Russia and, to a lesser extent, the United States on regional relationships should not be ignored.⁶

Despite the fact that Central Asian leaders' have a positive view of China due to its foreign policy of good neighborliness, experts on the region and the locals are anxious about the growing Chinese engagement and wonder about Beijing's true ambitions.⁷ The perception of China is different in different parts of Central Asia. Based on published works, China is not a reason for concern in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan "the Chinese issue" has become a part of the social and political debate.⁸ In the two latter countries, political life has been plagued by crises and public debates involving their relations with their great neighbor. Many surveys of the last decade reveal that China remains a challenge for Central Asia, including issues that have been regarded as resolved. Expert assessments of the situation are generally more critical than those of political leaders.⁹

China's continuing advances lead many to believe that in the foreseeable future, China will become a great power that may even surpass the U.S. economically and militarily, as it is currently the second largest economy after the U.S. The rise of China is visible in its immediate vicinity, although its activities differ from region to region. China's future behavior towards Central Asia during its ascent is an important issue. From both modern-day and historical perspectives, the rise and fall of China suggest certain behavior patterns that would make its behavior predictable for its Central Asian neighbors.¹⁰

This article explores the Central Asian view of the rising China through the prism of opinions of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz youth. The adoption of survey instruments to assess Central Asian perspectives will allow researchers to make systemic comparisons with the collected data, thus providing an overall view of different societies' responses to China's global superiority.

This study addresses the empirical gap between perceptions of China's rise among the youth of Central Asian countries. Central Asian countries differ in a number of ways, and in the methodological section, we will explain our choice of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as the preliminary point for the survey. In the findings section, we present our analysis that allows to make a comparison between the perceptions of Russia, the U.S., EU, and China in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Youth

⁵ See: N. Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, No. 14 (45), November 2005, pp. 569-584.

⁶ See: H. Zhang, "Building the Silk Road Economic Belt: Challenges in Central Asia," *Cambridge Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2015, U.K., pp. 17-35.

⁷ See: D. Gurbanmyradova, *The Sources of China's Soft Power in Central Asia: Cultural Diplomacy*, Master's Thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2015.

⁸ See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Singapore, 2009, p. 201.

⁹ See: Ibidem.

¹⁰ See: K. Shamshidov, "China's Approach to Multilateralism with an Emphasis on Its Influence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 23-43.

perceptions were captured by the online survey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences revealed in this research article are in no way decisive; however, they edge the way for upcoming study. The response to the question of the potential development of the survey results will be subsequently investigated in the conclusion.

Literature Review

It is argued that people's perception of the rival states is vital in foreign policy-making. However, some studies neglect the contextual and individual factors, since different national threats may be constructed differently. Surveys of the perception of the state are necessary and important to understand the individual opinions.¹¹

Recent survey studies have focused on common perceptions in various countries and in different regions. For instance, occasional anti-Chinese demonstrations show popular mistrust in certain Central Asia countries, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although official representatives seem to have positive feelings. This can be compared with Dingxin Zhao's argument. He implies that perceptions of the elite Chinese students differ from those of others being more positive than negative towards the U.S., labelling it more often as a superpower than an adversary.¹²

Many specialists focus on security and threat perception, based on which they frame the securitization theory. Scholars argue that the definition of a national security threat is a subjective rather than an objective fact that emphasizes the possibility of political manipulation of security measures.¹³

Numerous scholars state that accepting China as a unique major power undermines the ideal U.S. development model. The results of regression analysis of survey statistics in 13 Asian countries indicate that a positive assessment of China from the viewpoint of its democratization level and the positive effect on a specific country negatively correlates with a positive perception of the United States.¹⁴

Laruelle and Royce studied Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). The survey reveals three leading powers, among which Russia occupies the top spot in the public opinion, China is in the second place with a relatively high positive rating, and the U.S. comes the last.¹⁵

Silver, Devlin, and Huang studied the public opinion on China's economic growth in their 2019 survey. The findings indicate that China's economic growth is mostly welcomed in emerging countries, but its neighbors are cautious about its rapid growth.¹⁶

Owen's comparative content analysis study of the feelings towards China and Russia in Russian-language online media in Kyrgyzstan exposes the changing tendency in the perception of China as a reaction to its reorientation from the economic to the political sphere. Although Russia has been

¹¹ See: M. Zhou, "How Elite Chinese Students View Other Countries: Findings from a Survey in Three Top Beijing Universities," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2018, pp.167-188.

¹² See: *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹³ See: B. Buzan, O. Weaver, J. Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner, London / Boulder, CO, 1998. 247 pp.

¹⁴ See: M. Tsai, "Will You (Still) Love Me Tomorrow: Pro-Americanism and the China Factor in Asia," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, No. 49, 2021, pp. 21-30.

¹⁵ See: M. Laruelle, D. Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," *Kenan Cable*, No. 56, 2020.

¹⁶ See: L. Silver, K. Devlin, C. Huang, "China's Economic Growth, Mostly Welcomed in Emerging Markets, but Neighbors Wary of Its Influence," Pew Research Center, December 2019 available at [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/12/PG_2019.12.05_Balance-of-Power_FINAL.pdf], 31 August, 2021.

perceived as politically influential in the region, the growth of Chinese political influence is observed, particularly in the media.¹⁷

Chen and Günther's survey study among students made it clear that if China continues investing in projects, such as construction of hospitals, roads and bridges, which improve the quality of life, the perception of China will change positively compared to Russia.¹⁸

Chen and Jiménez-Tovar studied the perception of China and Russia via surveys among students in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The findings of the study reveal the difference between the views of Kyrgyz and Kazakh students. Kazakh students believe that China is the most influential, whereas Kyrgyz students think differently, but they also agree that in the long run China may surpass Russia.¹⁹ Chen's pilot survey conducted in Kazakhstan also confirms that Kazakh youth feels generally positive about China's rise.²⁰

Peyrouse surveyed the perception of EU in Central Asia. His study reveals Russia is considered the most influential regional actor and is perceived positively. China takes the second place; the U.S. and EU takes the third and fourth place, respectively. He claims that the public is not well-informed and large-scale surveys are not possible due to the absence of well-funded research institutions and access limitations in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. He highlights the distinction between opinions of the elite and the general public, placing more value on the elite, since it is more aware of international events than the general population and has greater influence in framing state foreign policies.²¹

There is extensive academic debate on Central Asia in terms of its perception of China and the Great Game-like rivalry. Laruelle and Peyrouse's monograph is a good example of these contending views. The study focuses on the feelings in the region about geopolitical issues and problems. They claim that the increasing Sinophilia or Sinophobia feelings may have a vital political, geostrategic, and cultural impact on the region and affect the Chinese expansion either positively or negatively.²²

Method and Data Analysis

The study adopts a positivist philosophy, aimed at obtaining results by empirically testing the knowledge base. This study presents the views of the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan youth objectively, without adding the researchers' subjective speculations. It applies the deductive approach, whereby the study is rooted in data that testifies to varying perception towards major global powers. Kuczynski and Daly state that deductive approaches are generally used along with positivist philosophy, with researchers collecting data from a large sample to validate the a priori hypotheses or realities.²³ Saunders claims that research philosophy generally determines the research methods, and positivists

¹⁷ See: C. Owen, "Making Friends with Neighbors? Local Perceptions of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2018, pp. 457-480.

¹⁸ See: Y.-W. Chen, O. Günther, "Back to Normalization or Conflict with China in Greater Central Asia? Evidence from Local Students' Perceptions," *Problems of Post-Communism*, No. 67 (3), 2018, pp. 228-240, available at [<https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1474716>].

¹⁹ See: Y.-W. Chen, S. Jiménez-Tovar, "China in Central Asia: Local Perceptions from Future Elites," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, No. 3 (3), 2017, pp. 429-445.

²⁰ See: Y.-W. Chen, "A Research Note on Central Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: The Example of Kazakhstan," *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2015, pp. 63-87.

²¹ See: S. Peyrouse, "How Does Central Asia View the EU?" *EUCAM Working Paper*, No. 18, 2014.

²² See: M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, "China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Singapore, 2009, p. 201.

²³ See: L. Kuczynski, K. Daly, *Qualitative Methods for Inductive (Theory-Generating) Research*, Handbook of Dynamics in Parent-Child Relations, 2003, pp. 373-392.

apply quantitative research methods employing surveys or experiments.²⁴ The current study also applied a survey research strategy, wherein data was collected from university students from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan using a convenient sampling technique. Similar sampling studies have been adopted by various researchers, such as Guo and Feng²⁵; Chen and Jiménez-Tovar,²⁶ Chen and Hao²⁷ and Chen and Günther.²⁸ Data was collected using a structured 7-point questionnaire using closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was framed with research objectives in mind, as suggested by Wegner.²⁹ Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS version 24. Scale reliability was checked with the help of Cronbach's alpha and data was analyzed using inferential statistics, such as chi-square and one-sample t-test.

Data was collected from 262 young respondents with a median age of 20 years from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The sample profile details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Profile

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	112	43
	Female	150	57
Country	Kazakhstan	128	49
	Kyrgyzstan	134	51

Table 1 shows that the sample consisted of 43% male respondents and 57% of female respondents. 49% of the respondents were from Kazakhstan; 51%, from Kyrgyzstan.

Comparative Perception of Global Powers by Kyrgyz & Kazakh Youth

The study aimed to understand the comparative perception of global powers by youth in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Respondents were asked to choose the global power they viewed most positively. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 demonstrates that the European Union was seen most positively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youths, wherein 47% people preferred this global power. The United States of America was favored by 30% of Kyrgyz and Kazakh youths as most positive global power, followed by the Russian Federation selected by 16% of Kyrgyz and Kazakh youths. China was viewed most positively by only 7% of the respondents.

²⁴ See: M. Saunders, P. Lewis, A. Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 5th Edition, Pearson Education, London, 2009.

²⁵ See: S. Guo, G. Feng, "Understanding Support for Internet Censorship in China: An Elaboration of the Theory of Reasoned Action," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 17 (1), 2012, pp. 33-52.

²⁶ See: Y.-W. Chen, S. Jiménez-Tovar, op. cit.

²⁷ See: Y.-W. Chen, Y. Hao, "Czech Perceptions of the Rise of China: A Survey Among University Students," *Asia Europe Journal*, No. 18 (1), 2020, pp. 157-175.

²⁸ See: Y.-W. Chen, O. Günther, op. cit.

²⁹ See: T. Wegner, *Applied Business Statistics: Methods and Excel-Based Applications*, Juta and Company Ltd., 2012.

Table 2

Positively Perceived Global Power

Most Positively Perceived Global Power	Frequency	Percentage
China	18	7
Russian Federation	43	16
United States of America	79	30
European Union	122	47

The significance of the results obtained was checked with the Chi-square goodness of fit test with 5% level of significance. The following hypothesis was set for the test:

H01: Kyrgyz and Kazakh youths have an equally positive perception of all global powers.

Ha1: Kyrgyz & Kazakh youths don't have an equally positive perception of all global powers.

Table 3

**Chi-Square Test Statistic
for Positively Perceived Global Power**

Most Positively Perceived Global Power	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	Chi-Square Statistic with Sig.
China	18	65.5	-47.5	93.695, .000
Russian Federation	43	65.5	-22.5	
United States of America	79	65.5	13.5	
European Union	122	65.5	56.5	
Total	262			

Table 3 demonstrates that the statistical value of chi-square equaled 93.695, which was associated with a .000 significance level. As the significance value was under .05, there was inadequate evidence to accept the null, which led to the acceptance of the alternate hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth didn't have an equally positive perception of the global powers. They perceived the EU most positively and China — least positively among all superpowers.

Apart from discovering the most positive perception, responses were also collected in both countries on a seven-point scale about various parameters, such as the desired alignment of their countries' foreign policy, economic and military power, and the situation with human rights in major global powers, namely the U.S., the EU, China, and Russian Federation.

Reliability of the construct was tested using Cronbach's alpha, whose value was found to be equal to .821, which is more than the cut-off value of .7. Hence, we can conclude that the scale used to judge the comparative perception of global powers by Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth was reliable. The results of comparative perception of global powers are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Comparative Perception of Global Powers

Perception Parameters	Country	N	Mean Value	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Foreign policy alignment	China	262	3.85	-1.512	.132
	Russian Federation	262	4.56	5.687	.000
	United States of America	262	4.95	10.027	.000
	European Union	262	5.37	16.261	.000
Economic power	China	262	5.82	22.027	.000
	Russian Federation	262	4.94	11.113	.000
	United States of America	262	6.07	28.659	.000
	European Union	262	5.69	23.770	.000
Military power	China	262	5.71	21.932	.000
	Russian Federation	262	5.79	24.425	.000
	United States of America	262	6.10	30.507	.000
	European Union	262	5.21	14.987	.000
Human rights situation	China	262	3.03	-8.490	.000
	Russian Federation	262	3.85	-1.523	.129
	United States of America	262	5.40	16.946	.000
	European Union	262	5.84	23.967	.000

Table 4 reveals that the European Union was perceived most favorably by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth as the target for the alignment of their country's foreign policy, since it received the highest mean value of 5.37. This was followed by the United States of America, with an average value of 4.95 and the Russian Federation, with an average value of 4.56. China was perceived negatively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth as the target for the alignment of their country's foreign policy, with a mean value of 3.85.

The United States of America was perceived as the most powerful economy, with a mean value of 6.07, followed by China, with a mean value of 5.82. The Russian Federation with a mean value of 4.94 was perceived as the least powerful economy among the global powers. The United States of America was also perceived as the greatest global military power (6.10 mean value) followed by Russia (5.79 value). The European Union with a mean value of 5.21 was considered as the global power with the least powerful military.

The European Union was perceived by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth as the global power with the most positive human rights situation, with an average value of 5.84, followed by the United States of America, with an average value of 5.40. The human rights aspect in the Russian Federation and China was not perceived positively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth, as they assigned a less than average value to both countries, i.e., 3.85 to the Russian Federation and 3.03 to China. The human rights aspect in China was perceived most negatively among the global powers by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth.

The results obtained demonstrate that the European Union was perceived most favorably as the target for the alignment of foreign policy and human rights situation, whereas the United States of America was perceived as the greatest economy and military power. China was perceived most negatively by the youth in both countries in terms of two parameters, namely, foreign policy alignment and human rights. The Russian Federation was perceived as the global power with least powerful economy.

The significance of the results obtained was tested with one-sample t-test at a 5% level of significance. The test hypothesized the following:

H02: All global powers were perceived equally as the targets of the countries' foreign policy alignment.

H03: All global powers were perceived equally as economic powers.

H04: All global powers were perceived equally as military powers.

H05: All global powers were perceived equally in terms of the human rights situation.

Table 4 demonstrates that the *t* statistical value was found to be associated with a less than .05 significance level for every parameter except one, i.e., alignment of foreign policy with China. This led to the rejection of null hypotheses H03, H04 and H05. Insignificant results were obtained for China in terms of foreign policy alignment, since it was associated with a significance value of .132 (greater than .05); this led to the partial rejection of null hypothesis H02.

Thus, it can be concluded that Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth didn't perceive the global powers equally across various parameters. The European Union was perceived most favorably as a target for the alignment of their respective countries' foreign policy and human rights. The United States of America was perceived as the country with the most powerful economy and the most powerful military. China was perceived most negatively in terms of the human rights situation.

Perception of China as a Neighboring Global Power

Data was collected on a 7-point scale to reveal the perception of China as a neighboring global power. Respondents were asked to rate the statements related to trade with China, Chinese investments, Belt and Road Initiative, power of the Chinese military in Central Asia, China's impact on global environment, China's effect on democracy in other countries and overall feelings towards China. Reliability of the construct was tested using Cronbach's alpha, whose value was equal to .841, which is higher than the cut-off value of .7. Hence, it can be concluded that the scale used to assess the perception of China as a neighboring global power by Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth was reliable. The results of perception of China as a neighboring global power have been presented in Table 5.

As seen from Table 5, Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth positively perceived trade with China, Chinese investment and Belt and Road Initiative: these were the statements with higher than average ratings. Trade with China was seen most positively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth. However, China's military power in regard to Central Asian countries and its impact on global environment and democracy in other countries was perceived negatively, as the respondents assigned a lower than average value to these statements. China's effect on democracy in other countries was seen most negatively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth. Overall feelings towards China were rated lower than average, i.e., 3.75, showing a negative perception of China.

Table 5

Perception of China as a Neighboring Global Power

Statement	N	Mean	t-Statistic	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Trade with China for Central Asian countries	262	4.60	6.142	.000
Chinese investments for Central Asian countries	262	4.19	1.787	.075
Belt and Road Initiative for Central Asian countries	262	4.34	3.543	.000
Chinese military power from the point of view of Central Asian countries	262	3.48	-4.503	.000
China's impact on the global environment	262	3.70	-2.504	.013
China's effect on democracy in other countries	262	3.43	-5.402	.000
Feelings towards China	262	3.75	-2.463	.014

The significance of the obtained results was tested using a one-sample t-test at a 5% level of significance. The test hypothesized the following:

H06: Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth had an indifferent perception of China as a neighboring global power.

Table 5 demonstrates that the t statistical value was found to be associated with a significance value of less than .05 for each statement except one, i.e., Chinese investments in the Central Asian countries. Since insignificant results were obtained for Chinese investments in the Central Asian countries, as this parameter was found to be associated with an insignificant value of .075, this led to a partial rejection of null hypotheses H06.

Thus, it can be concluded that Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth were not indifferent towards China as a neighboring global power. Overall, China was perceived negatively by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth. China's impact on democracy in other countries was the most negatively perceived factor. However, Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth positively perceived trade with China and its Belt and Road Initiative.

Recent Trends in Perception of China

Researchers sought to understand the trends in the perception of China in the last three years. Data was collected on a 7-point scale from Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth in regard to their feelings towards China in the last three years. The results are presented in Table 6:

Table 6

Recent Trends in Perception of China

	N	Mean	t-Statistic	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Feelings towards China in last three years	262	3.561	-4.124	.000

Table 6 demonstrates that a lower than average value, i.e., 3.56, was obtained for the statement, meaning that the perception of China has slightly worsened in recent years. The significance of the results obtained was tested using a one-sample t-test at a 5% level of significance. The test hypothesized the following:

H07: Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth's attitude towards China was indifferent in recent years.

Table 6 demonstrates that the t statistical value for the trends in perception of China is associated with a significance value of under .05. This led to the rejection of H07. Thus, it can be concluded that perception of China has slightly worsened in recent years.

Geodemographic Characteristics of Respondents and Perception of Global Powers

Data was collected from male and female respondents from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Researchers sought to find out whether there was a gender- or nationality-based difference in perception of global powers. The relationship between gender and perception of global powers was observed in the cross-table presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Gender and Perception of Global Powers

Gender	Global Power				Total	Chi-Square with Sig.
	United States of America	China	European Union	Russian Federation		
Male	30 (27%)	5 (5%)	51 (46%)	25 (22%)	111 (43%)	6.590, .086
Female	49 (32%)	13 (9%)	71 (47%)	18 (12%)	151 (57%)	

Table 7 demonstrates that male and female respondents do not differ significantly in their perception of global powers, wherein both males and females perceived the European Union (seen most positively by 46% of males and 47% of females) most positively, followed by the United States of America (seen most positively by 27% of males and 32% of females) and the Russian Federation (seen most positively by 22% of males and 12% of females). Both male and female respondents perceived China as the least positive global power, wherein only 5% of males and 9% of females considered China the most positive superpower.

The significance of the results obtained was tested with the Chi-square goodness of fit test with a 5% level of significance. The following hypothesis was set forth to be tested:

H08: Males and females did not perceive global powers differently.

Table 7 demonstrates that a Chi-square value of 6.590 was obtained with a significance value of .086, which was greater than .05. This led to the acceptance of hypothesis H08. Thus, it can be concluded that there was no difference in perception of global powers in males and females.

Similarly, the relationship between nationality and perception of global powers was observed using the cross-table presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Nationality and Perception of Global Powers

Global Power	Nationality		Chi-Square with Sig.
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	
United States of America	46 (34%)	33 (26%)	4.110, .250
China	10 (8%)	8 (6%)	
European Union	61 (45%)	61 (48%)	
Russian Federation	17 (13%)	26 (20%)	
Total	134 (49%)	128 (51%)	

Table 8 demonstrates that perception of global powers did not differ significantly based on nationality. Both Kyrgyz and Kazakh youth perceived the European Union (45% of Kazakh and 48% of Kyrgyz youth) most positively, followed by the United States of America (34% of Kazakh and 26% of Kyrgyz youth), and the Russian Federation (13% of Kazakh and 20% of Kyrgyz youth). China was positively perceived only by 6% of Kyrgyz youth and 8% of Kazakh youth.

The significance of the results obtained was tested with Chi-square goodness of fit test with a 5% level of significance. The following hypothesis was set forth to be tested:

H09: Kyrgyz & Kazakh youth did not perceive global powers differently.

Table 8 demonstrates that a Chi-Square value of 4.110 was obtained with a significance value of .250, which was greater than .05. This led to the acceptance of hypothesis H09. Thus, it can be concluded that there was no difference in the perception of global powers among Kyrgyz & Kazakh youth.

Conclusion

Central Asia, as the transit zone of the global economy and an important source of natural gas and oil, as well as other minerals, is a geo-economically important region. The proximity of Russia and China further augments the region's geopolitical importance. There are various views on how major powers' policies towards the region are shaped. One of the theoretical approaches claims that public perception shapes the formation of foreign policies of the respective states to some extent.

This article is a survey study conducted on 262 students from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The study reveals that the U.S. is perceived as the most powerful economy, whereas Russia is seen as the least powerful economy. The U.S. is perceived as the greatest military power, followed by Russia, and the EU is seen as the weakest military power. The EU is perceived as a global power with the most positive human rights situation, while Russia and China are not perceived positively as far as human rights are concerned.

The hypothesis that all global powers were perceived equally for the purpose of aligning the respective country's foreign policy is proven to be wrong in this study. Respondents revealed their feelings towards the major powers across various parameters; the perception of the EU as the most favorable in the foreign policy and human rights spheres, the U.S. as the most powerful economy and military power, and China as the least popular on human rights situation.

Respondents positively perceive the trade with China and have positive feelings towards the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese military power and its effect on global environment are perceived negatively by the respondents in the study, moreover, respondents see China's negative impact on the democracies in other countries. The study also tested the hypothesis of a perception difference between the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan youth. The results proved the hypothesis wrong, as youth in both countries perceive China negatively as a military power, but praise trade relations with China. The Road and Belt Initiative is perceived particularly favorably. Furthermore, the study examined whether gender plays a role in perception and revealed that gender does not play any role in the perception of global powers.

In order to study the subject matter more extensively and propose generalized regional assumptions, surveys should be conducted in other Central Asian states, i.e., Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.