



British public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19

Worsening perceptions amidst the pandemic

Tim Summers | Richard Q. Turcsányi | Matej Šimalčík
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Summary

- This report is a result of a wide-scale **study of public opinion on China in 13 European countries**,¹ conducted in September and October 2020, on a research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.² Here, we focus on the **British portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- Overall sentiment towards China among those surveyed in the UK was clearly negative, with 62% reporting “negative” or “very negative” perceptions. This was **one of the most negative responses of the 13 countries** surveyed (*Figure 1*).
- A larger proportion of respondents, 68%, reported that their views of China had worsened over the last three years (*Figure 2*). Among the countries surveyed, **perceptions of China worsened most significantly in the UK**.
- When comparing the views of China with those of other countries, **only Russia and North Korea were seen more negatively** than China by British respondents (*Figure 3*).
- When analyzed by voting intention, views of China were **most negative among Conservative Party supporters**, and most positive among Liberal Democrats (*Figure 19*). Supporters of leaving the European Union reported more negative views of China than those who voted to remain (*Figure 20*).
- **COVID-19** was the phrase most frequently associated with China, suggesting that in 2020, British popular perceptions of China have been heavily influenced by the pandemic. Other frequent word associations were **communism, large population, food, and technology**, suggesting a somewhat diverse set of perceptions of China exist in the UK (*Figure 4*).

- Few respondents believed China had **helped during the COVID-19** pandemic - less than 20% (*Figure 17*). Of the other countries surveyed, only Sweden recorded a lower level. Similarly, only about 10% of the British respondents thought that China's international reputation improved following COVID-19. More than 30%, however, felt that China has gained economically after the pandemic (*Figure 18*).
- Almost half of the British respondents thought that COVID-19 may have spread due to "Chinese people eating bats and wild animals", suggesting that significant **cultural stereotypes** might exist in British society (*Figure 18*). Moreover, about a third of the respondents believed in an unsubstantiated theory that "**COVID-19 was artificially created in a Chinese lab and spread intentionally**", a similar number to those believing in the scientific consensus that COVID-19 jumped from animals to humans (respondents were asked to comment to what extent they agreed with each statement)
- Respondents indicated a slightly negative overall feeling towards **trade** with China, and were more negative about Chinese **investment** in the UK (*Figure 5*). Even though the UK is a traditional trading power, the UK survey indicated one of the most negative European perceptions in this regard, second only to France.
- Feelings about China's **military power, impact on the global environment** and **influence on democracy** in other countries were significantly more negative than feelings about trade and investment with China (*Figure 5*).
- When compared with the EU, US, and Russia, China was seen as a significant **military and economic power** (*Figure 6 & Figure 7*). But perceptions of its **cultural attractiveness and human rights record** were substantially lower than those for the EU and the US (*Figure 8 & Figure 9*). The level of trust towards China was low (*Figure 11*), but views of its importance to the UK economy approached that for the EU and the US (*Figure 10*).

- Respondents felt that British foreign policy should be most closely **aligned with the EU**, followed by the US, with China and Russia some way behind (*Figure 12*).
- In building **5G infrastructure**, EU countries, the US, Japan and South Korea were favored as partners over China (even though China's technological power was ranked higher than that of the US and EU) (*Figure 13*).
- When asked about the UK's foreign policy priorities in relation to China, **cyber security, human rights, and global issues** scored slightly above **trade and investment**, dealing with Chinese geopolitical expansion, and addressing intellectual property rights (*Figure 14*).
- Overall, China was seen as **slightly more important for the UK after Brexit**, though respondents indicated limited support for a free trade agreement (the EU and US were seen as higher priorities, with India slightly ahead of China) (*Figure 15*).
- Feelings towards Hong Kong and "Hong Kongers" were more positive than towards China and Chinese. A clear majority of those with a view said they supported granting **right of abode in the UK for people from Hong Kong** (one third said they did not know) (*Figure 16*).
- The survey was carried out in the **context of an intensifying public and policy debate about China in the UK**, largely stimulated this year by responses to COVID-19. Voices more critical of China have led much of this political and media discussion, **driven not just by COVID-19** but by responses to developments in **Hong Kong and Xinjiang**, amidst debate about the role of Chinese investment in the UK.
- So far, the **British government has responded by saying that relations with China should no longer be "business as usual"**. In July it reversed its decision, taken in January, to allow Chinese company Huawei to be involved in developing the UK's 5G network, and it has taken a position of **strong opposition to the Hong Kong national security law**, introduced in June.

- Meanwhile, **growing strategic rivalry between the US and China** has created a **more complicated environment for British policy** towards China. Brexit has added to the uncertainty over the UK's long-term foreign and security policy strategy and China's position in it.
- More work is needed to evaluate the impact of public opinion on policy making. This survey's findings on the public's sources of information about China suggest that the **media and politicians play an important role in informing perceptions of China**. Further research could test the extent of correlation between public perceptions and framing of China in the British media, and look at the way that these perceptions are reported and used in the policy debate.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among British respondents⁴

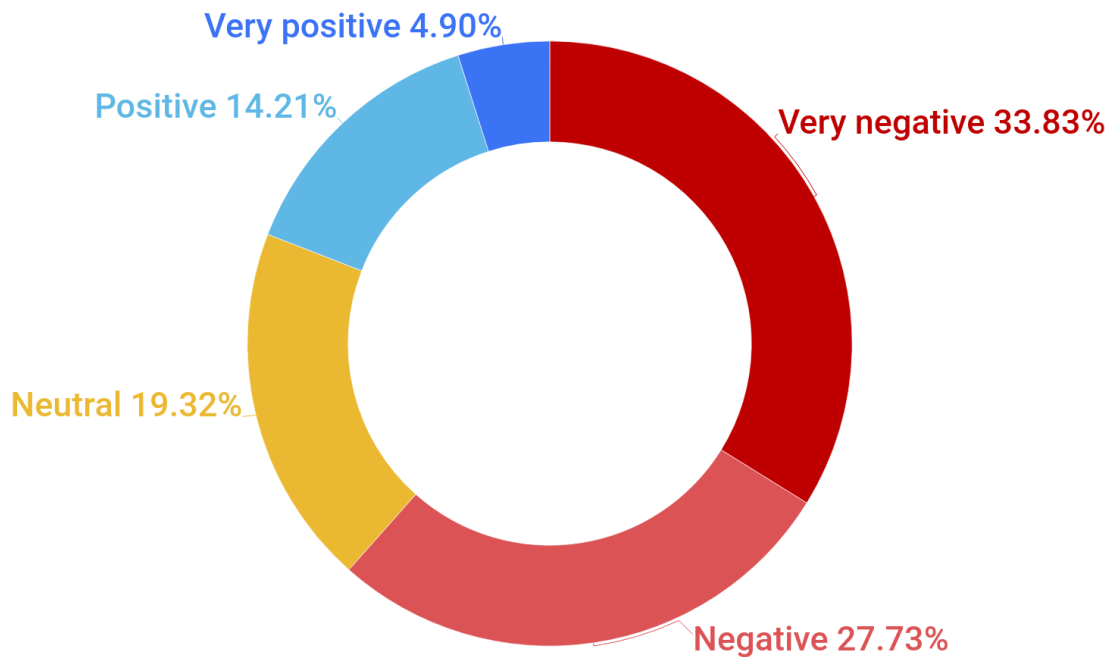


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among British respondents in the past three years⁵

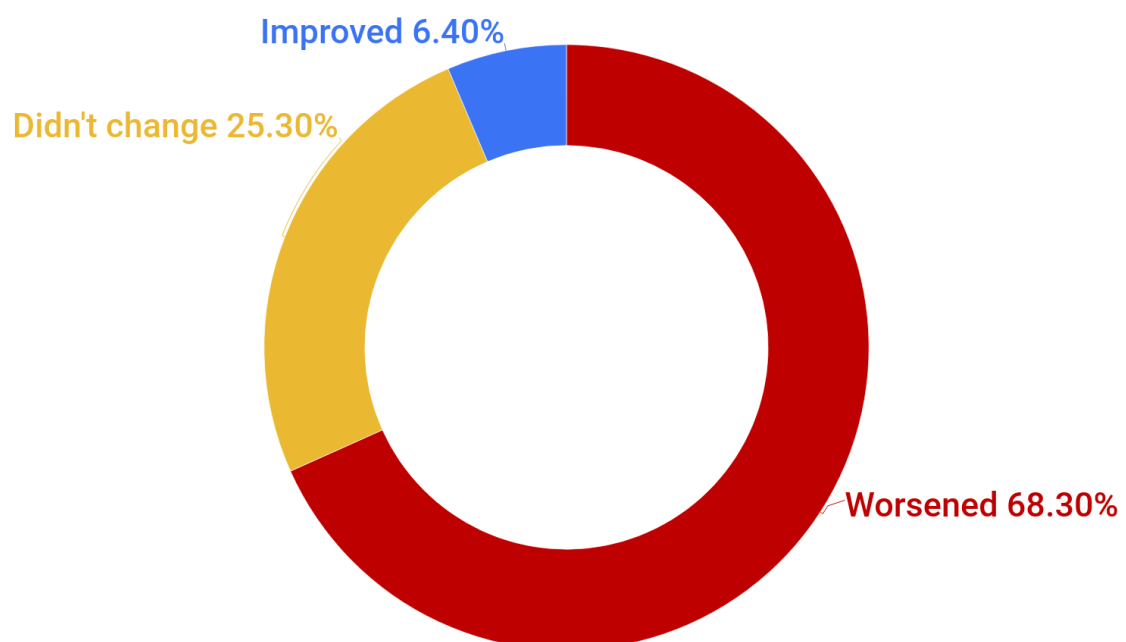


Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among British respondents⁶

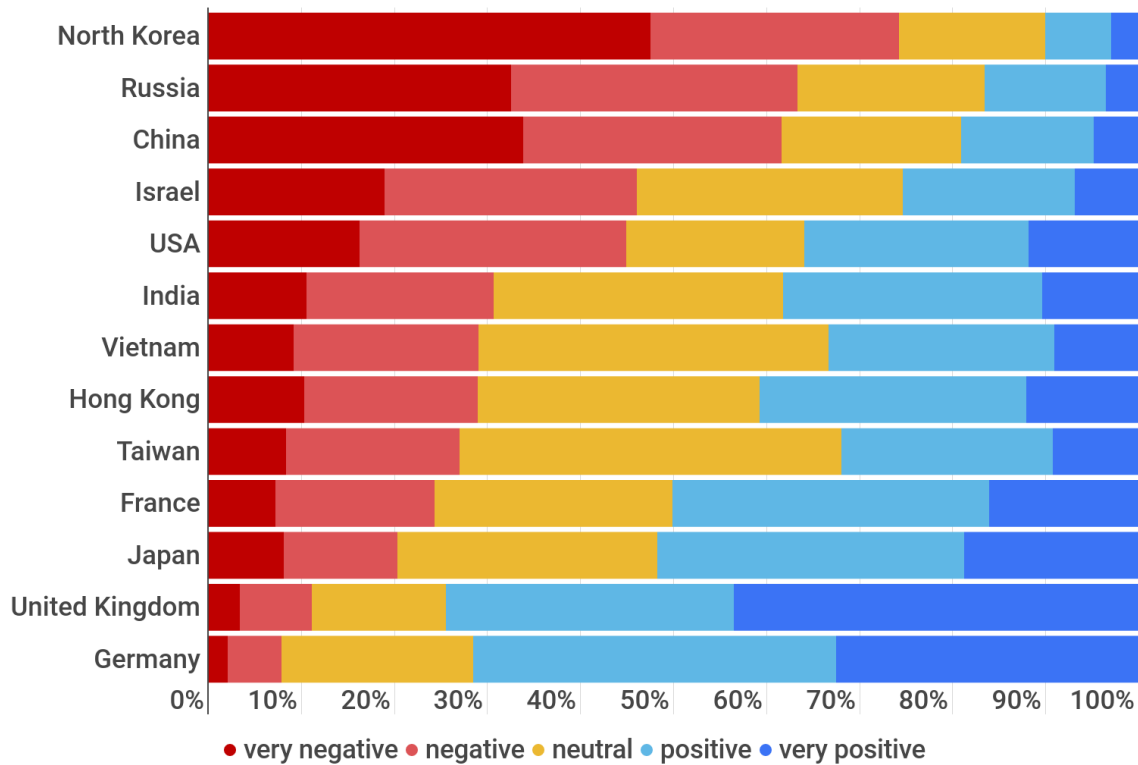
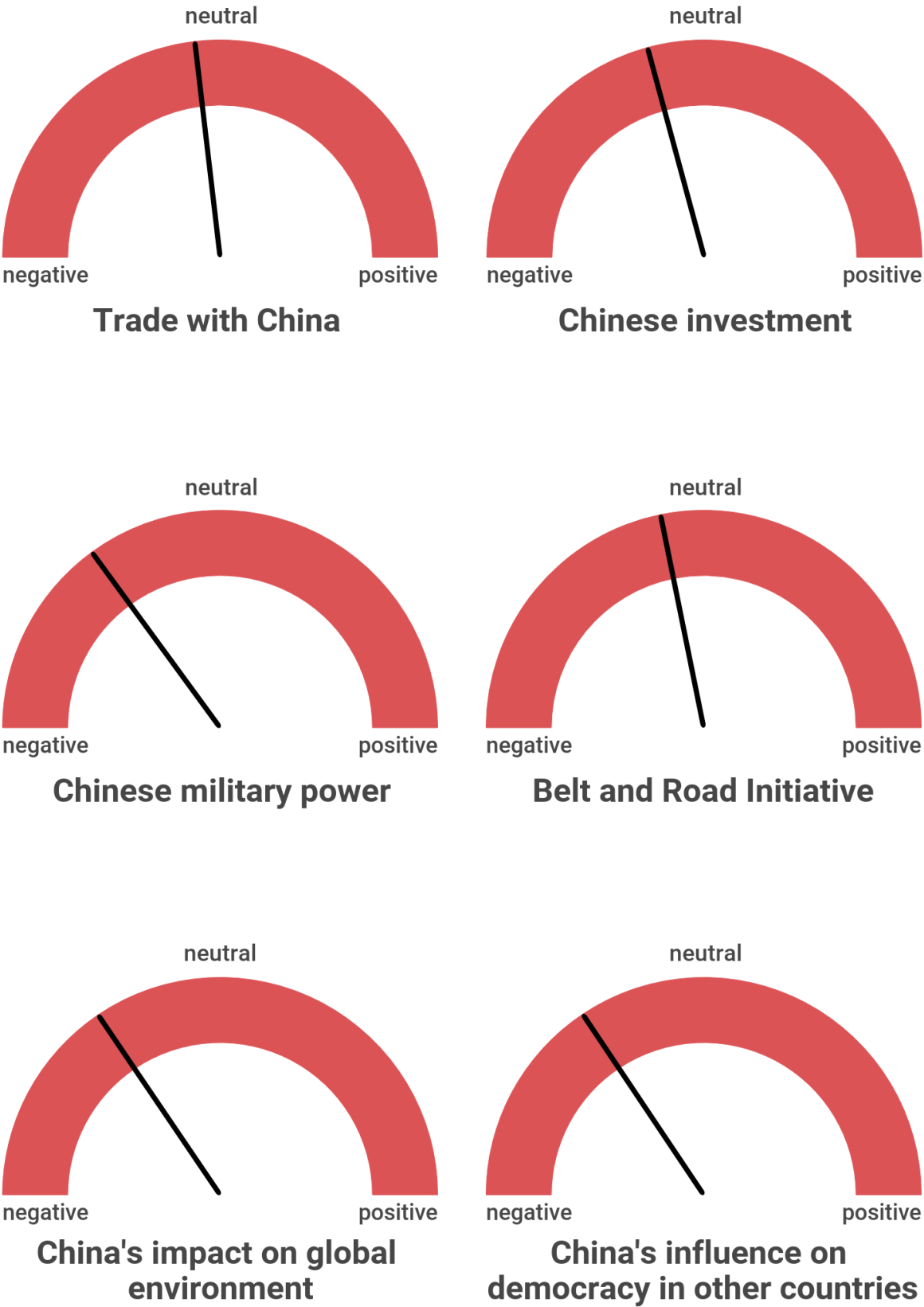


Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?⁷



Figure 5: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among British respondents⁸



2 Comparing the global powers

Figure 6: How militarily strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

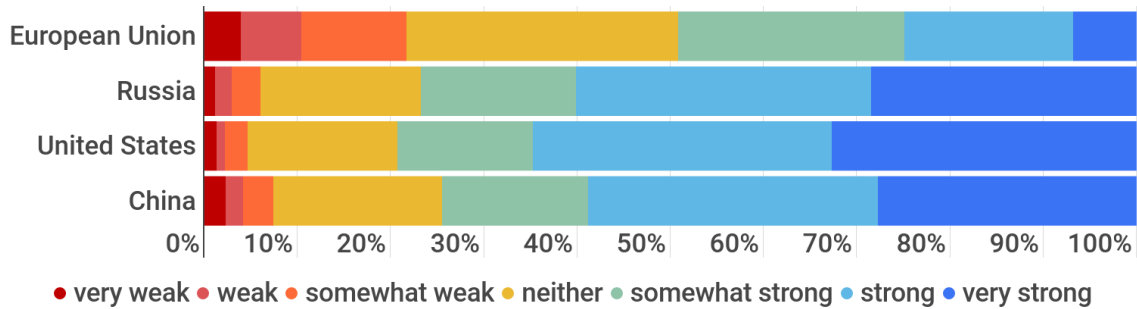


Figure 7: How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

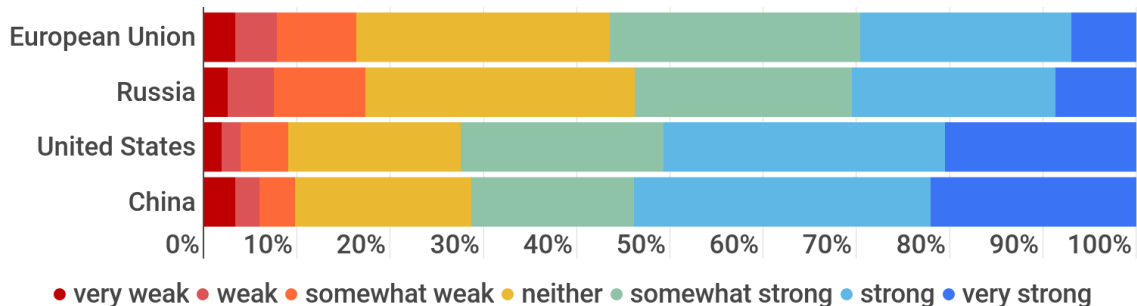


Figure 8: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?

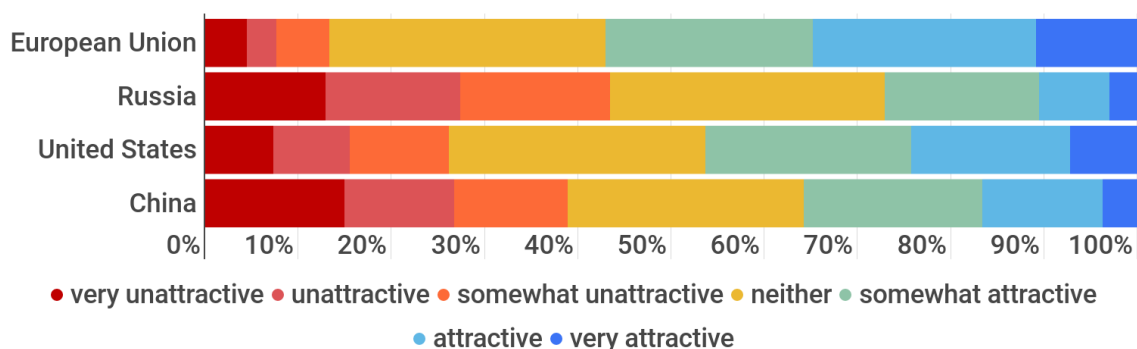


Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?

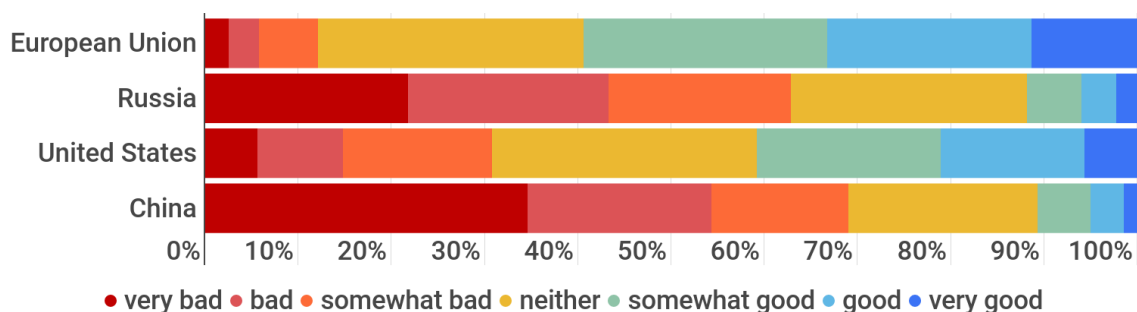


Figure 10: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of the UK?

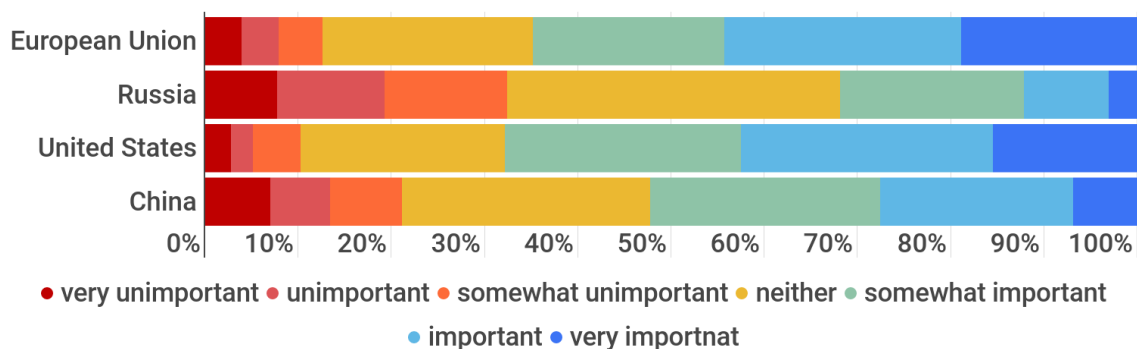
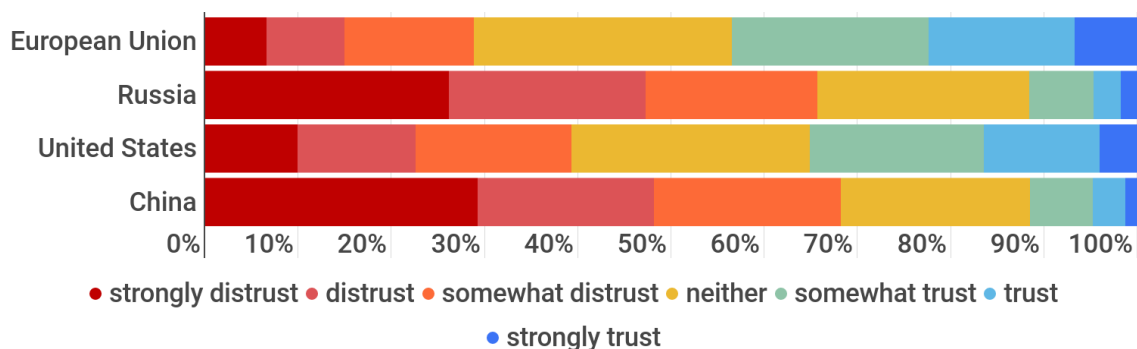


Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries/entities?



3 British foreign policy towards China

Figure 12: How closely should British foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)⁹

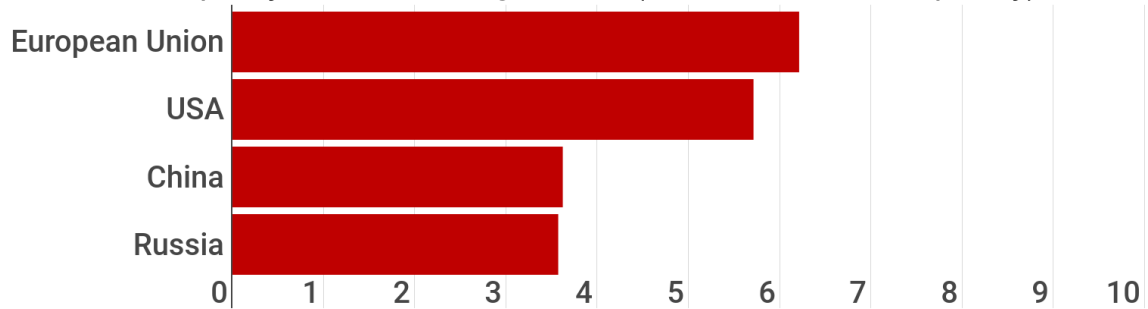


Figure 13: Should the UK cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

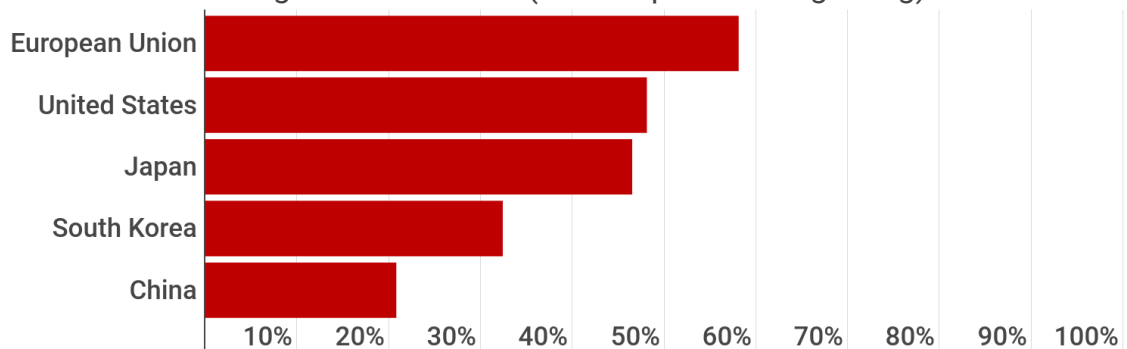


Figure 14: What should be British foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

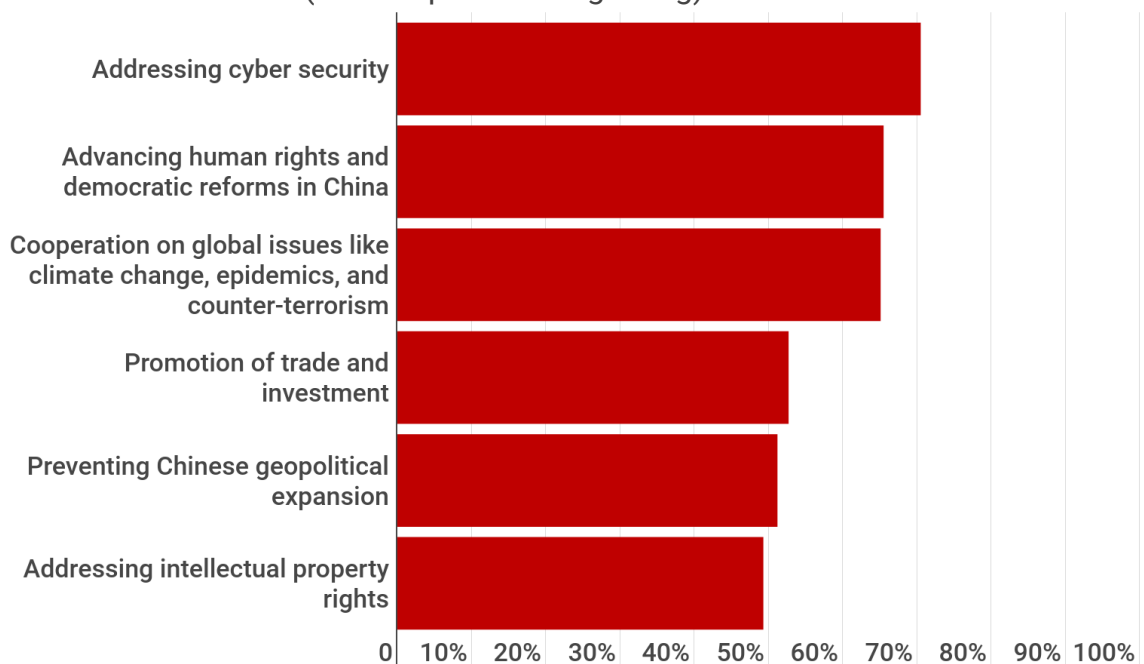


Figure 15: How important or unimportant are free trade agreements with the following countries/entities after Brexit?

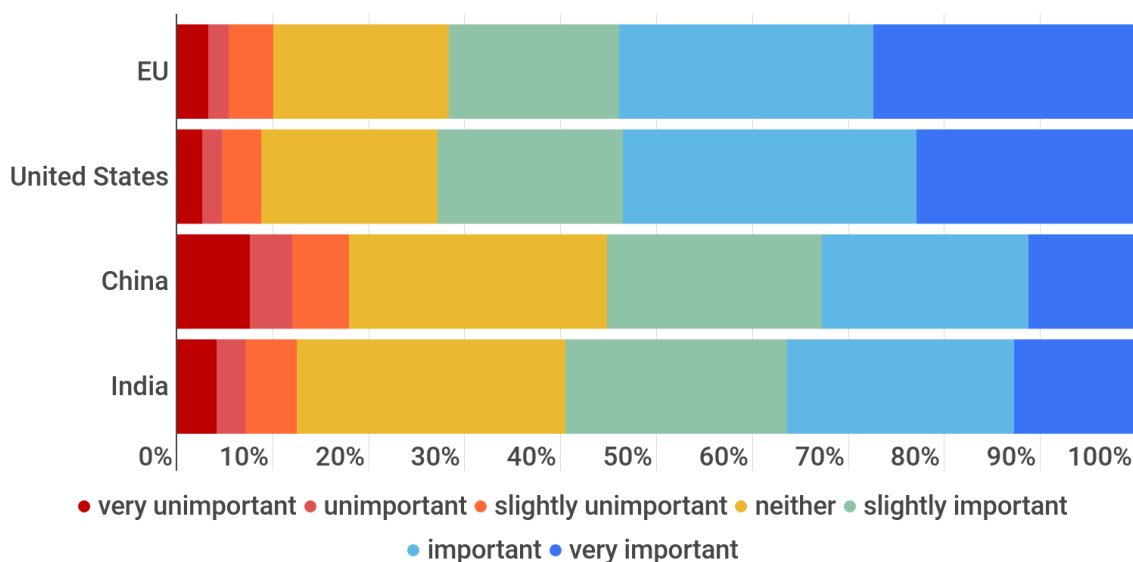
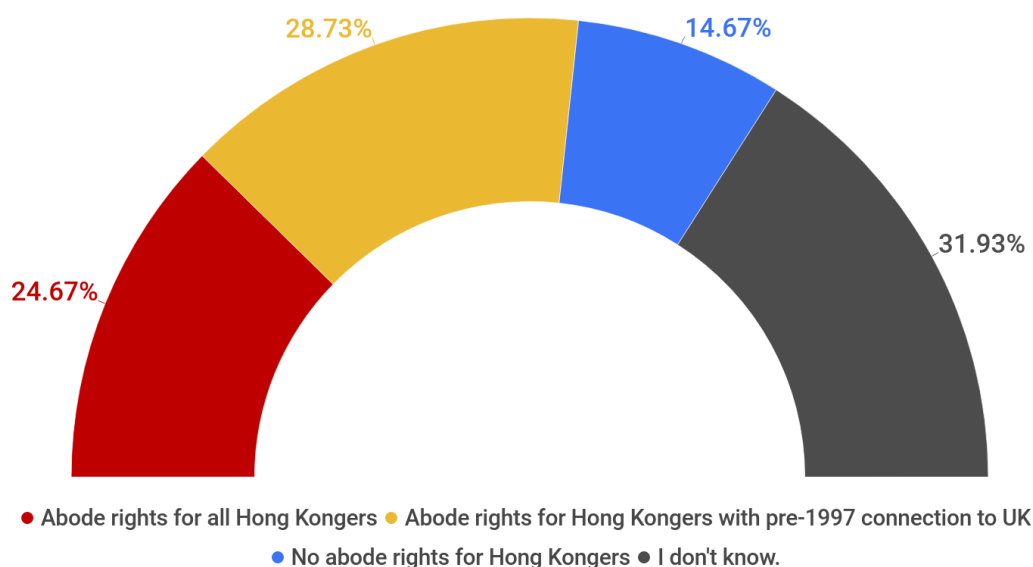


Figure 16: Do you think that the UK (as the former colonial power) should give right of abode to people from Hong Kong?



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 17: How much did the following countries/entities help the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹⁰

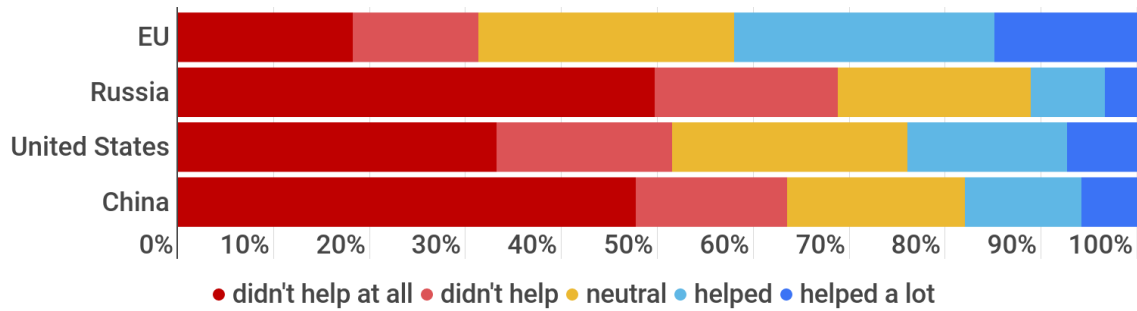
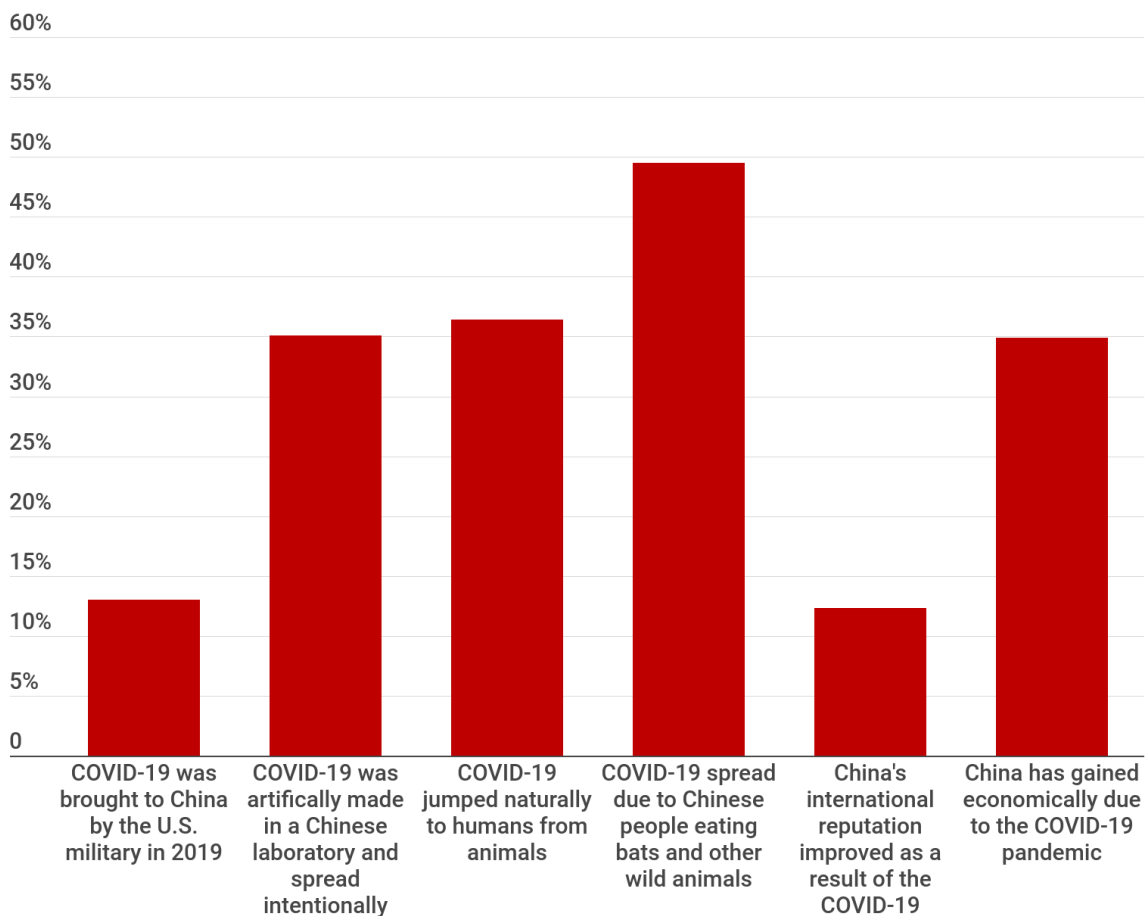


Figure 18: British views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 19: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹¹

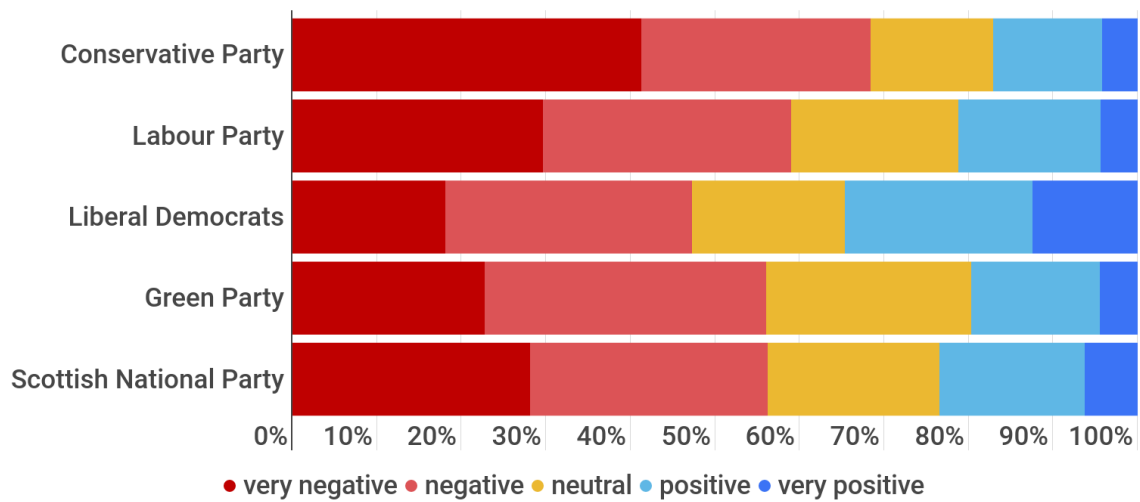
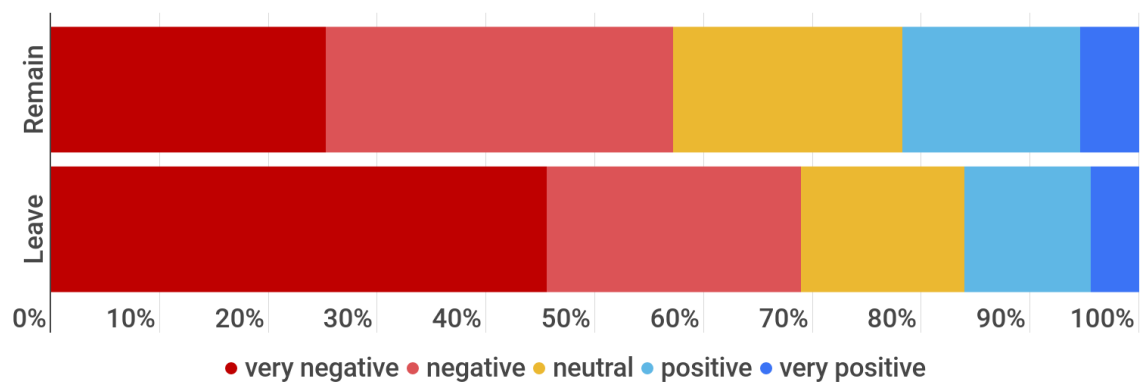


Figure 20: Feelings towards China according to the respondents' preference on Brexit¹²



Endnotes

- ¹ Turcsanyi, Richard, Renata Sedlakova, Jiri Cenek, Kristina Kironska, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Marek Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Berzina Cherenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Bjorn Jerden, Marc Julienne, Tamas Matura, Tim Ruhlig, and Tim Summers. 2020. "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey." Palacký University Olomouc. Preparation of the dataset has been supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.
- ² N = 1500; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the British population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, settlement within the country, region, settlement density, and size of settlement. Data was collected online in September and October 2020.
- ³ Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šímalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Cenek, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Matej Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Cerenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Bjørn Jerdén, Marc Julienne, Tamás Matura, Tim Ruhlig, Tim Summers (2020). *European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Differences and common ground across the continent*. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- ⁴ Feelings towards China (and other countries) have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "negative" (incl. very negative: 0-20 and negative: 21-45), "neutral" (46-54) and "positive" (incl. positive: 55-79 and very positive: 80-100).
- ⁵ Respondents were offered 7 options: much worse; worse; slightly worse; neither worse nor better; slightly better; better; much better. "Worsened" includes options much worse; worse; slightly worse. "Did not change" includes option neither worse nor better. "Improved" includes options slightly better; better; much better.
- ⁶ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis).
- ⁷ The respondents were asked an open-ended question "What first comes to mind when you hear about China?" The answers provided by 10 or more respondents are visualized.
- ⁸ Feelings towards China-related issues have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each characteristic.
- ⁹ Desired foreign policy alignment has been measured on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each country.
- ¹⁰ Perceived COVID-19 help provided by the mentioned entities has been measured on a 0 (didn't help) to 10 (helped a lot) scale. The responses were grouped as "didn't help at all" (0-2), "didn't help" (3-4), "neutral" (5), "helped" (6-7), and "helped a lot" (8-10).
- ¹¹ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Conservative Party – 380, Labour Party – 405, Liberal Democrats – 72, Green Party – 66, Scottish National Party – 64.
- ¹² Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the Brexit referendum preferences are: Leave – 628, Remain – 551.

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About CEIAS

The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank based in Bratislava (Slovakia), and with branches in Olomouc (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria).

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About Sinophone Borderlands

The Sinophone Borderlands - Interaction at the Edges is an excellent research project based at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. The project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund, project no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

The main idea of the project is to explore how the Chinese-speaking world interacts with other worlds, including those at its border (Slavophone, Tibetophone, Turco-Persophone, or Austroasiatophone worlds), as well as those who may be more distant (such as Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and others).

The Sinophone Borderlands research team consists of researchers from various disciplines under three main Research Groups - Political Science, Anthropology, and Linguistics. This allows for a cross-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons which pushes the academic studies of China and Asia beyond the limits of current disciplinary and national frameworks.

The Sinophone Borderlands is a research project that engages primarily in activities such as publishing academic journal articles, books, or participating in conferences and workshops.

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