Elite Perceptions of the United States in Europe and Asia
Executive Summary

There is a plethora of public polling on views about the United States. But these studies miss three important questions:

- What are the views of the influential elites with whom the US works?
- How are these views formed?
- How do elite views compare with public opinion?

This report addresses these questions. Over the course of several months in the summer of 2013, essays of approximately 1,000 words were gathered from elites in four sectors (public, private, academia/think-tanks, and the media) in 13 countries in Europe and Asia (France, Germany, Greece, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Pakistan). Contributors were asked to answer the first two questions, in their own words and according to their personal experiences. The responses (53 essays) offer interesting conclusions from which a number of policy recommendations for American policy-makers can be drawn. Many of these could also be considered by other countries as they explore how they are viewed internationally.

Major findings and policy prescriptions

- Across the board, elites view US business, and in particular entrepreneurs and innovators, in a more positive light than they do the American government. Given this, it would be advantageous to the United States for its government, wherever possible, to support the ability of these non-state actors to advance US values and expand people-to-people links. To a lesser degree other non-state actors, including the media and academia, are also well respected.

- Particularly for European elites, the most powerful levers affecting views of the United States are visits to the country and interactions with Americans. This may also be true for Asian elites, but with fewer respondents the result is less robust. This has significant implications for US visa policy, particularly towards those countries with which Washington has sensitive relations.

- While foreign policy has long been considered an extension of domestic policy, for Europeans it appears that the opposite is equally true: domestic policy is also foreign policy. When seen from abroad, domestic decisions on issues such as gun control, gay rights, abortion, poverty and inequality create dissonance with American calls for freedom, openness and cessation of violence. It can lead to charges of US hypocrisy.

- Europeans attend to the totality of US actions across the globe, while Asians tend to prioritize America’s Asia policy. This highlights the complexity of US policy-making towards Europeans, but also provides the United States more entry points for influencing European views. The more narrow perspective of Asian elites heightens the impact and resonance of any specific US policy towards the region, making nuances much harder to manage.

- The figure that resonates most powerfully in Asia (and to a lesser degree, Europe) is the US president (the secretaries of state and defense were also noted but to a significantly lesser degree). Therefore, if US policy announcements are to register and have the greatest impact in these regions, they must come from the president. The only national elites that recognized the role of Congress were those associated with strong lobbying groups in the United States, such as Greece, Turkey, India and Pakistan.

- America’s tripartite system of government is badly understood. Thus, when policies are announced but not implemented (e.g. shutting down Guantánamo) foreigners tend to think of the US political system as broken or dysfunctional, to accuse the president and his administration of backtracking or lying, or to think the United States weak. Explaining the US system with more clarity (without excusing its shortcomings) could mitigate many of these misunderstandings.

- Asians value America’s hard power; Europeans focus on America’s soft power. Values are all-important in Europe and, unfortunately, in the eyes of most of its elites, the United States has appeared increasingly willing to forgo the values it has long promoted. Foreign observers no longer give the US government the benefit of the doubt, believing that America is at least trying to do ‘the right thing’. Unless the United States is able to reverse this slide, it might find that when it wants to lead, Europeans will be reluctant to follow. In contrast, Asians value America’s military strength more and are much more wary of American values (or, as they put it, ideology).

- There exists great uncertainty among elites regarding America’s future European and Asian policies. This is leading to a perception of America as unpredictable or, in the case of its allies, potentially unreliable. While defining such a strategy or doctrine faces real challenges and could be seen to restrict US action, providing some guidelines or broad vision for America’s global role might do much to mitigate some of the uncertainty and provide more security and reassurance to its partners. America’s allies will watch to ensure the rhetoric is followed through in action, both internationally and domestically.
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About the US Programme

The US Programme at Chatham House (London, UK), provides analysis on the changing role of the US in the world. Building on the independent, international reputation of Chatham House, the programme provides a unique external perspective on the US. The programme aims to:

- develop a contextual understanding of the transformations taking place within the US and internationally, to analyse how they affect US foreign policy;
- offer predictions on America’s likely future international direction;
- influence responses from allies and others towards the US;
- highlight to American policy-makers the intended, and unintended, impact of their policies overseas.

The programme comprises both in-house staff and an international network of Associate Fellows who together provide in-depth expertise in both geographical and thematic areas.
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