

Western perceptions of China through the eyes of media

Another front in the "war of ideas"

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Western media and political presentations of Chinese policies, governance and activities in recent decades appear to have provided partial, distorted or erroneous pictures that have and will probably continue to prevail and have a negative impact on relations with the country. While there exist considerable areas of concern about China, it is the aim of this paper to present cases of strong misrepresentation and to suggest the need for a more balanced treatment. This is especially needed because of the influence and reach of Western media to avert growing confrontation in view of China's own contrived perceptions as presented in its media.

This presentation will examine a few examples of Western descriptions of the Chinese political and economic systems, foreign and security policies that provide a one-sided negative portrayal of a more complex reality. The examples selected will cover the presentation of the Chinese political system as rigidly authoritarian which has not reformed since the opening of the economy against the example of evolving experiments at elections and the intense politics in the Peoples Congress, the perception of a non-market economy with massive state intervention contrasted to the extensive private sector that surpasses some other economies regarded as more open. In the field of foreign and security policy, in addition to a comparison of Chinese defence spending increases with other comparable BRIC countries, this report will also contrast the perception of an aggressive Chinese foreign policy with examples of prudence and restraint in dealing with attacks on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in the 1990s, dealings with Taiwan during the Presidency of Chen Shui Bien, the deployment of a US and allied ballistic missile defence in Asia, the international debate and decision over the US-India nuclear cooperation agreement and ongoing territorial negotiations with neighbouring Japan, India and ASEAN.

In closing, the presentation will look briefly at other examples, including this year's turmoil in Tibet, human rights practices there and in other countries such as India, its relations with Burma and Sudan, the impact on Western and global perceptions of China as reflected in public opinion polls and the possible medium and longer-term impact on relations.