



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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## Dutch Views of China

### Unfavourable and Deteriorating



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The emergence of China as a global power is the most important driver of geopolitical change in the international system. Never before has a non-European, non-Western country achieved the degree of global influence that China currently wields. The United States, concerned that it is losing

its status as global leader, is responding with increasing determination and intensity. Since 2009 presidents Obama and Trump have stepped up American attempts to push back against China. The new Biden administration appears intent on continuing this line. Recently, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that strategic cooperation with Japan, India and Australia would be the basis for US policy in the Indo-Pacific region. This grouping, the so-called Quad, is often regarded as an anti-China coalition. Europe is increasingly experiencing the effects of US-China rivalry. Last December, a group

\* The authors are grateful to Mark Elchardus for his contribution to the development of the questionnaire and the analysis of the results. They also thank Tom Etienne and André Krouwel of research institute Kieskompas for the data collection.

of independent experts appointed by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg identified China, alongside Russia, as a major threat to the alliance and recommended that NATO adjusts its strategic focus accordingly.

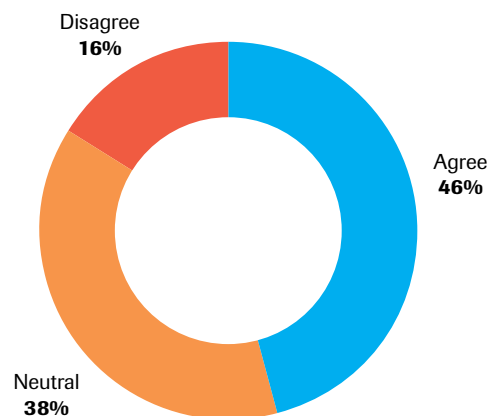
A recent Clingendael study found that the Dutch public regard the rise of China as a threat to European security, ranking it the second-biggest threat after pressure from immigrants on the EU's external borders.<sup>1</sup> 'Russian assertiveness' and 'declining US influence' were ranked much lower. Moreover, a previous opinion poll indicated that, in a 'new Cold War', the Dutch public would prefer the EU to side with the US rather than with China.<sup>2</sup> However, the same study also showed that respondents would much prefer the EU to stay neutral than to choose sides in this conflict. Only 16 per cent were in favour of taking sides, while 60 per cent were against doing so.<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands has reached a point where it is confronted with a number of foreign policy options with potentially far-reaching consequences. The options include alignment with the US against China, staying out of Sino-American great power politics or taking an active approach to bolstering the EU as a geopolitical actor in its own right.<sup>4</sup> In this context it is worth noting that 72 per cent of Dutch respondents support more cooperation with Germany and France, the EU's most influential member states.

To further improve our understanding of what the Dutch public think of China and how the Netherlands should position itself vis-a-vis the country, this Barometer Alert focuses specifically on China. Relevant insights are drawn from the overall perception of the

rise of China, changes in that perception of China over time and differentiation in views according to political preference.

This Barometer Alert is based on a survey conducted in September 2020 with input from nearly 15,000 respondents, as well as a previous survey in February 2020 with 23,000 respondents.<sup>5</sup>

### China is a threat to the security of Europe (September 2020)



### Understanding the negative perception of China

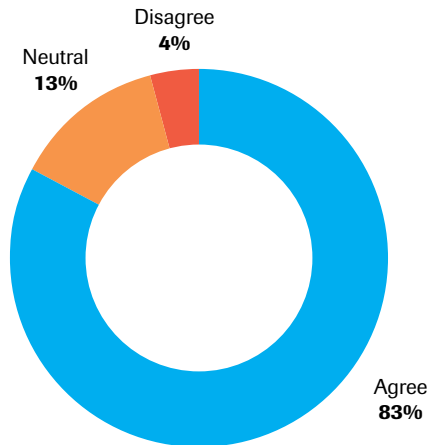
The Dutch public tend to regard China as a threat. Among all respondents, 46 per cent see China as a threat to European security. Only 16 per cent indicate that China is not a threat. Respondents have a sceptical, if not outright negative, view of China. Indeed, an overwhelming 83 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'the Chinese regime is reprehensible because it violates the human rights and privacy rights of its population on a large scale'. Moreover, when asked whether they think 'the Chinese regime's performance has not been so bad',<sup>6</sup> since it lifted over a billion people out of poverty', only 11 per cent of respondents

1 C. Houtkamp, B. Deen & M. Sie Dhian Ho (2021) [Nederlanders bezorgd over het buitenland in de aanloop naar de verkiezingen: polarisatie over migratie en klimaat, consensus over China](#)  
2 R. Korteweg, C. Houtkamp & M. Sie Dhian Ho (2020) [Dutch views on Transatlantic ties and European security cooperation in times of geopolitical rivalry](#)  
3 Based on a survey conducted in February 2020.  
4 M. Sie Dhian Ho, L. van Middelaar & F.P. van der Putten (2021) [Nederland en de wending naar Europese geopolitiek: speler of speelbal?](#)

5 Unless stated otherwise, the survey data presented in this report were collected in September 2020.  
6 'Het Chinese regime is zo gek nog niet' in the original Dutch questionnaire.

agreed. A much larger group of 60 per cent disagreed.

**The Chinese regime is reprehensible because it violates the human rights and privacy rights of its population on a large scale (September 2020)**



Respondents who view China negatively do not regard the United States as a threat, and would prefer to side with the US in a potential 'new Cold War' (see regression table 1). Moreover, those who think China is a threat also feel threatened by Russia. Furthermore, as may be expected, people who are sceptical about China are also sceptical about the use of Chinese technology.<sup>7</sup> The same group also tends to strongly value the right to privacy. Among different age groups, younger people often find China more threatening than older people do. Women also regard China as a threat more often than men. Interestingly, there is no indication of any relationship between having a negative perception of China and believing that the Netherlands should spend more money on defence. This could suggest that the threat posed by China is not widely perceived as one that can be countered by military means. Respondents with negative views of China also tend to experience a sense of national and international decline, perhaps reflecting

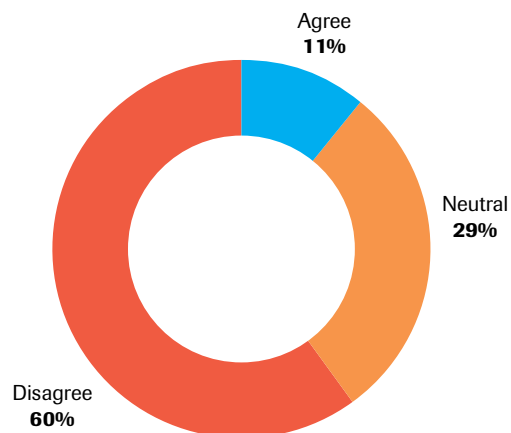
7 B. Dekker, C. Houtkamp, M. Okano-Heijmans, & M. Sie Dian Ho (2020) [Dutch attitudes towards Chinese technology](#)

the sense that as China rises, the influence of the West must inevitably decline.

**Not an economic opportunity**

If the rise of China is seen as a security threat, what does that mean for views of China as an economic opportunity? In theory, the perception of China as a security threat does not necessarily imply the rejection of economic cooperation. China could represent a security threat as well as an economic opportunity. Indeed, this duality is a major feature of Dutch China policy. In its 2019 policy paper on China, the government attempted to strike a balance between Dutch security and economic interests.<sup>8</sup> The policy paper thus put forward the credo 'open where possible, protective where necessary' as a general guideline for dealing with China.

**The Chinese regime's performance is actually not so bad, since it is lifting over a billion people out of poverty (September 2020)**

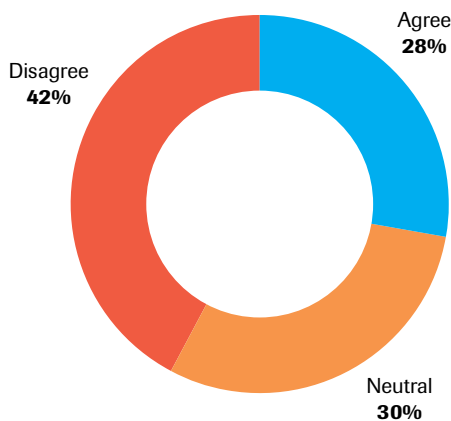


The government's increasingly cautious but still largely permissive stance on continued economic cooperation with China is not surprising given China's rapid trajectory towards becoming the world's largest economy. The country is already the largest trading nation in goods and in 2020 it

8 Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ['The Netherlands and China: A new balance'](#), October 2019, p. 31.

became the largest recipient of foreign direct investment. Also, while Germany is the Netherlands' largest trade partner, China is Germany's. A significant part of Sino-German trade flows through the Netherlands, in particular through the port of Rotterdam.

**China is growing fast economically and wants to invest in the Netherlands. This presents major economic opportunities for the Netherlands (September 2020)**



However, a large part of the Dutch population does not think that China, as a fast-growing economy and as an investor, presents major economic opportunities for the Netherlands. Only 28 per cent of respondents believe that is indeed the case. A majority, 42 per cent of respondents, disagree that China presents such opportunities. This outcome is remarkable, particularly since a recent opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates that a majority of 52 per cent of Dutch respondents view China as the world's leading economic power.<sup>9</sup> Only 29 per cent think the United States is the leading economic power. The implication appears to be that while many Dutch are aware of (and perhaps even overestimate)<sup>10</sup> the economic might of China, they do not think the Netherlands is

in a position to benefit economically from China's rise. This could mean respondents think that economic relations with China are not mutually beneficial and that China's economic rise is a one-way street.

With regard to Chinese medical supplies, such as medicines and facemasks, a majority of respondents would consider it problematic if the Netherlands were dependent on China. The number of people who find such dependence on China problematic is higher than those who think the Netherlands should not be dependent on countries such as the US or Germany for medical supplies (see table 1 in the Annex). Interestingly, however, the number of people who disapprove of dependence on India is nearly as high as those who do not wish to be dependent on China. It is unclear to what extent respondents regard medical supplies as a distinct category of great strategic importance and to what extent they disapprove of economic dependence on China in general.

**China's deteriorating image**

In the course of the spring and summer of 2020, Dutch public opinion on China grew more negative. Between the first survey in February and the second in September, the number of people seeing China as a security threat increased (35% in February vs 46% in September). The same was true of those agreeing with the statement that China has a reprehensible regime (72% in February vs 83% in September). The number of people having a positive view of China's achievements in domestic poverty alleviation (16% in February vs 11% in September) and the number of those thinking that China offers important economic opportunities decreased (30% in February vs 28% in September, see annex).

On the basis of available data it is unknown whether and to what degree the coronavirus crisis contributed to this deterioration of China's image. The February survey predated the first wave of the coronavirus outbreak in the Netherlands, while the second was conducted between the first and the second waves. During that period the Dutch media

9 L. Silver, K. Devlin & C. Huang (2020) [Unfavorable views of China reach historic highs in many countries : Majorities say China has handled Covid-19 outbreak poorly](#).

10 The US economy is the world's largest by nominal GDP (gross domestic product), while China's is the second-largest.

focused on a number of issues potentially harmful to China's image. These included: the severe lockdown measures imposed by the Chinese government in Wuhan (February); foreign dependence on Chinese medical supplies and the Dutch government's recall of a batch of 600,000 FFP2 facemasks that were purchased in China (March);<sup>11</sup> some Chinese media and experts calling for a ban on exports of medical supplies to the Netherlands in retaliation for the name change of the Dutch representative office in Taiwan (April);<sup>12</sup> and the Chinese government's apparent attempts to avert or delay an international inquiry into the origins of the pandemic (May). However, in the same time period China-related reporting also covered other issues, including the debate over possible security risks from Chinese telecommunication equipment, the imposition by China of a new security law in Hong Kong, mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the geopolitical tensions between the United States and China. The latter topic included allegations by then president Trump that China was to blame for the coronavirus pandemic.

Whatever the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on China's image in the Netherlands, it is important to note that a negative image predates the pandemic. The February 2020 survey results were already quite negative. Already then, the number of people agreeing that China was a security threat (35 per cent) was larger than the number who disagreed (23 per cent). Also, more people disagreed (37 per cent) than agreed (30 per cent) that China offered economic opportunities. The aforementioned survey by the Pew Research Center shows that the Dutch public's view of China was relatively constant throughout 2016-2018, after which it quickly grew more negative. This suggests that, while the pandemic may have accelerated the deterioration of China's image, the trigger might have been a series of events that took place in 2018-2019, such as the US-China trade conflict, the rapid rise of

Chinese direct investment in the Netherlands (that peaked in 2017)<sup>13</sup> and the discussion in the media on the threats to security and privacy of incorporating Chinese equipment in the Dutch 5G network and on the introduction of an EU-wide framework for investment screening. The fact that the Dutch government was asked by Parliament to prepare a China strategy seems to have generated much public attention for China-related topics in late 2018 and the first half of 2019. One of the main messages of the subsequent policy paper was that the Dutch should not be naïve in their relationships with China.

In early 2020, a majority of the Clingendael Barometer respondents disagreed with the suggestion that the Netherlands or Europe should cooperate more with China because president Trump focused primarily on the US's own interests. When the same question was asked in the September survey, the number of people who disapproved of closer cooperation with China in reaction to Trump's America First policies was even somewhat higher.

### Little variation across electoral preferences

On the whole, there is not much variation between the perceptions of China among different electoral groups. Respondents across the political spectrum tend to have negative views of China. Voters for Geert Wilders' PVV, Thierry Baudet's FvD, the christian-right SGP and elderly party 50Plus are the most China-sceptic groups.

In early 2020 voters for PVV (32%) or FvD (39%), along with Socialist Party (SP) voters (24%), were among the least concerned about China. Only seven months later the former two groups are among those who appear most worried about China as a security threat (both 56%). SP voters, too, have become more concerned (43%), but less so than the other two groups.

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11 The government deemed the quality of the masks insufficient.

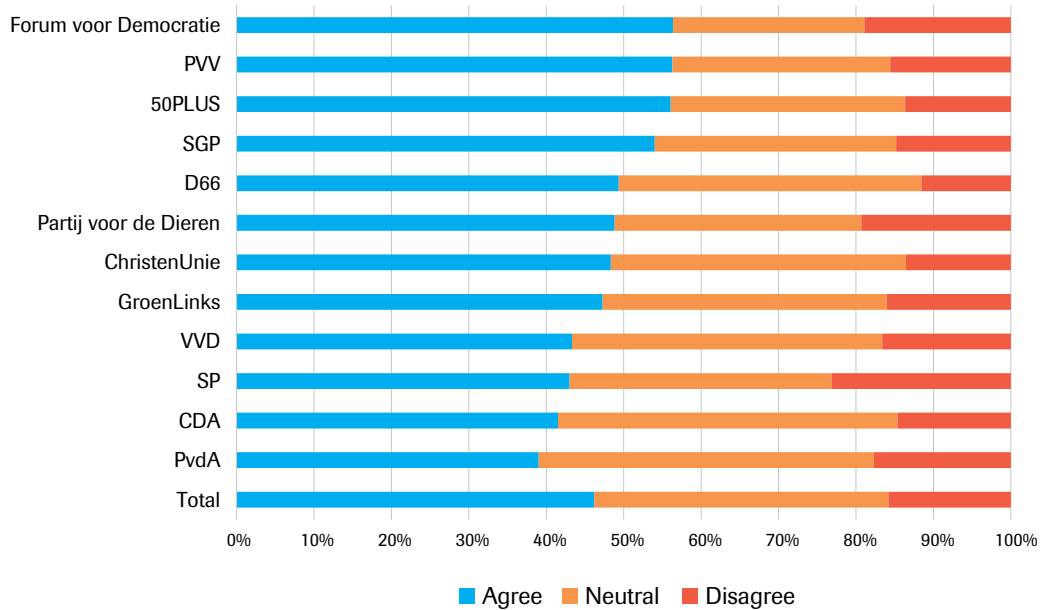
12 From Netherlands Trade and Investment Office Taipei to Netherlands Office Taipei.

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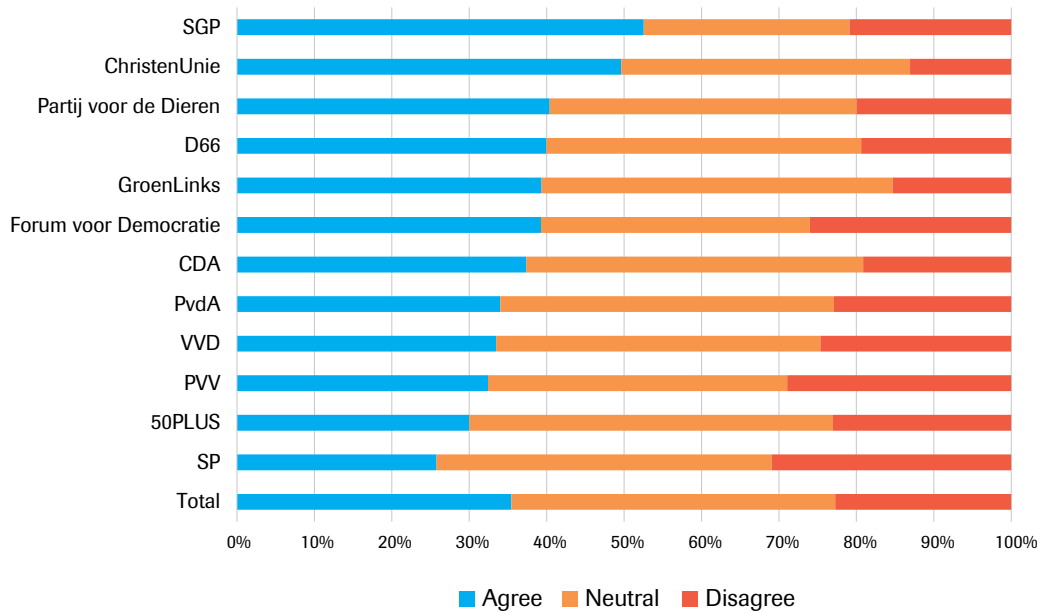
13 F.P. van der Putten, B. Dekker & X. Martin (2020), [China and Geopolitical Considerations for Investment Screening in the Netherlands](#).

## China is a threat to the security of Europe

September 2020



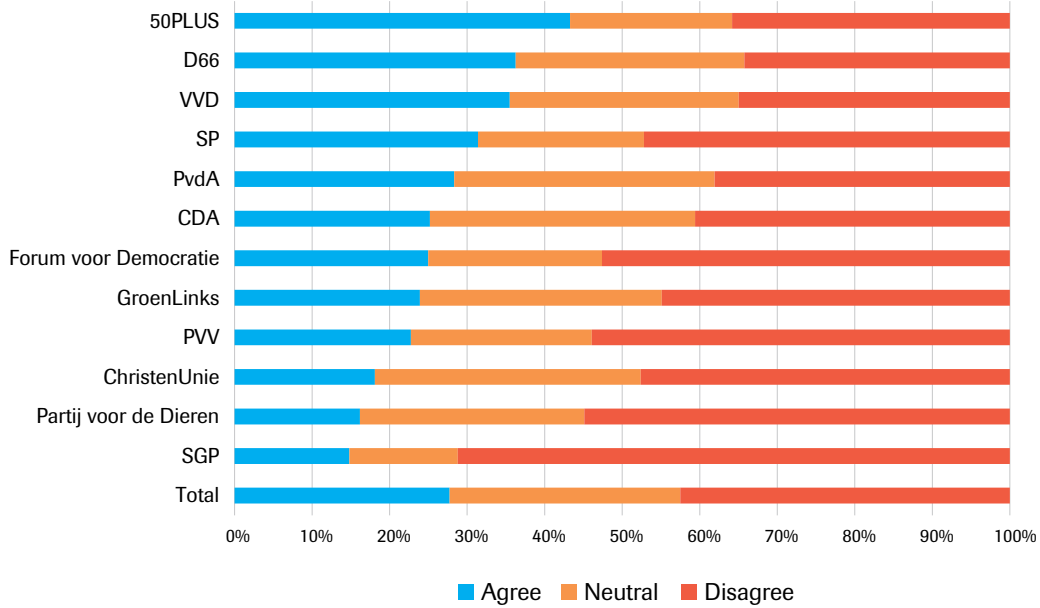
February 2020



When it comes to assessing China as an economic partner, social-liberal D66, conservative-liberal VVD and 50Plus voters are most likely to believe that China's fast growth rate and investment potential may bring substantial opportunities for the Netherlands. This does not mean these groups are in favour of close economic engagement with China. The number

of D66, VVD and 50Plus voters who disagree that China poses major economic opportunities is roughly the same as the number who agree. Still, it is the voters for these two parties who tend to have a balanced view of China (both a threat and an opportunity), and their position thus corresponds most closely to that of the Dutch government.

**China is growing fast economically and wants to invest in the Netherlands. This presents major economic opportunities for the Netherlands (September 2020)**



**Conclusion**

The Dutch public favour geopolitical neutrality rather than siding with the US against China, but this is not grounded in a favourable image of China. Many respondents even regard the rise of China as a threat to European security. Indeed, even the often presumed attractiveness of China as an economic partner does not appear to be a major factor in the Dutch perception of China. It is unclear to what extent this desire to stay neutral may be set to change with a new US president in the White House.

China-scepticism is strong and has increased among all political constituencies. In the course of the spring and summer of

2020, FvD and PVV voters switched from being among the least concerned to a position where they were among the groups most concerned about China.

There are two important implications. First, assuming that China is indeed of major importance for the Dutch economy, the government should increase the Dutch public’s awareness accordingly. Second, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of why China’s public image in the Netherlands started to deteriorate so sharply already before 2020. As this understanding is currently lacking, further investigation is needed. This is important in order for policymakers to assess whether perceptions of China will continue to become more negative, and what factors lie behind this.

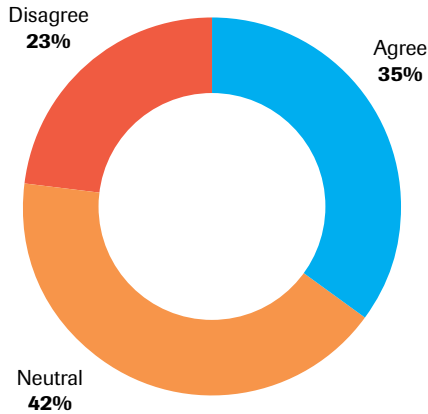
Annex

**Table 1: To what extent would you consider it problematic if the Netherlands were dependent on the following countries for medical supplies? (September 2020)**

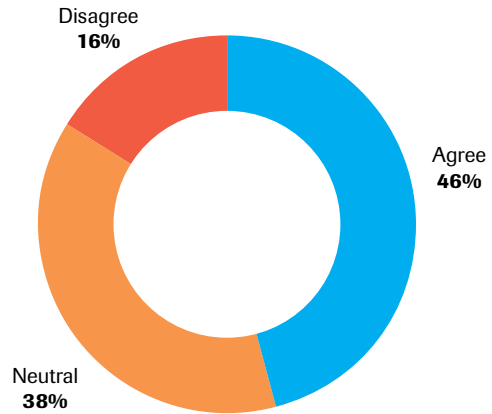
	Not problematic	Neutral	Problematic
China	13.5%	12.0%	74.5%
India	17.5%	19.2%	63.2%
USA	22.4%	22.5%	55.1%
Germany	74.1%	16.4%	9.5%

**China is a threat to the security of Europe**

February 2020

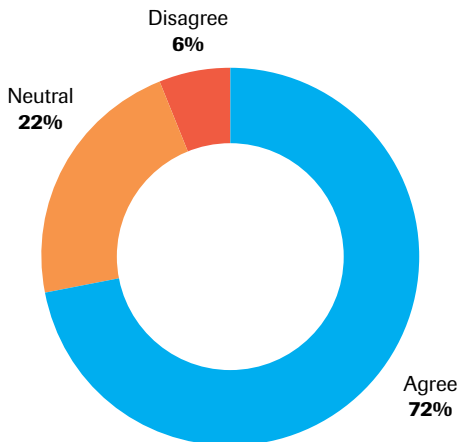


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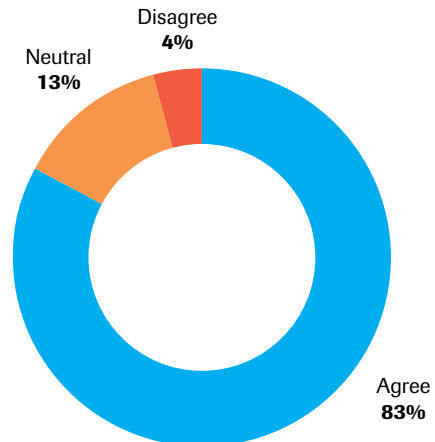


**The Chinese regime is reprehensible because it violates the human rights and privacy rights of its population on a large scale**

February 2020



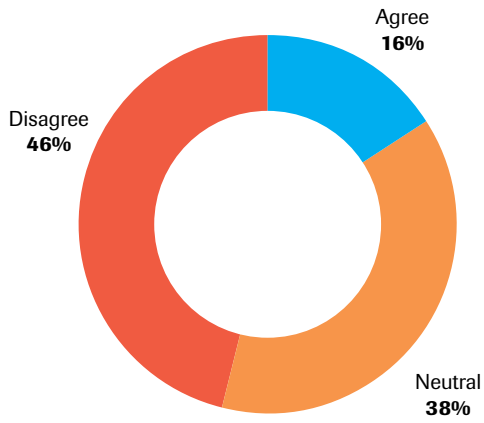
September 2020



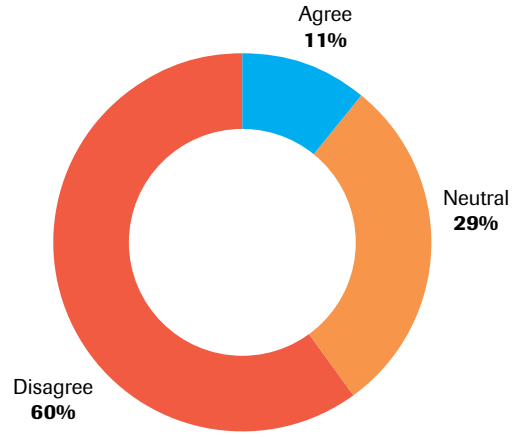


**The Chinese regime's performance is actually not so bad, since it is lifting over a billion people out of poverty**

February 2020

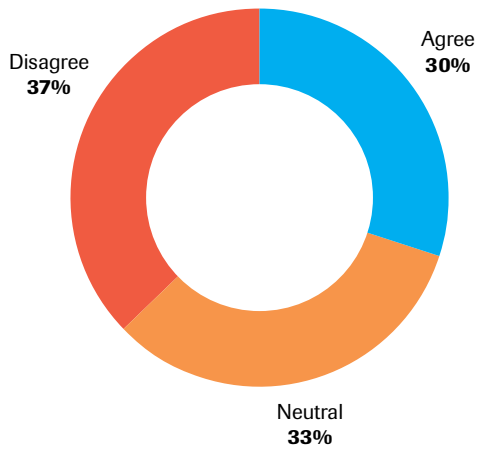


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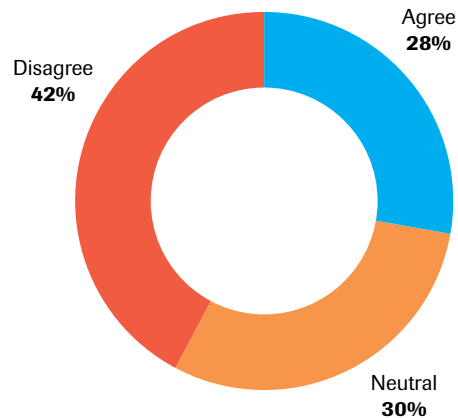


**China is growing fast economically and wants to invest in the Netherlands. This presents major economic opportunities for the Netherlands**

February 2020



September 2020



**Regression table 1: explanations for a negative view regarding China**

Variable	$\beta$	SE	Sig.
Constant	-4.892	.756	0
New Cold War, Europe sides with USA	.143	.052	0
Threat from USA	-.128	.049	0
Threat from Russia	.155	.048	0
Negative attitude towards Chinese technology	.357	.020	0
Negative attitude on privacy violation	.116	.019	0
Negative attitude towards privacy infringement by China/Russia/USA	.117	.025	0
More money for the defence budget	-.037	.044	0
Declinism	.137	.004	0
Negative attitude towards migration	-.005	.004	.696
PVV/FvD/CU/PvDD/SGP	.028	.115	.009
Populism	.024	.011	.063
Socioeconomically left	-.023	.014	.026
Age (young)	-.155	.003	0
Education (high)	-.053	.031	0
Gender (female)	.104	.089	0

Dependent variable: a negative view regarding China (range 7-35)






**Explained variance**

Model	Adjusted R2
1 New Cold War	.102
2 Threat from global powers	.154
3 Chinese technology	.306
4 Privacy	.341
5 More money for the defence budget	.342
6 Cultural attitudes	.356
7 Political preference	.358
8 Political attitude	.360
9 Background variables	.395

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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