The angry public response in China to the collision on 1 April of a US surveillance aircraft and Chinese fighter highlighted the growing importance of public opinion as a factor influencing China’s policy-making process. While this influence has been evident for many years in the treatment of domestic issues such as economic reform and corruption, the role of popular attitudes in shaping foreign policy has only become apparent since the late 1990s. The trend in part reflects the growing availability of new channels, particularly the Internet, through which public opinion can be expressed. The increasing attention paid by the Communist Party to ordinary citizens’ attitudes does not suggest that the government is moving towards acceptance of a more pluralist system of government. On the contrary, an awareness of the potency of public opinion – and its tendency to take on an anti-government hue – is making the party increasingly reluctant to experiment with greater pluralism.

Since the early 1990s, the Communist Party has sought to define itself more in nationalist terms than ideological ones. It knows that its legitimacy depends on being seen as the only force that can represent the nationalist aspirations of Chinese people. However, the party has not sought to stoke up such aspirations – merely to match them in order to avoid losing what legitimacy it has. The leadership’s willingness to respond to public opinion on nationalist and other issues remains subordinate to its determination to follow policies that will ensure the party’s survival. Policy towards Taiwan and the US, for example, still reflects the view that sustained confrontation could critically undermine the leadership, given the likelihood that military conflict with either – or both – could result in embarrassing losses for Beijing. Nevertheless, growing social and economic problems at home, combined with uncertainties surrounding China’s forthcoming leadership transition, will weaken the ability of the authorities to resist acting in response to public opinion.

Nationalist expression
Chinese public attitudes towards foreign policy issues involving territorial claims and/or China’s global status usually reflect a strong sense of national pride. Those who express opinions on such matters do so in a way deeply influenced by an educational system that stresses the greatness of Chinese culture, the humiliation of China by foreign powers before the communist takeover, and the supreme importance of loyalty to the Chinese nation over and above loyalty to any ideology. Nationalism has been a central feature of Chinese political culture for much of the last century. While nationalism is not necessarily growing, public expression of it is expanding rapidly. In part, this is because the government has placed emphasis on ‘patriotic education’, requiring schools to conduct flag-raising ceremonies and teach children about the invasion of China by colonial powers in the nineteenth century. The leadership sees patriotism as a more effective rallying force than communist ideology among a public disillusioned by politics. More important, however, is the way in which economic changes are providing greater opportunities for the airing of nationalist sentiment of a kind that does not necessarily suit the leadership’s interests. With market forces beginning to remould the publishing industry and the media, editors are learning that headline-grabbing bellicose rhetoric sells better than diplomatically worded argument.

Lacking the power of his predecessors, China’s President Jiang Zemin is unable to brush aside the fulminations of hardline nationalists. To do so would risk his becoming the target of public anger, which could easily give rise to protests and political instability. Many Chinese are already bitterly resentful of problems such as corruption, growing economic inequality, unemployment and spiralling healthcare and education costs. The Communist Party leadership knows that every major anti-government campaign in the last 100 years in China has been fought under the banner of patriotism, including what student leaders dubbed the ‘patriotic democratic movement’ based in Tiananmen Square in 1989. During the US spy plane crisis, the government sought to prevent a repeat of the protests that

**Internet users in China**

| Age   | Users, January 2001 |
|-------|---------------------|
| Under 18 | 1.175,000 |
| Age 18–24 | 2.100,000 |
| Age 25–30 | 4,000,000 |
| Age 31–35 | 5,900,000 |
| Age 36–40 | 6,900,000 |
| Age 41–50 | 16,900,000 |
| Age 51–60 | 22,500,000 |
| Above 60 | 22,500,000 |

**Total internet users in China, 1998–2001**

| Period   | Total Users, China, 1998–2001 |
|----------|--------------------------------|
| July 1998 | 1,175,000 |
| January 1999 | 2,100,000 |
| July 1999 | 4,000,000 |
| January 2000 | 5,900,000 |
| July 2000 | 6,900,000 |
| January 2001 | 16,900,000 |
| January 2001 | 22,500,000 |

Source: China Internet Network Information Centre
erupted with such vehemence after the accidental US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. Those demonstrations were permitted only because the leadership felt that not to do so would risk an explosion of anti-government sentiment in the build-up to the sensitive tenth anniversary in June that year of the crushing of the Tiananmen protests. The protests were quickly subdued after three days, with the government clearly nervous of their potential impact on social stability and China’s image abroad. In the most recent crisis, the government decided not to allow street protests, even though many Chinese privately expressed fury at the US for, in their view, causing the death of a Chinese pilot.

Logging on
During the spy plane crisis, many Western journalists cited views expressed by users of Internet bulletin boards in China as examples of public anger. The phenomenal growth of Internet usage in China has created unprecedented opportunities for some Chinese to convey opinions instantly to a wide audience. Nonetheless, the Internet is an unreliable guide to the broad spectrum of public opinion. It is still mainly a tool of young, well-educated urban males. Such people are most likely to become influential in business and government. Yet in a country with huge disparities in wealth and education, as well as vastly differing experiences of the outside world, the concerns of this savvy urban elite are not necessarily widely shared. It is also difficult to determine the origin of particular postings on Internet bulletin boards. While websites may be located in China, users could be Chinese living abroad. Unlike their counterparts in China, who mainly have to use public computer terminals on campuses or in relatively expensive Internet cafés, the tens of thousands of Chinese students in the US have ready, cost-free access to the Internet. A further limitation of the Internet in assessing Chinese public opinion is that those most likely to express their views through this medium are often those who enjoy the opportunities for engaging in anonymous polemics that the Internet affords.

Nevertheless, such polemics are a more accepted form of political discourse in China than they are in the West. The anonymous handwritten posters put up on university campus notice boards in Beijing in 1989 were a crucial form of communication among participants in anti-government unrest. Their language was often as emotional and lacking in reason as the Internet bulletin board postings of today. Since 1989, posting unauthorised bills has been banned. The Internet, which has been embraced by a government eager to ensure China’s competitiveness in an information-driven global economy, has inadvertently provided an important new outlet for students to air their opinions.

Postings on Internet bulletin boards after the US surveillance aircraft collided with the Chinese fighter underlined the difficulty the government faces in handling nationalist sentiment. Many postings called for tough action against the US, such as shooting down surveillance aircraft. While the government would not endorse a military confrontation with the US, it did at least approve of the patriotic tone of such postings. Other messages, however, attacked the Chinese government for failing, in the view of their authors, to respond firmly enough to what was widely seen in China as aggressive behaviour by the US military. Censors employed by bulletin board operators quickly removed many such messages.

The access to non-government-approved information that the Internet provides appeared to have little direct impact on the kind of opinions expressed in this way. Most views rejected the plausible US argument that the Chinese pilot was at fault for manoeuvring his plane too close to the US aircraft. Similarly, many Chinese with access to alternative sources of information readily accepted the Chinese government view that the bombing of the Belgrade Embassy was deliberate. This willingness to believe the explanations of a government whose views on other issues are often greeted with considerable scepticism reflects profound public misgivings in China about US strategic intentions.

Leadership balancing act
The leadership knows that it faces serious challenges to social and political stability in coming years. China’s prospective accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) will present colossal challenges to social and political stability. Many sectors – from banking to agriculture – will suffer layoffs and closures. The government is gambling that WTO membership will stimulate exports and boost foreign investment inflows, as well as force Chinese firms to improve their management and technology. However, until the benefits of membership become clear, many ordinary Chinese will be tempted to blame the government – and the US, as the WTO’s most powerful economy – for the negative side-effects of globalisation.

It is a time of considerable uncertainty for China’s political elite. Jockeying for position is underway ahead of sweeping leadership changes to be announced around the Sixteenth Communist Party Congress in late 2002 and at the National People’s Congress in 2003. Although prepared to relinquish the state presidency and post of Communist Party General Secretary, Jiang wants to remain in effective control by staying on as chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission. It is by no means certain that he will achieve this. The younger leaders who will be promoted will probably try to seek to manage nationalism in the same way Jiang has. Nonetheless, they will lack experience of resisting pressures from the public and sectors of the party and military to assert Chinese power more aggressively in the region and beyond.

In 1996, a then less experienced Jiang allowed such pressures to sway him into conducting ballistic missile tests close to Taiwan’s two main ports. This course of action was out of keeping with China’s foreign policy strategy of the last 20 years, which has been to avoid confrontation with the US in order to provide a secure environment for economic development. Jiang allowed himself to be swayed again in May 1999 by sanctioning – if only briefly – the biggest anti-Western demonstrations in China since the Cultural Revolution. During the spy plane incident, he tried to satisfy public and military opinion by keeping the US aircrew in custody for 11 days – again risking serious damage to the Sino-US relationship in order to keep crucial domestic constituencies from turning against him.

Jiang may not have succeeded in getting the balance right. Chinese officials privately admit that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing has received many letters from Chinese offering ‘calcium pills’ to Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, in order to strengthen his spine. This is a way of suggesting that he has been far too weak in his response to the spy plane incident. In order to preserve his influence beyond the upcoming congresses, Jiang knows he will need to appear resolute in the face of what is perceived as US ‘bullying’.