

# Chicago Council Survey

World affairs or if we stay out of world affairs?  
United States Public Opinion  
immigration international  
preventing the spread of nuclear weapons terrorism  
Afghanistan Strengthening the United Nations  
management Globalization Free trade agree  
Climate Change Favor or oppose Syria  
European Union  
Law Brazil From your point of view, how desirable is  
Policy Goals it that the U.S. exert strong leadership in  
Very Effective world affairs? Opinion South Korea  
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CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

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## American Views of Asia and the Future of the U.S.-Japan Alliance Analysis of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey on American Public Opinion and U.S Foreign Policy

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This report is based on a series of survey questions on Japan that is part of a larger Chicago Council survey on American public opinion and U.S. foreign policy. The essay that follows is the author's own interpretation of the Council's survey results. For the full report, please visit [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

The 2012 Chicago Council Survey on American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy provides important context for thinking about the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance. These are the first Chicago Council results on American attitudes towards Japan and Asia since the tragic March 11, 2011, Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, the implosion of the newly elected Democratic Party of Japan, and the Obama administration's announcement of a strategic "pivot" to East Asia. The results show a real disconnect between the hyperbolic debate about Asia in Washington, D.C., and the somewhat calmer and longer-term view of the region that appears to prevail throughout most of the country. Where many inside the Beltway see a rapidly rising and threatening China and a hopelessly drifting Japan, Americans elsewhere seem to appreciate that China's rising power is not necessarily a threat, that Japan continues to be a powerful and trusted ally, and that more can be done to cement our relationship with Japan and the region through strengthening alliances and promoting trade. Taken together, that is a good recipe for a long-term American strategy for the region and a more robust agenda with Japan.

### Americans trust Japan and have confidence in Japanese influence

Japanese "declinists" will note that Americans continue to identify China as more important to the United States than Japan. This trend has continued for over a decade. In 2002 an equal percentage of Americans identified Japan and China as more important to the United States than the other (48 percent for each). Ten years later, 70 percent say China is more important than Japan, compared with

27 percent saying Japan is more important than China. Japanese commentators worried about “Japan passing” as American attention shifts to a rising China will find ammunition for their arguments.

However, other responses in the survey suggest that the Japan-China comparison is really a matter of apples and oranges. Americans clearly feel differently about Japan than they do about China. Eighty percent of Americans in the survey respond that Japan is a partner rather than a rival—an increase from 73 percent who said so in 2006 and a stark contrast with the 48 percent of Americans who consider China a partner. Indeed, since 2008 the Chicago Council Surveys have shown (most recently in 2010) that Americans see Japan as “very important” to the United States, with Japan ranking in the top four with Canada, Great Britain, and China as countries that are most important. Japan has also consistently come out in the top three countries toward which Americans have a “very warm, favorable feeling” (with Great Britain and Germany). When Richard Armitage and Joe Nye cochaired an influential strategy memo on the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance in October 2000, they argued that the model for alliance cooperation should be the United States’ special relationship with Britain. While there are obvious differences between Britain and Japan, including Britain’s possession of nuclear weapons and a shared heritage and language, Chicago Council Surveys over the past decades reveal that Americans have come to think of Japan as being part of a select core of unique relationships. Indeed, in contrast to the 1980s, the United States and Japan are now closely aligned in international organizations like the UN and IMF and in diplomacy within Asia and the world more broadly.

The debate within Washington policy circles is increasingly not whether Japan is a trusted partner, but whether Japan is a good bet, given rising demographic challenges, sluggishness of the Japanese economy, and continually rotating prime ministers. In other words, the critique of the Armitage-Nye report has become that Japan is not up to the task of being an influential partner. Judging from Chicago Council Surveys, the American public seems to think that Japan *is* up to the task. While there is a slight decline in American’s views of Japan’s influence, from a mean of 6.4 on a 10-point scale in 2010 to a mean of 6.1 in 2012, compared with China’s steady influence (7.5 in 2010 and 7.4 in 2012), Americans see Japanese influence holding steady over the next decade, while U.S. influence declines (and Chinese and Korean influence increases). It appears that the Wall Street and Washington insiders’ frustration with rotating Japanese prime ministers and dismal debt-to-GDP ratios has not penetrated the broader public’s consciousness—or perhaps the insiders are reacting to immediate developments and losing sight of the historic character of the Japanese people and the strength of their national brand.

That character was on display in the Japanese peoples’ resolute response to the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis of March 2011. Other surveys on Japan’s national image abroad have demonstrated a marked increase in Japan’s “national brand” after March 11, 2011<sup>1</sup>. In the Chicago Council Survey, 85 percent of the American people see the disaster as only a temporary

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<sup>1</sup> Dong-hun, Lee. “Nation Brands, 2011 Survey Results.” *SERI Quarterly* 5.2 (2012): n. pag. *SERI Quarterly*. Samsung Economic Research Institute, 16 Feb. 2012.

setback. Again, elites in Washington and New York are following Japan's travails trying to restart nuclear power plants and the slow pace of reconstruction in the devastated areas. The general public appears to take a broader view that appreciates comparative strengths in Japan society and culture.

The increasing levels of trust in Japan as a partner may also reflect the American public's recognition that Japan and the United States share common values. In the Chicago Council Survey, six out of ten Americans say that the United States shares common *cultural values* with Japan. This definition could have encompassed everything from kimonos to constitutional forms of government and freedom of the press, so it is difficult to determine whether stripping away the word "cultural" might have yielded an even higher affirmative response. In any case, the American public's sense of shared purpose with Japan comes through clearly in the survey, which suggests there is a solid political foundation for the alliance moving forward.

### **Americans have a good understanding of the key priorities in the U.S.-Japan alliance**

When asked to say how high a priority a number of strategic objectives should be in America's relationship with Japan, the American public's response was impressive. At the top was stopping North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons (45 percent say "high priority" and 34 percent say "somewhat high priority"). This is no doubt the result of North Korea's accumulation of plutonium-based nuclear devices and active program to develop more weapons from uranium enrichment, which constitute an immediate threat to the American, Japanese, and—of course—Korean people. The fact that fewer respondents choose "limiting the rise of China's power" as a priority accurately reflects the realities of U.S. foreign policy strategy (18 percent say it is a "high priority" and 37 say it is a "somewhat high priority"). U.S. policy is not to contain or limit China's power *per se*, but instead to encourage China to be a responsible international actor through a combination of engagement and maintenance of strong alliances and a stable balance of power. President Obama's January 2011 statement that "the United States has a stake in China's success and China has a stake in U.S. success" echoes similar sentiments expressed by his seven predecessors.

However, China's behavior would become a problem if it threatened freedom of navigation and U.S. sea lanes between the United States and Asia. Indeed, protection of the maritime domain lies at the heart of U.S. strategy towards the Pacific since the days of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt. Securing sea lanes in the Pacific ranks as the second most important priority for the U.S.-Japan alliance (32 percent say "high priority" and 44 say "somewhat high priority"). China's assertive push for sovereignty over the East China Sea and the South China Sea since 2010 has prompted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to remind Beijing and our allies of this historic American interest, which Japan's leaders have said their nation shares with us as a maritime democracy. Old TR and Mahan would have smiles on their faces knowing that the public understands the essence of our historic interests in the Pacific.

“Building a regional security alliance between the United States and East Asian countries” ranks as the third most important agenda for the U.S.-Japan alliance. This also reflects some of the reality in emerging U.S. strategic thought towards the region. In fact, the United States does not have a “regional alliance” in Asia, having opted instead for the “hub and spokes” arrangement of bilateral alliances with Japan, Korea, and others in the region at the beginning of the Cold War. There were historic reasons for choosing this path, including U.S. concerns that a NATO-style collective security arrangement might have increased the risk that Syngman Rhee in Korea or Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan might have pulled the United States into an unwanted war with China as they sought to reunify their countries. Since the Cold War, however, the United States has found value in increasing security cooperation trilaterally with Japan and Korea, Japan and Australia, and most recently Japan and India. These trilateral relationships fall short of formal security treaties, but help to shore up the strategic equilibrium as China asserts its influence over the maritime domain. Through instinct or chance, the American public has found the sweet spot in U.S. strategy: it is not to limit or contain Chinese power, but to ensure our alliances and partnerships are robust enough to help ensure that Beijing stays on a cooperative path.

It is also noteworthy in this context that the survey shows a majority of Americans continue to support stationing of U.S. bases in Japan and Korea, even in the current fiscal climate.

### **However, Americans may not be attuned to Japan’s insecurity about the region**

While the survey results suggest an American public that has a healthy attitude toward forward engagement in Asia and a balanced view of China’s rise, there are some numbers that indicate potential disconnects between the American and Japanese publics’ views of the security challenges we face. For example, while a majority of Americans choose Asia as a more important to the United States than Europe, only two in ten (19 percent) say that the greatest threats to U.S. security will come from Asia in the future. Most (73 percent) think such threats will come from the Middle East. Moreover, the January 2012 Strategic Guidance to the Pentagon shifted U.S. military planning away from preparing for two simultaneous crisis—presumably one in the Middle East and one in East Asia—in order to justify a leaner military after Iraq and Afghanistan. The administration has promised that despite declining defense budgets, the so-called “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia will still occur because the U.S. Navy will shift from a 50/50 Pacific/Atlantic split towards a 60/40 division in favor of Asia. However, this rebalancing will occur mostly because of attrition in the naval forces outside the Pacific, not because of a buildup in Asia. Moreover, many of those favored forces in the western Pacific would have to shift back to the Middle East if a major crisis broke out there—and that is precisely where the American public seems to think that the next great crisis will come. This will be small comfort for Japanese readers.

In this context it is worth noting a recent Pew Global Attitudes Project survey. At a time when 77 percent of Americans think their nation takes into account the views of other countries, most other countries do not see it that way. In the Pew survey in Japan in 2011, 51 percent said the United States considered the interests of nations like Japan—a 20-point increase from 2010 because of the huge disaster relief effort under Operation Tomodachi in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami. However, this year the number dropped again, with 36 percent of Japanese expressing this view. While the United States and Japan are aligned in terms of values, mutual respect and overall threat perception, there will continue to be an undercurrent in Japan of uncertainty about the American commitment to Japan's security that most Americans, including many in government, have not detected.

That said, it is clear that Americans do understand Japan's rivalry with China. Sixty-eight percent in the Chicago Council Survey say the two Asian giants are rivals, only a slight dip from the 71 percent who said so in 2010. Interestingly, this generally tracks with polling in Japan about whether Japanese see relations with China as confrontational<sup>2</sup>.

### **The U.S. and Japan have running room to expand trade relations**

The 2012 survey confirms a continued increase in the number of Americans who say Japan practices fair trade—from 58 percent in 2010 to 63 percent in 2012. These numbers are the reverse twenty years ago in most polling. The big change may reflect two decades of Japanese foreign direct investment that has introduced Americans in virtually every congressional district in the country to Japanese manufacturers and new job opportunities. It may also reflect a dramatic reduction in the number of trade cases brought against Japan as Japanese companies have globalized. This is important in the context of Japanese participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free trade negotiation that began in the Bush administration with four smaller Asian economies and which Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has recently indicated he wants his country to join. The U.S. presidential election and looming Japanese elections have slowed momentum toward Japan's participation, as politicians in both countries pay extra attention to the rent-seeking instincts of certain key constituencies. However, the Chicago Council Survey suggests that the administrations in power in Tokyo and Washington in 2013 would be on safe ground moving ahead with negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

The U.S.-Japan alliance has survived some challenging developments over the past few years, including the fall of the long-dominant, pro-alliance Liberal Democratic Party and the devastating earthquake and tsunami of 2011. The alliance came out stronger in the wake of these political and natural shocks,

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<sup>2</sup> Seventh Annual Genron NPO-China Daily Japan-China Joint Opinion Survey. Released August 11, 2012. Accessed September 12, 2012, <[http://www.genron-npo.net/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=24:on-the-results-of-the-7th-japan-china-joint-opinion-survey&catid=1:advocacy&Itemid=3](http://www.genron-npo.net/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24:on-the-results-of-the-7th-japan-china-joint-opinion-survey&catid=1:advocacy&Itemid=3)>.

but in some ways lost its forward momentum. The Chicago Council Survey shows that the American people would likely support an agenda for strengthening the alliance in the years ahead, including enhanced security cooperation to protect sea lanes, networking with other like-minded allies and partners, coordinating on strategy towards North Korea, and beginning negotiations on Japan's participation in TPP. The public does not see the need for the alliance to contain China's power per se, but the U.S. and Japanese governments are not pursuing containment strategies designed to keep China weak. The key to building a stronger alliance in future will be to have confidence in the capabilities, values, and mutual trust that the United States shares with Japan—and in Japan itself.

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