

U.S.–Japan Alliance Central to American Views of Asia: Assessment of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey

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The Chicago Council's 2014 survey on the American public's foreign policy attitudes demonstrates support for the pivot to Asia and for the two most important pillars of the policy: free trade agreements and sustained forward military presence. Japan stands out as the most trusted US partner in the region and an important global player in its own right. Americans also recognize the growing friction between Japan and China. Positive attitudes towards Japan increased slightly since the 2012 survey, while attitudes towards China decreased over the same period. In general, Americans see security problems in Asia in the same way as Japanese citizens, but not with the same intensity. Overall, the American public's desire for continued engagement with Japan and Asia stands in contrast to the ambivalence expressed about the Middle East.

Americans trust Japan.

On a scale of “feelings” toward other countries, Japan ranks first in Asia among Americans, with an average of 62 out of 100 (Australia was not included) and fourth globally behind Canada (79), Great Britain (74), and Germany (65). Additionally, 60 percent of Americans rate Japan above a 50, an increase of 11 percentage points from 2010. An impressive 80 percent of Americans think the United States and Japan are mostly partners rather than mostly rivals. Reflecting the

increasing closeness Americans feel towards Japan, the number who say the United States should secretly spy on the government of Japan dropped from 53 percent in 1994 to 34 percent in 2014. Conversely, those who say it is necessary to spy on China increased from 67 percent in 1994 to 70 percent in 2014. The Chicago Council's results parallel the December 2013 Yomiuri/Gallup survey in which 65 percent of Americans said they trust Japan as well as the Japanese Foreign Ministry's December 2013 survey in which 76 percent of the general American public and 93 percent of opinion leaders expressed the view that Japan is a reliable ally.¹

Americans also see Japan as an important global player. On a 1 to 10 scale, Japan ranks an average of 6.5, or fourth overall behind the United States, China, and the European Union in terms of global influence. Japan's ranking had dropped to 6.1 in 2012 from the 2010 ranking of 6.5, but has rebounded in 2014. China meanwhile, has declined slightly from 7.8 in 2010 and 2012 to 7.6 in 2014, retaining second place behind the United States at 8.2. American views on the future influence of countries also reflect a slight uptick in confidence in Japan. When asked to estimate the influence of various countries in the world in 10 years

1. “Yomiuri-Gallup Survey/68% of Americans: U.S. gov't not functional,” *The Japan News*, December 16, 2013, Special 2, page 10. “Opinion Poll: 2013 U.S. Image of Japan,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, December 19, 2013, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000022801.pdf>.

on a scale from 1 to 10, Americans estimate Japan's influence at an average of 6.3, up from 6.1 in the 2012 survey. This places Japan fourth on the list of countries asked about. Overall, other US allies and partners are expected to have slightly more influence in 10 years, including Korea, the EU, and India. Expectations of Russian influence also rose slightly. In contrast, expectations of China's future influence fell slightly from 7.8 to 7.6.

Japan's uptick in perceived global influence and trust among Americans comes at a time when China has intensified its anti-Japanese propaganda in editorials and paid newspaper inserts in major US newspapers. It also stands in contrast to the discourse by some American editorial writers and academics in the United States who have attacked the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for its sometimes controversial treatment of historical issues. It is possible that after six years of annual changes in prime ministers, Japan has made a better impression among Americans with the comparatively stable and confident government of Mr. Abe, who as recently as October 6, 2014, enjoyed a 62 percent approval rating according to Yomiuri Shimbun polls.² It also appears that recent Japanese discourse on historical issues has not dented the American public's favorable impressions of Japan's trustworthiness and influence as much as some observers had expected.

Americans support the pivot to Asia and see Japan and allies as the linchpin of the strategy.

The Chicago Council Survey finds that a majority of the public supports the Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia," also known as the "pivot to Asia." Sixty percent say they support the "pivot," with 34 percent opposed. This is a six-point increase in support from the 2012 survey (the "pivot" was announced in 2010 by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the "rebalance" in January 2011 by President Obama). The support for the pivot tracks with a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 2014 survey of strategic elites in 10 Asia-Pacific countries that found 96 percent support among American Asia experts for the pivot and broad support in Asia. An average of 79 per-

cent of respondents across Asia supported the policy. (The number would have been higher but for Chinese respondents, only 24 percent of whom supported the "pivot"). In Japan 92 percent of respondents to the CSIS strategic elites survey supported the pivot or rebalance, and 85 percent responded that "continued US leadership in Asia" is in Japan's national interest.

However, the CSIS survey also found that a majority of respondents in the United States and Asia had concerns about the actual implementation of the pivot or rebalance.³ Three questions about the American commitment to the pivot stand out in Asia: fears that the United States might tilt towards China as Chinese power grows, worries that the American public might not support a continued forward US military presence in the region, and questions about whether the Obama administration will be able to win support for key regional free trade agreements from the US Congress.

The 2014 Chicago Council Survey should provide some reassurance on all three counts. First, the 2014 Chicago Council Survey demonstrates that a majority of Americans (59%) think the United States should put priority on "building up strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China," a 6 point increase from 2012. Fewer Americans think the United States should build a new partnership with China, even if that will diminish our relations with our traditional allies, down 7 points from 2012 to 33 percent in 2014.

Second, American support for a forward military presence in Asia has increased. Sixty-two percent say the US military presence in Asia is a stabilizer, up from 59 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, 55 percent of Americans support long-term US bases in Japan, with 42 percent opposed. This percentage is lower than the December 2013 Yomiuri/Gallup poll in which 65 percent of Americans supported US bases in Japan. Yet it is still a majority and compares positively to the strong opposition among the American public to long-term US bases in the Middle East.

Third, the 2014 Chicago Council Survey finds majority support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Along with their strongest support ever for

2. "Cabinet approval rating stays steady at 62%," *The Japan News*, October 7, 2014, National, p. 2.

3. Michael J. Green and Nicholas Szechenyi, *Power and Order in Asia: A Survey of Regional Expectations*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 17, 2014, http://csis.org/files/publication/140605_Green_PowerandOrder_WEB.pdf#search='csis+power+and+order+in+asia'.

globalization (65% say it is “mostly good”), 63 percent of Americans support TPP (11 percent “strongly” and 52 percent “somewhat”). Sixty-two percent of respondents think that Japan is one of America’s top 10 trading partners, up 6 points from 2012. Elite support for TPP is even higher. The 2014 CSIS survey of strategic elites found that 98 percent of US experts and 92 percent of Japanese experts think TPP is either “very important” or “important” for their country’s future.⁴ All of this augurs well for the completion of TPP negotiations and particularly the US-Japan component of the agreement, which covers the two largest economies in the pact and is the key to unlocking agreements with the other member states. Of course, trade negotiations are not based on public voting and can easily become entangled in legislative politics, but the broad public support for TPP should encourage proponents to redouble their efforts.

Americans mostly concur with the Japanese threat assessment.

The 2014 Chicago Council Survey suggests that Americans and Japanese generally view security challenges in Asia the same way, but not in all cases and not with the same intensity. The greatest convergence of views is on the North Korean threat. Though a majority of Americans in the 2014 Chicago Council Survey oppose US military intervention in the event of a North Korean invasion of the South (51%), the number supporting a US intervention has increased steadily from 36 percent in 2003 to 41 percent in 2013 and now stands at 47 percent in 2014.

Americans and Japanese also generally agree on the need for talks with North Korea, even though both publics distrust the North. Sixty-one percent of the public supports meetings between American and North Korean leaders, down from 69 percent in 2012. This is similar to the 62 percent of Japanese who supported increased diplomatic efforts with North Korea in a March 2014 Nikkei Shimbun poll.⁵ Interestingly, large majorities of Japanese who support dialogue with North Korea (69%) also doubt that Pyongyang will

resolve outstanding issues, according to an October 2014 Yomiuri poll.⁶ It may well be that Americans who support dialogue with the North have similarly low expectations for the results, though this was not part of the Chicago Council Survey this time.

Americans and Japanese also generally agree on the growing challenge presented by China. In the 2014 Chicago Council Survey 89 percent of Americans say the development of China as a world power is a critical or important threat to US interests, and 79 percent say the same of border disputes between China and its neighbors. However, Japanese and Americans view the China threat with different levels of intensity. In the 2014 Chicago Council Survey, for example, 72 percent of Americans characterize China and Japan as mostly rivals (a 5 point increase from 2012), while 48 percent say the United States and China are mostly rivals (49 percent—a narrow plurality—say the United States and China are mostly partners). This tracks with other survey results showing alignment on the China threat but differing levels of intensity about the significance of the threat.

In most surveys in Japan asking about China, around 80 to 90 percent of respondents give negative answers (do not trust China, do not have warm feelings towards China, etc.).⁷ In the 2014 CSIS survey of strategic elites, Americans were asked to evaluate threats to US interests on a scale of 1 to 10. Territorial disputes in Asia received an average of 5.9. Among Japanese, territorial disputes in Asia received an average of 7.1 as a threat to Japanese interests. In addition, the December 2013 Yomiuri/Gallup public opinion survey showed that 89 percent of Japanese are concerned about China’s territorial disputes with its neighbors, compared with 58 percent of Americans. Particularly surprising in the 2014 Chicago Council Survey is the increasing number of Americans who say they would not support US military intervention in the case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, up to 71 percent in 2014 from 69 percent in 2012, 65 percent in 2008, 61 percent in 2006 and 2004, and 58 percent in 2002 and 1998. For a Japanese government worried about the integrity of the First Island Chain stretching from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines

4. Green and Szechenyi.

5. “Tairo gaikou ‘dokujisei o’ 54%, chukan e ‘jouho huyou’ 51%, syusyuu, kajitori muzukashiku honsya yoron chousa [Diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia ‘Independent Approach’ 54%, vis-à-vis China and the ROK ‘No Need to Compromise,’ 51%, Difficult for Prime Minister: Nikkei Survey],” *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, March 24, 2014, Morning edition, p. 2.

6. “Cabinet approval rating stays steady at 62%,” *The Japan News*, October 7, 2014, National, p. 2.

7. “The 10th Japan-China Public Opinion Poll: Analysis Report on the Comparative Data,” The Genron NPO, September 9, 2014, http://www.genron-npo.net/en/pp/docs/10th_Japan-China_poll.pdf.

against Chinese pressure, this trend would be a cause for concern.

The area of greatest divergence between Americans and Japanese in their assessments of regional neighbors is on the Republic of Korea (ROK). In the 2014 Chicago Council Survey 70 percent of Americans say that the United States and Korea are mostly partners, but polling about Korea in Japan is much more negative. Only 16 percent of Japanese in the December Yomiuri/Gallup poll said they trust

Korea, and 45 percent listed the Republic of Korea—a democratic US ally—as a military threat to Japan, third behind North Korea and China. For the US government, this tension between two critical allies in Northeast Asia is a cause for real concern. When the US-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship is strong, US leverage vis-à-vis North Korea and China increases. When Seoul and Tokyo are at odds, Washington finds itself handicapped by the lack of solidarity among democratic allies.

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This report is based on a series of survey questions on Japan that is part of a larger 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy. This essay is the author's own interpretation of the Council's survey results. For the full report, please visit www.thechicagocouncil.org.

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