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Public Prefers Cooperation and Engagement with China

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Since the Trump administration took office in 2017, it has pursued a more competitive relationship with China on both economic and security fronts. The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy stated that China "seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region," and Washington and Beijing have been engaged in an escalating trade war since the United States first imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports in March 2018.

Just as the high-level US-China relationship has taken a sharp turn towards competition, so too have public perceptions of Sino-American relations: a February 2019 [Chicago Council poll](#) found that a majority of Americans describe the United States and China as rivals (63%) rather than partners (32%), a shift that has occurred across partisan lines. However, Americans have not fully closed the door to bilateral cooperation, and most Americans do not see the rise of China as a critical threat to the United States.

Key Findings:

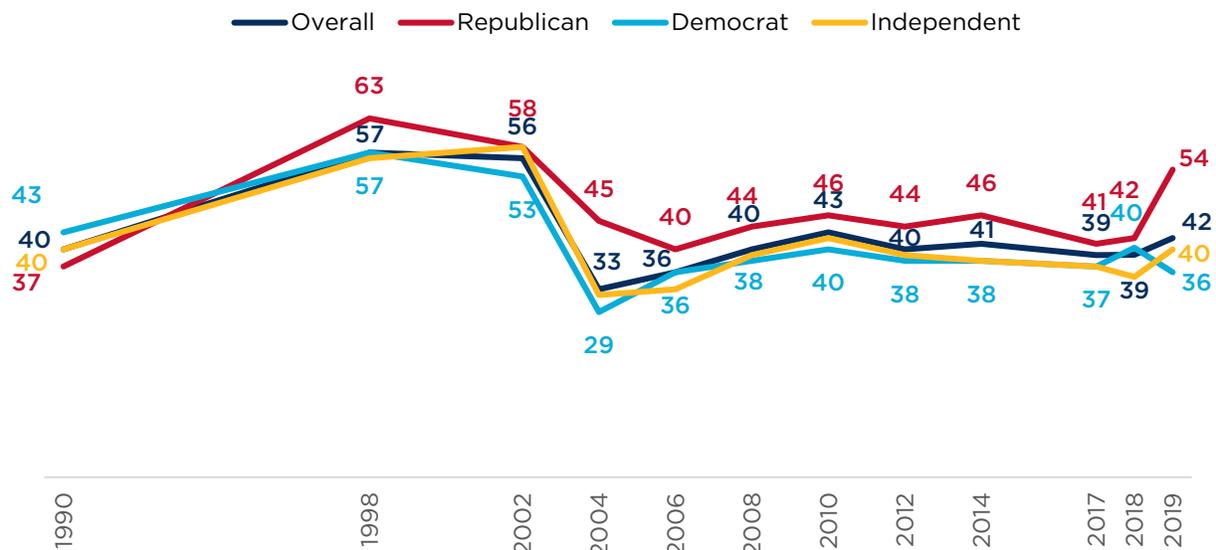
- Two-thirds of Americans (68%) say the United States should pursue a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than working to limit the growth of China's power (31%).
- Four in ten Americans (42%) say the development of China as a world power is a critical threat to the United States.
- Americans see China as the second most influential country in the world, behind only the United States.
- A majority of Americans (58%) see the United States as a stronger military power than China, and a plurality (38%) say America is more economically powerful.
- Republicans are more likely to see the rise of China as a critical threat (54%), to support the use of US troops in a conflict between China and Japan over disputed islands (48%), and to prefer containing the growth of China's power (40%).

Majority of Republicans See China's Rise as Critical Threat

Since 2002, American views of China's rise have remained consistent, with around four in ten Americans describing China's development as a world power as a critical threat (in 2019, 42%). However, Republican attitudes have taken a dramatic turn: for the first time since 2002, a majority of Republicans now say that China's development as a world power represents a critical threat to the United States (54%, up from 42% in 2018). However, that shift has only affected Republicans; minorities of Democrats (36%) and Independents (40%) see China's rise as a critical threat, as they have for the past fifteen years.

Threat of China as a World Power

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **The development of China as a world power** (% critical threat)

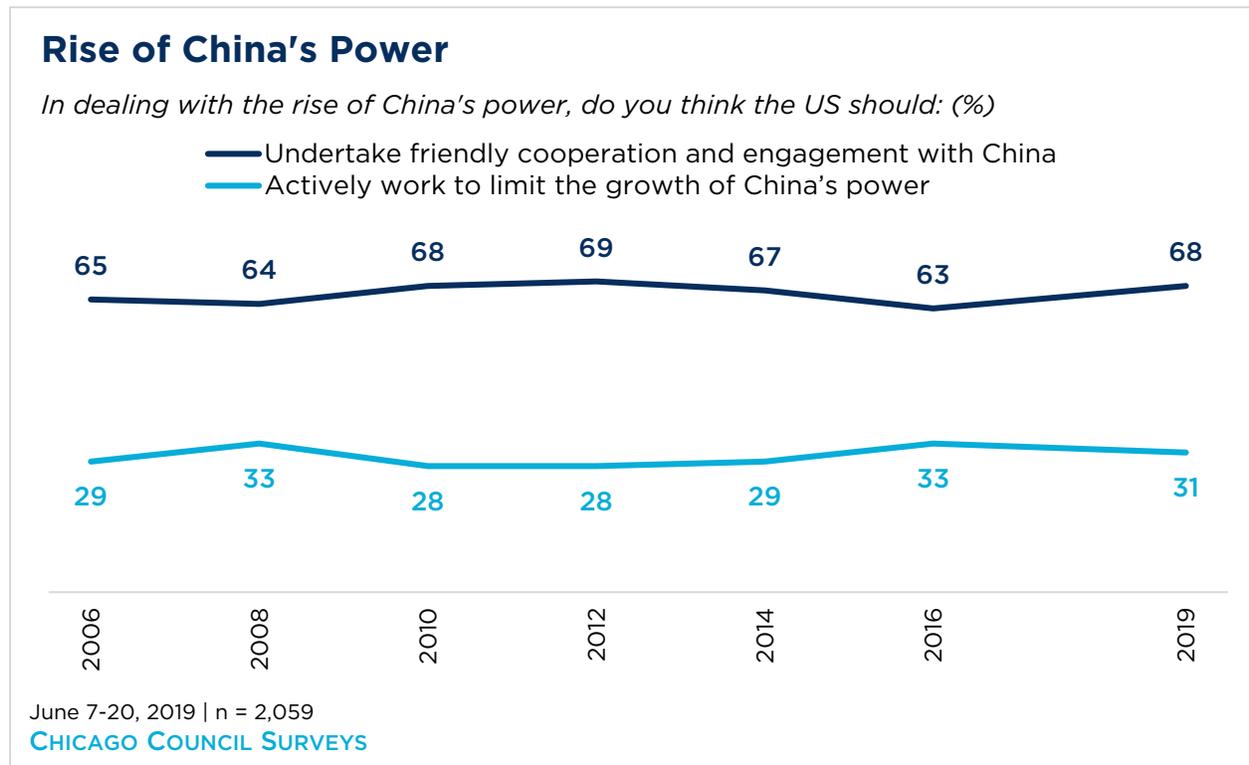


June 7-20, 2019 | n= 2,059
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Two-Thirds of Americans Favor Friendly Cooperation and Engagement with China

While the debate in Washington has taken a sharp turn towards competition with China, that view is not broadly shared by the American public. Instead, two-thirds of Americans (68%) say the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China, while three in ten (31%) say the United States should actively work to limit the growth of Beijing's power. Since the question was first

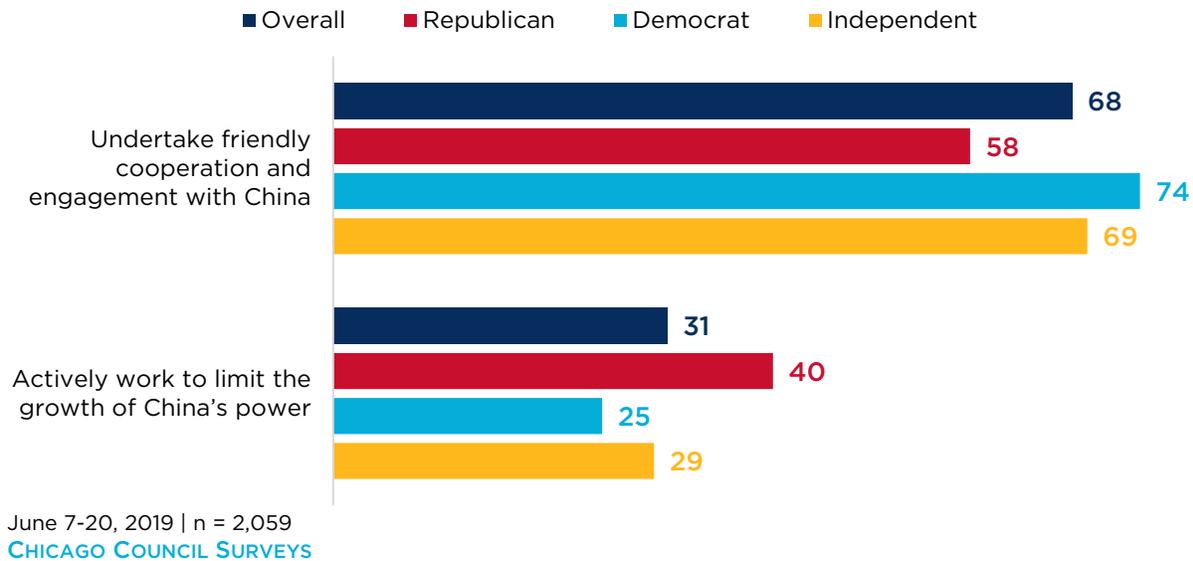
asked in 2006, Americans have consistently supported cooperation and engagement with Beijing, with relatively few favoring an active effort to limit the rise of China.



That pro-engagement position holds true across party lines, with majorities of Republicans (58%), Democrats (74%), and Independents (69%) saying the United States should undertake friendly cooperation with China. However, over the past decade, Republicans have grown more likely than other partisan groups to favor working to limit the growth of Chinese power. Today, four in ten Republicans (40%) favor efforts to limit the rise of China, up from 29 percent in 2006. Democrats, by contrast, have become somewhat more likely to favor cooperation with China (74%, up from 65% in 2006); Independents have remained consistent across the same time period.

The Rise of China

In dealing with the rise of China's power, do you think the United States should: (%)



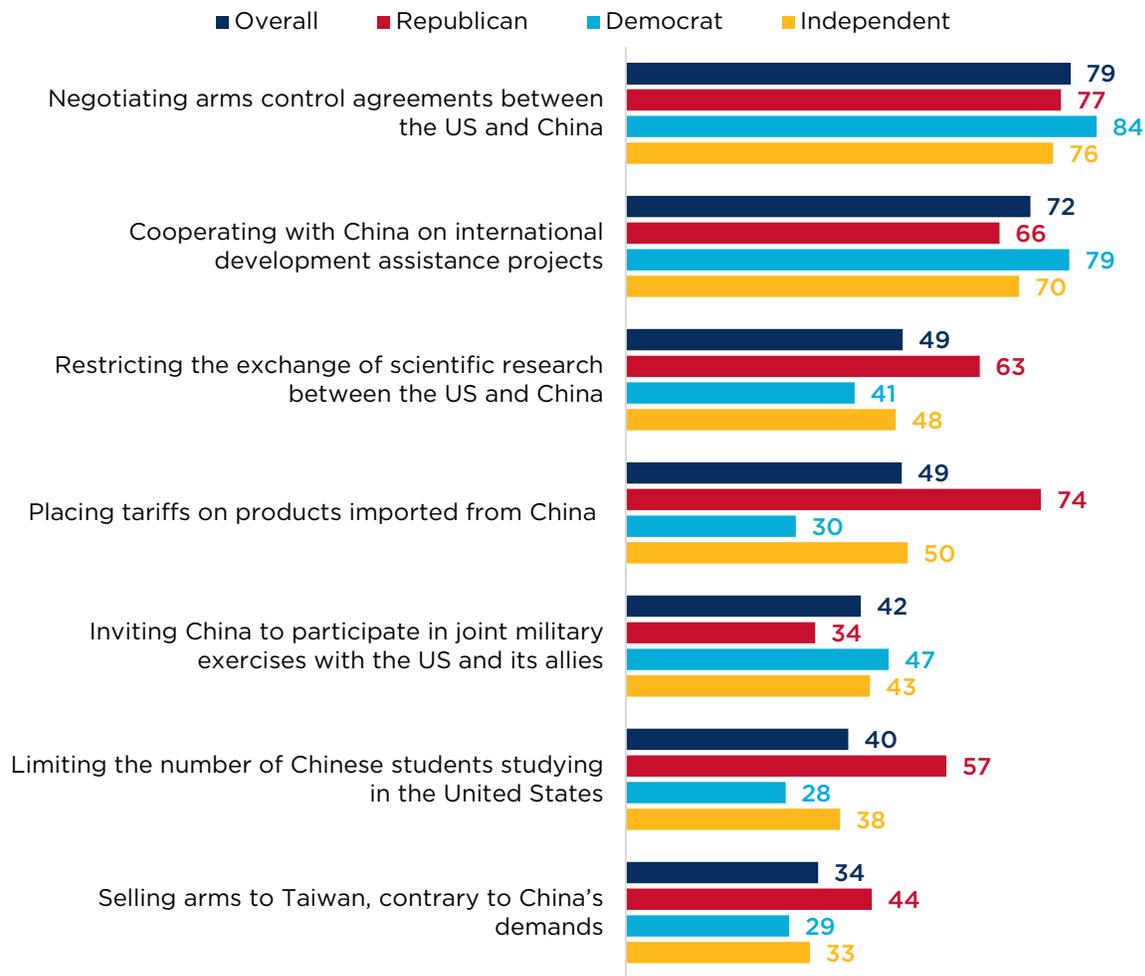
In addition to favoring a pursuit of cooperation and engagement with China, six in ten Americans (59%) say that the US relationship with China does more to strengthen US national security, while four in ten (37%) say it does more to weaken US security. Across party lines, most Americans see the US-China relationship as strengthening US national security, including majorities of Republicans (60%), Democrats (62%), and Independents (55%).

Limited Bipartisanship on US-China Policies

Reflecting the generally bipartisan view that the United States should pursue a policy of engagement rather than seeking to limit the rise of China, Americans across partisan lines agree on a number of bilateral policies. Majorities of Americans support negotiating arms control agreements between the United States and China (79%) and cooperating with China on international development assistance projects (72%). Both policies receive support from majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike. Majorities across party lines also oppose selling arms to Taiwan (61%) and oppose inviting China to participate in joint military exercises with the United States and its allies (54%).

US-China Policies

Would you support or oppose the following US policies towards China? (%)



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CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

However, as with the threat of China's development as a world power, other issues in the US-China relationship divide along partisan lines. Whether or not the United States should place tariffs on products imported from China is one such issue. Three in four Republicans (74%) and half of Independents (50%) favor imposing tariffs on Chinese imports, while a majority of Democrats (66%) oppose doing so. This division reflects, in part, a division on whether trade between the United States and China strengthens or weakens US national security. A majority of Americans (64%), Democrats (76%), and Independents (64%) say US-China trade strengthens US national security. However, Republicans are divided: 48 percent say it does more to strengthen, and 49 percent say it does more to weaken, US national security.¹

¹ For more on public opinion and the US-China economic relationship, see: Kafura, Craig. [Americans Favor US-China Trade. Split Over Tariffs](#). Chicago Council on Global Affairs. September 3, 2019. Please note that the tariff question reported in that brief is a stand-alone question, while the one reported here was asked in a larger battery of US-China policy items. The two questions' results are not significantly different from one another.

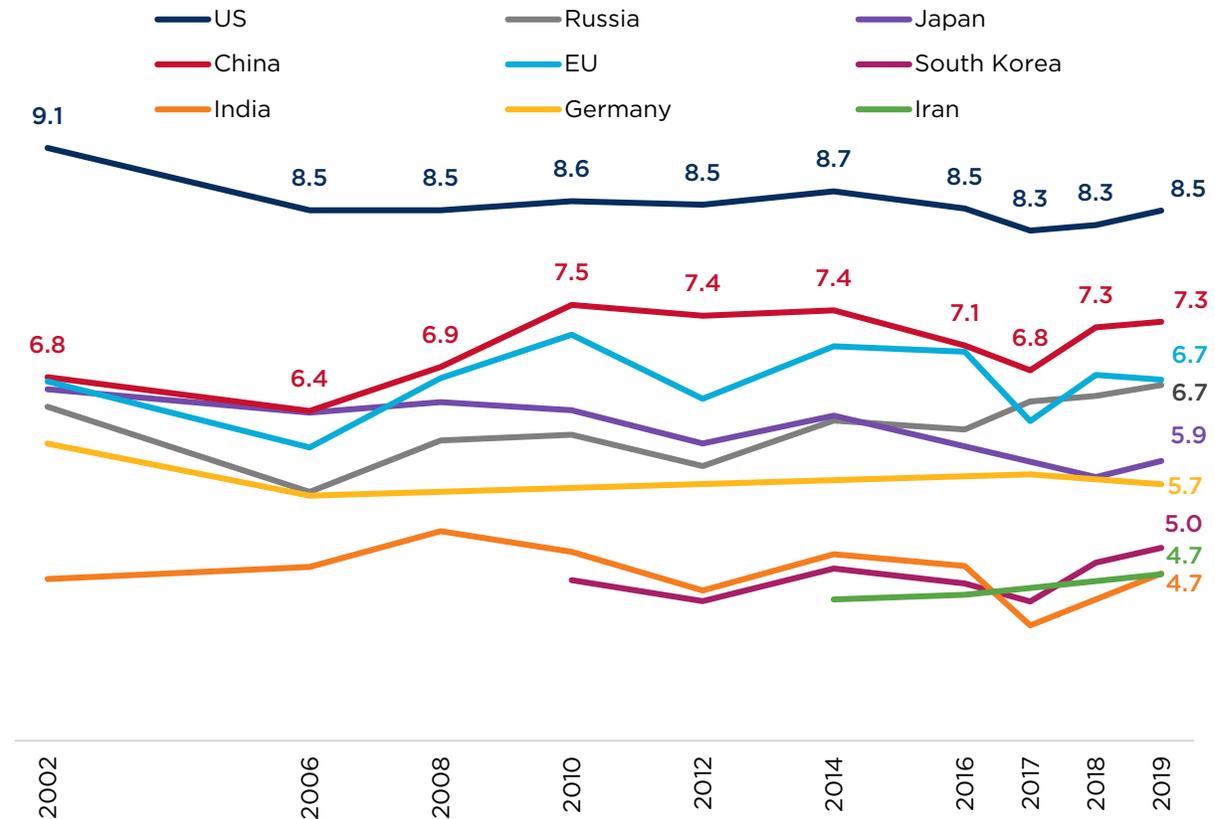
Republicans and Democrats also differ on other aspects of the US-China relationship. Six in ten Republicans (63%) favor restricting the exchange of scientific research between the United States and China, a move most Democrats oppose (56%) while Independents are divided. A majority of Republicans (57%) also favor limiting the number of Chinese students studying in the United States, which majorities of Democrats (65%) and Independents (60%) oppose.

China Still Viewed as Second Most Influential Nation

When asked to rate Chinese influence in the world on a zero to ten scale, with zero representing no influence and ten representing a lot of influence, Americans give China an average rating of 7.3. This makes China the second most influential country asked about in the 2019 Chicago Council Survey, behind the United States (8.5) and ahead of the European Union and Russia (6.7 each). American views of China's global influence have remained largely stable over the past decade.

Global Influence

I would like to know how much influence you think each of the following countries has in the world. Please answer on a 0 to 10 scale; with 0 meaning they are not at all influential and 10 meaning they are extremely influential. (mean)



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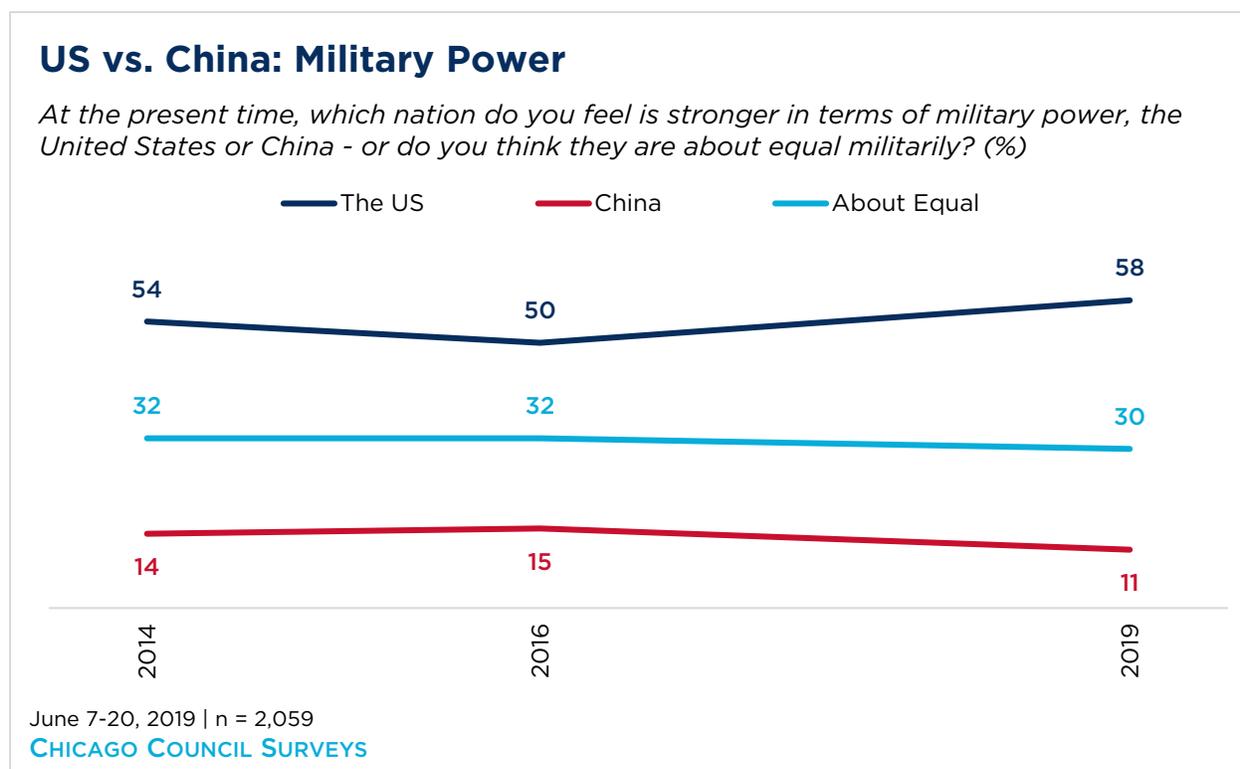
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When asked about the future influence of the United States and China, Americans see the gap between the two nations narrowing. On the same ten-point scale, Americans project US influence in ten years' time at 8.2, down slightly from the current average of 8.5. At the same time, Americans expect Chinese influence to rise, projecting an average influence of 7.6, up from the present estimate of 7.3. This general trend is true across partisan lines. Though Democrats predict a greater decline in US influence and a greater rise in Chinese power than Republicans or Independents, no partisan group sees Chinese influence as exceeding that of the United States in ten years.

Americans Confident in US Military, Economic Power Compared to China

In addition to seeing the United States as the more influential country around the world, Americans remain confident in American military superiority over China. Six in ten (58%) say the US is the stronger military power, three in ten (30%) say they are

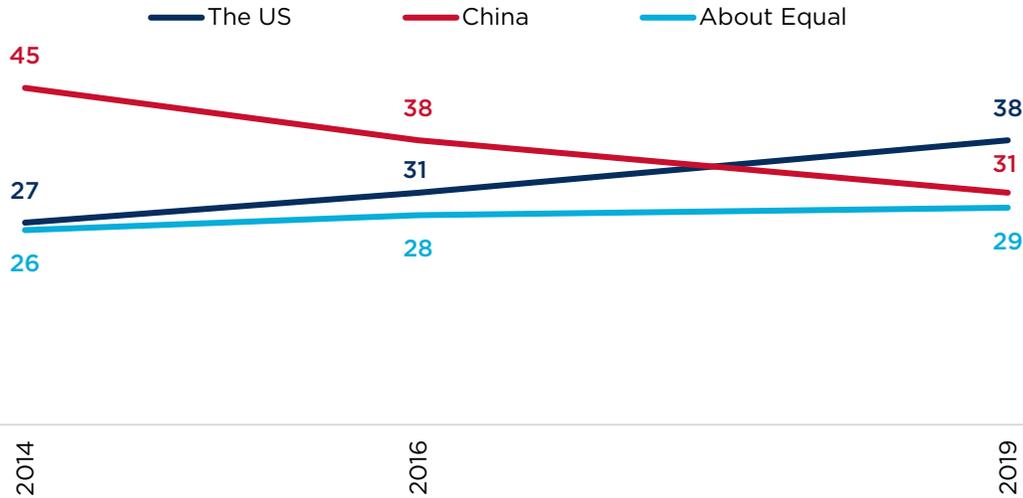
about equal, and one in ten (11%) say China is the stronger military power. This holds true across partisan lines, with few differences between partisan groups. Since the question was last asked in 2016, Americans have become more likely to see the United States as the stronger military power (58%, up from 50% in 2016). This occurs as the People’s Liberation Army continues its efforts to become a “world-class” military through an intense modernization program, as outlined in the [annual Department of Defense report](#) to Congress on Chinese military and security developments.



American perceptions of US economic power vis-à-vis China have also risen over the last five years. A plurality of Americans (38%) say the United States is economically stronger than China, up from one in four (27%) in 2014. Over the same time period, views of China as the stronger economy have fallen sharply. Today, three in ten Americans (31%) say China is more economically powerful than the United States, down from 45 percent in 2014. Over the same period, [Chinese PPP-adjusted gross domestic product](#) has outpaced that of the United States, though American nominal GDP remains larger, and in per-capita terms, China remains a poorer nation than the United States.

US vs. China: Economic Power

At the present time, which nation do you feel is stronger in terms of economic power, the United States or China - or do you think they are about equal economically? (%)



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 2,059

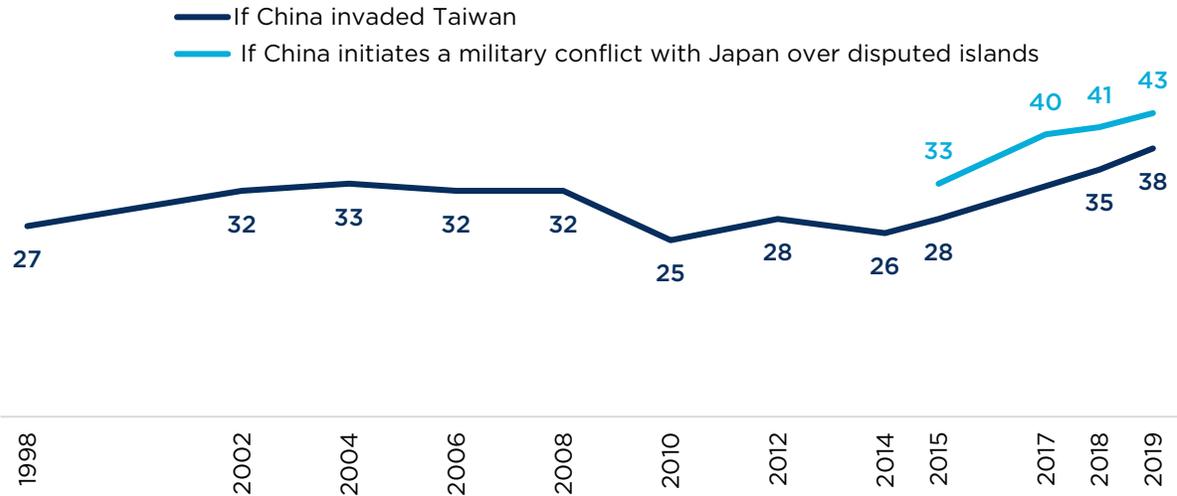
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Most Americans Oppose Using US Troops in Conflicts with China

Though Americans are confident in American military power vis-à-vis China, they remain hesitant to commit US troops to combat scenarios involving China. Minorities of Americans say they would favor the use of US troops if China initiated a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands (43%) or if China invaded Taiwan (38%). However, in both cases, public support for using US troops in a conflict with China is on the rise. Since 2015, each scenario has seen an increase of ten percentage points in support for US troop use, and both are now at all-time recorded highs in the Chicago Council's surveys.

US Troops in Conflicts Involving China

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: (%)



June 7-20, 2019 | n= 2,059

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Reflecting their greater view of China's rise as a threat to the United States, Republicans are somewhat more likely to favor the use of US troops in both scenarios. Four in ten (42%) favor using US troops to defend Taiwan, compared to 38 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of Independents. And should China and Japan get into a military conflict over disputed islands, Republicans are divided over whether the US should use troops (48% favor, 49% oppose), while majorities of Democrats (58%) and Independents (57%) are opposed.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.3 , including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Additional results come from the 2018 Chicago Council Survey, conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel July 12-31, 2018 among a weighted national sample of 2,046 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.37 , including a design effect of 1.1954.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

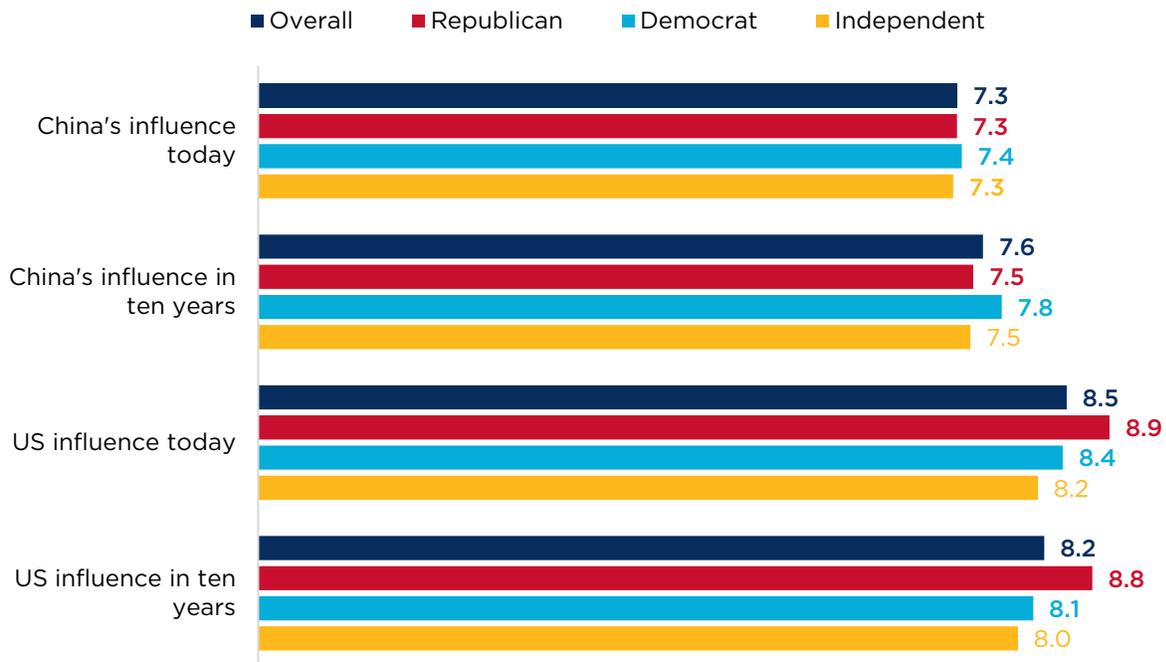
The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

Appendix

US and Chinese Influence

I would like to know how much influence you think each of the following countries has in the world. Please answer on a 0 to 10 scale; with 0 meaning they are not at all influential and 10 meaning they are extremely influential. (mean)

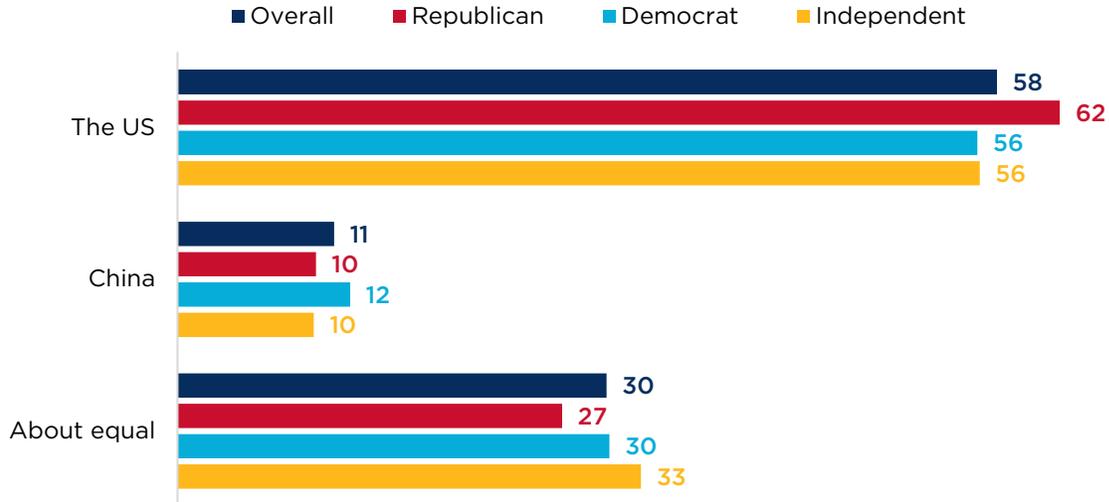
Using the same 10 point scale, please say how much influence you think each of the following countries will have in the world 10 years from now. (mean)



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 2,059
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

US vs. China: Military Power

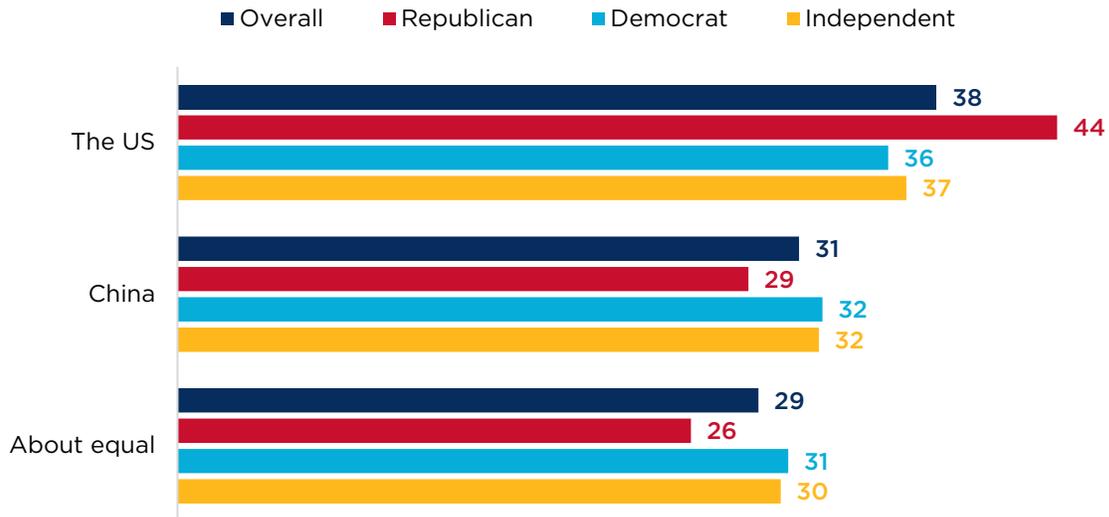
At the present time, which nation do you feel is stronger in terms of military power, the United States or China – or do you think they are about equal militarily? (%)



June 7-20, 2019 | n = 2,059
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

US vs. China: Economic Power

At the present time, which nation do you feel is stronger in terms of economic power, the United States or China – or do you think they are about equal economically? (%)



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