

Divisions on US-China Policy: Opinion Leaders and the Public

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As President Joseph Biden returns to the White House, this time to sit behind the Resolute desk, perhaps no foreign policy question looms larger than that of US-China relations. The results of the 2020 Chicago Council Survey and the 2020 [Chicago Council on Global Affairs-University of Texas at Austin survey](#) of foreign policy professionals and the American public find there are significant partisan differences among leaders and the public on the degree of threat posed by China and how the United States should respond. When it comes to defending Taiwan, however, the divisions are not between partisans but between the public and opinion leaders, with the public in opposition and leaders in support of an American defense of Taiwan.

Key Findings

- A large majority of opinion leaders, regardless of partisan preference, believe the United States is very or somewhat likely to make a major bipartisan effort to counter the rise of China in the next two years.
- A majority of Republicans among leaders and the public consider the development of China as a world power a critical threat to the United States, while fewer than half of Democratic leaders and the Democratic public agree.
- Republicans, both leaders and public, say the United States should aim to limit the growth of China's power rather than cooperate with China. Democrats are divided, but a majority of leaders and the public favor a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with Beijing.

- Majorities of opinion leaders across partisan lines support using US troops to defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion, while a majority of the American public opposes doing so, regardless of partisan affiliation.

Most Republicans See China as Critical Threat

As Biden takes office, he will inherit a more confrontational relationship with Beijing and a willingness among opinion leaders and the public at home to compete with China. How the United States responds to these changing attitudes, and the changing balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, will be a key test for the new administration.

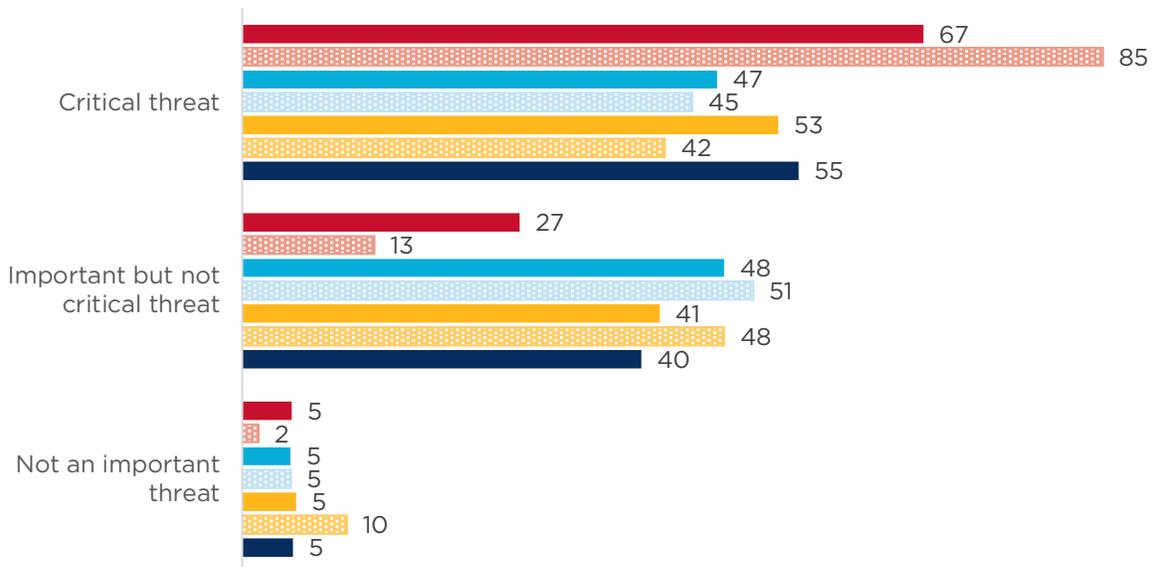
According to the 2020 Chicago Council-University of Texas survey of more than 900 US executive branch officials, congressional staff, think tank scholars, academics, journalists, and interest group representatives, experts expect the administration to take a competitive line on China. Nearly all opinion leaders, including large majorities of Republicans (97%), Democrats (91%), and Independents (93%) say the United States is very or somewhat likely to make a major effort to counter the rise of China in the next two years, and most of these leaders [expect that effort to be bipartisan](#).

One factor behind these expectations: the rising level of public concern about China. As the 2020 Chicago Council Survey of the American public shows, a majority of Americans (55%) see the rise of China as a critical threat to the United States. However, views of China as a threat run along partisan lines, with Republicans among the public and leaders alike more concerned about the extent of the threat posed by China's rise.

Leaders and the Public on: China as a Threat

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 (%)**

■ Republican Public
 ■ Republican Leaders
 ■ Democratic Public
 ■ Democratic Leaders
■ Independent Public
 ■ Independent Leaders
■ Overall Public



Leaders: August 3 - September 7, 2020 | n = 781

Public: July 2-19, 2020 | n = 1,634

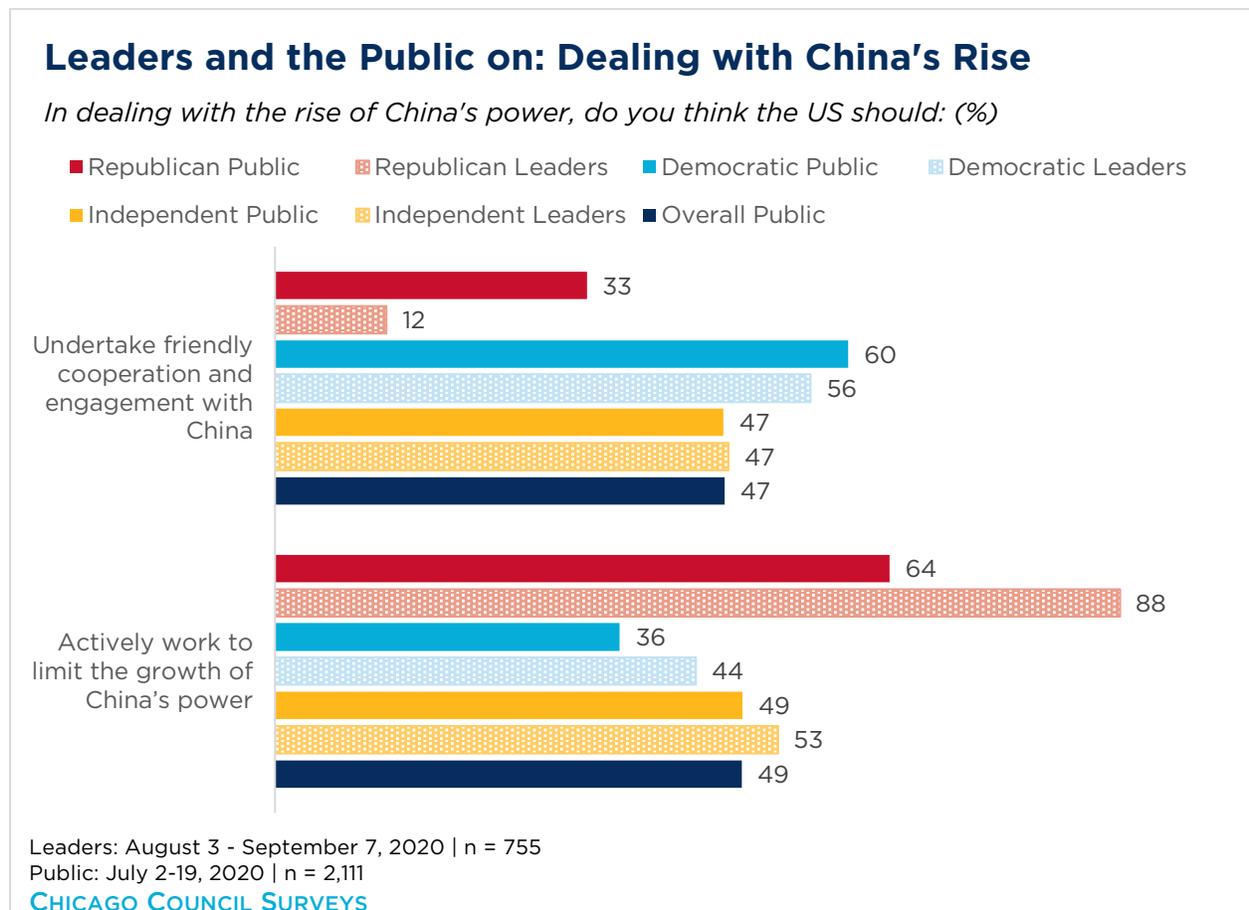
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

A large majority of Republican opinion leaders (85%), as well as two-thirds of the Republican public (67%), say the development of China as a world power represents a critical threat to the vital interest of the United States. Democrats are generally less concerned about China’s rise. Democratic leaders are divided, with similar proportions seeing it as a critical (45%) or an important, but not critical, threat (51%). Democrats among the public are similarly split, with a narrow majority seeing China’s rise as an important threat (48%) rather than a critical threat (47%). Independents, too, are divided, with four in ten leaders (42%) and half of the public (53%) seeing China’s rise as a critical threat.

Republicans, Democrats Split on How to Handle China’s Rise

Reflecting these partisan divisions on the threat posed by the rise of China, Republicans and Democrats are also divided on how to deal with the growth of Chinese power. Most Republican leaders (88%) and a majority of the Republican public (64%) say the United States should actively work to limit the growth of China’s power.

Many Democrats prefer a different approach. A majority of Democrats, among leaders (56%) and the public (60%), say the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China. Still, substantial minorities of Democrats, both among leaders (44%) and the public (36%), prefer an active US attempt to limit Chinese power. Independents, among leaders and the public, are divided. A narrow majority of Independent leaders (53%) prefer working to limit the growth of Chinese power, as do roughly half of the public (49%). Nearly as many Independent leaders and the public (47% each) favor a policy of cooperation and engagement.



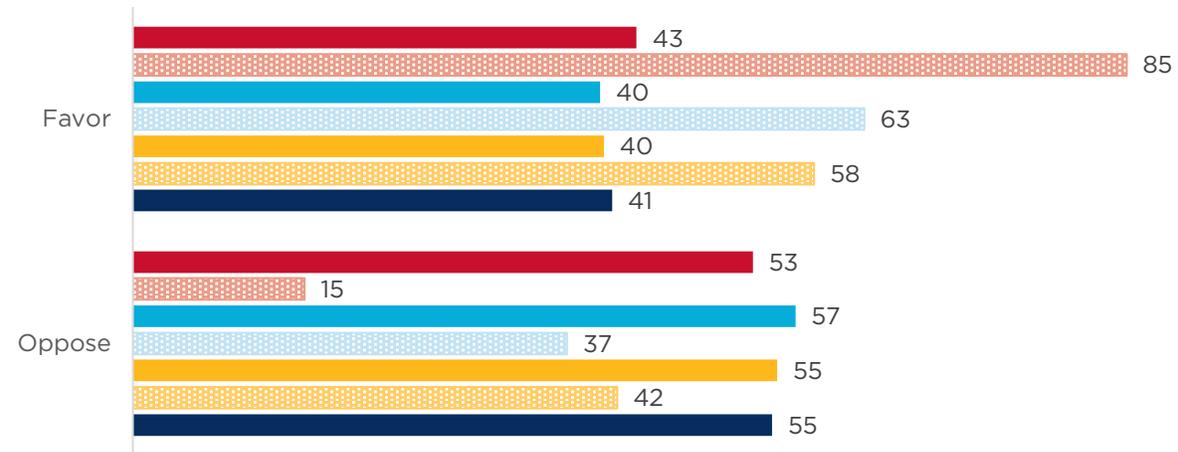
Opinion Leaders Favor Defending Taiwan from China; Public Opposed

Unlike views of China as a threat to the United States, or on the direction of American policy toward China, support for defending Taiwan from a Chinese invasion does not split along partisan lines. Instead, the dividing line is between opinion leaders and the public. Majorities of opinion leaders, including Republicans (85%), Democrats (63%), and Independents (58%) favor the use of US troops to defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion. By contrast, only four in ten among the public (41%) favor doing so, including similar proportions of Republicans (43%), Democrats (40%), and Independents (40%). Though public support for defending Taiwan has grown notably in recent years, rising from 26 percent support in 2014 to 41 percent today, it remains a minority position with the public.

Leaders and the Public on: Defending Taiwan

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: If China invaded Taiwan (% favor)

■ Republican Public
 ▨ Republican Leaders
 ■ Democratic Public
 ▨ Democratic Leaders
■ Independent Public
 ▨ Independent Leaders
 ■ Overall Public



Leaders: August 3 - September 7, 2020 | n = 774

Public: July 2-19, 2020 | n = 2,111

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Conclusions

Republicans and Democrats, both among leaders and the public, disagree about the broad strokes of Sino-American relations and how critical of a threat China’s rise represents to the United States. Republican opinion leaders, like the Republican public, take a fairly hawkish view of China, seeing its rise as a critical threat and calling for the United States to adopt a policy of limiting China’s rise. By contrast, Democrats are more inclined to seek cooperation and engagement, despite the downturn in US-China relations and rising public concerns. But that inclination to cooperation and engagement is not an open-ended one. Indeed, the broad bipartisan support among opinion leaders for the American defense of Taiwan against Chinese invasion suggests that there are some red lines for opinion leaders when it comes to the US-China relationship.

Additionally, early statements from Biden administration officials suggest that opinion leaders’ expectations of a bipartisan American effort to counter the rise of China may well be met. As Secretary of State Tony Blinken commented in his January 19 confirmation hearings, “President Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China. I disagree very much with the way he went about it...but the basic principle was the right one, and I think that’s helpful to our foreign policy.” That stance clearly reflects the [broader shift among Democrats](#) on Sino-American relations over the past two years. That shift now looks to define not just American policy toward China but US foreign policy more broadly. As White House Press

Secretary Jen Psaki said in a January 25 press briefing, “We’re in a serious competition with China. Strategic competition with China is a defining feature of the 21st century.”

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2020 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2020 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 2–19, 2020, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,111 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 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.2056. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Opinion leader data comes from the 2020 Chicago Council-University of Texas Survey of Foreign Policy Opinion Leaders. The opinion leaders survey was conducted August 3 to September 9, 2020, among 927 foreign policy opinion leaders from different professional groups, including executive branch agencies, Congress, academia, think tanks, the media, interest groups and nongovernmental organizations, religious institutions, labor unions, and business. The data is presented without weighting adjustments for group size and so is not suitable for comparison to past years’ opinion leader data.

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 2020 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

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