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China and the World

Chinese Public Opinion on International Affairs,
Foreign Policy, and China's Global Role

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Table of Contents

Chinese Public Divided on Whether Beijing Should Seek Shared Leadership or Global Dominance	3
Chinese Public Wants a Balanced Approach to the United States	15
Chinese Public Broadly Confident in China's Economy	26
Friends with Benefits: Chinese See Russia and North Korea as Beijing's Closest Comrades	38
Survey Methodology	45
About the Chicago Council and The Carter Center	46

Chinese Public Divided on Whether Beijing Should Seek Shared Leadership or Global Dominance

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September 2025

New research conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Carter Center offers a rare window into the attitudes of everyday Chinese citizens' on international affairs. The survey, conducted April 25 to June 16, 2025, reveals a Chinese public confident about its country's status as a global power, and the interest of everyday Chinese citizens in their country's continued global involvement is striking, given the opposite trend in recent surveys of American public opinion. At least on these issues, the results reveal a public that looks likely to support Beijing's aspirations to shape global power dynamics in China's favor.

There are numerous challenges in conducting surveys in China, including designing a representative sample, a closed media environment, and the potential for self-censorship. While treating these results with a degree of skepticism is healthy, previous and repeated surveys conducted by [other organizations](#) have found similar patterns among Chinese public opinion on international issues.

Key Findings

- Nine in 10 Chinese support their country's active participation in world affairs (90%).
- Part of this enthusiasm stems from a sense that China is a leading power in the world: Large majorities say their country is in at least a somewhat strong position in the world (97%) and expect it to get at least somewhat stronger in the next five years (95%).

- Seven in 10 Chinese respondents say China has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world (69%) versus three in 10 who say China is no greater than any other country (30%).
- While a plurality prefer China play a shared leadership role in the world (48%), four in 10 say it should take a dominant one (41%). One in 10 feel China should play no leadership role (11%).

Chinese Public Backs Xi's Nationalist Ambitions

This Chicago Council survey focused solely on foreign policy issues to minimize any sensitivities around domestic politics. One common theme that emerges [from these studies](#) is that nationalism is alive and well in China (and apparently [has been for some time](#)), in sync with messaging from Chinese leadership. In a party conference [speech](#) marking the end of Chinese President Xi Jinping's first term in office in 2017, Xi proclaimed "the Chinese nation . . . has stood up, grown rich, and become strong—and it now embraces the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation. . . . It will be an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind." These Chicago Council survey findings illustrate that Xi has widespread public backing for these aspirations.

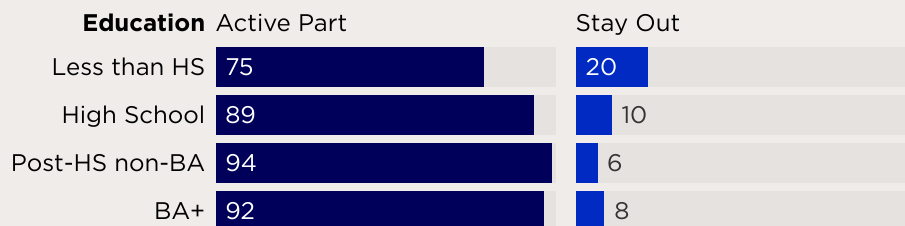
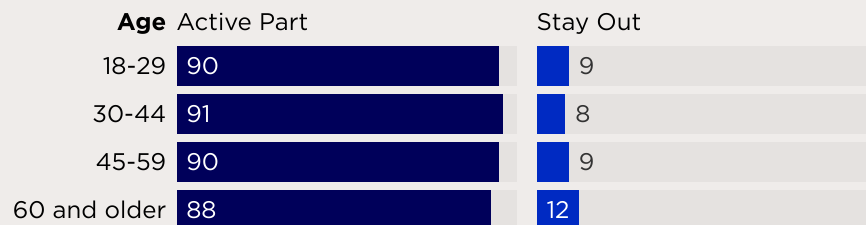
Nine in 10 Chinese Support an Active Role for China on the World Stage

When asked whether they support or oppose an active role for China in world affairs, the percentage of Chinese respondents who support active global participation is striking. Nine in 10 Chinese say it is best for China's future if their country takes an active part in world affairs (90%). This is a remarkable proportion compared to American public opinion on this question. Over the past 50 years of Chicago Council Surveys, the highest percentage of Americans who supported an active part in world affairs for the United States was 71 percent, recorded in 2002, after the September 11 attacks. By contrast, in the 2024 Chicago Council Survey, just 56 percent of Americans preferred an active US global role in world affairs, one of the lowest levels on record.

The view that China should take an active global role is held widely across Chinese of all ages, education levels, and income categories. Those Chinese with less than a high school education are the most likely to favor staying out of world affairs (20%), but three in four (75%) still favor an active part for China.

Broad Support for an Active Part in World Affairs

Do you think it will be best for the future of China if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? (%)



April 25 - June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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Military, Economy, and Technology Contribute to China's Influence

Part of this enthusiasm stems from a sense that China is a leading power in the world. Its rapid economic development since the 1980s has expanded the country's technological independence and global footprint—particularly through trade partnerships and development assistance programs, like the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has also become influential in international organizations like the United Nations, the World Bank, and BRICS.

In fact, almost all Chinese (97%) say their country is in a strong overall position in the world (43% very strong, 54% somewhat) and think China will only enhance its position over the next five years (95%; 46% grow much

stronger, 49% somewhat stronger). Only a handful see China's current position as weak (3%) and getting weaker in five years (4%).



When asked what has made China so influential, the Chinese people point mostly to their country's military strength (79% very important), technology and innovation (76%), and economic power (73%) as the most important reasons their country is so influential today.

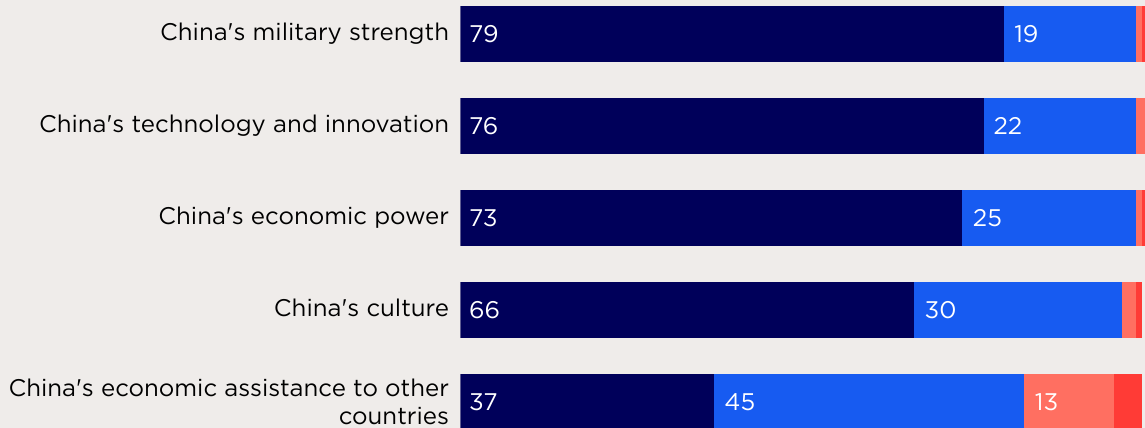
Two-thirds also believe Chinese culture is very important to national influence (66%). While many consider China's economic assistance to other countries as important to Chinese global influence, they tend to view it as somewhat important (45%) rather than very important (37%).¹

¹ A 2024 [Tsinghua University public opinion survey](#) found that 45 percent of Chinese respondents thought China's foreign aid is "excessive."

Sources of China's Influence in the World

How important do you think each of the following is to China's influence in the world today? (%)

■ Very important ■ Somewhat important ■ Not very important ■ Not important at all



April 25-June 16, 2025 | n = 1,002

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Public Perceptions of Economy Affect Views of Beijing's Influence

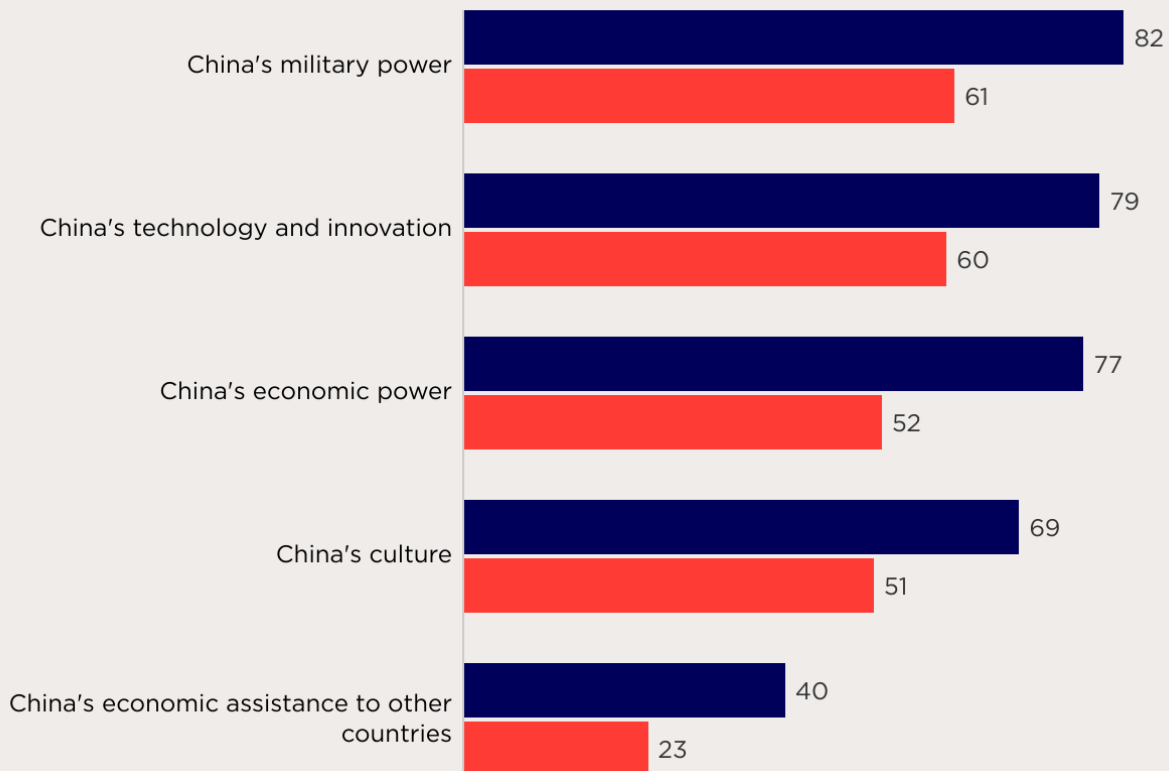
Chinese economic gains appear to be a factor in these views. While only a minority of the overall Chinese public [say economic conditions are very good](#) (21%, compared to 63% somewhat good), this group is much more likely than others to say the country's global position is very strong (71% compared to 43% overall) (see appendix table 1).

In addition, respondents' economic assessments also influence the extent to which other factors play a role in their assessments of Chinese influence. For example, at least nine in 10 Chinese citizens who rate China's economic situation as very good believe China's military strength, technology and innovation, and economic power are all important elements in China's clout. But these majorities decline with each downward increment in perceptions of the economy's condition. At the other extreme, those who rate the economy as very bad are least likely to consider these factors important (though a majority of even this group consider China's military strength to be an important factor).

Economic Conditions and Sources of China's Influence

How important do you think each of the following is to China's influence in the world today? (% very important)

- Current economic conditions for China are very good/somewhat good
- Current economic conditions for China are somewhat bad/very bad



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Chinese Public Internalizes Idea of Chinese Exceptionalism

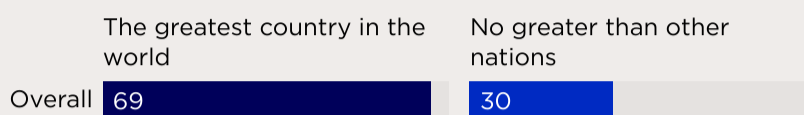
Chinese leaders have passed on [their own versions](#) of Chinese “exceptionalism” that [underscore](#) China’s unique characteristics that differentiate it from Western nations. Given this type of messaging from leaders along with the public’s expressions of confidence in China’s international standing, the Chinese people are not shy about their country’s achievements. Seven in 10 Chinese say their country has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world (69%) versus three in 10 who say it is no greater than other nations (30%). Belief in China’s exceptionalism

is especially prevalent among older age groups, though a majority of the youngest Chinese cohort also say China is the greatest. In addition, an even larger majority of those who think the Chinese economy is very good say China is the greatest (83%).

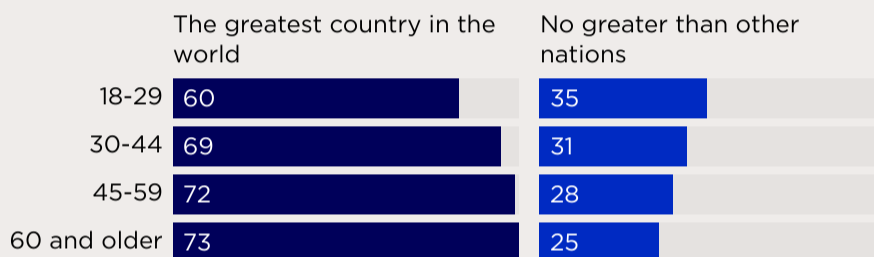
Attitudes Toward Chinese Exceptionalism

Some people say China has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. Others say that every country is unique, and China is no greater than other nations. Which view is closer to your own? (%)

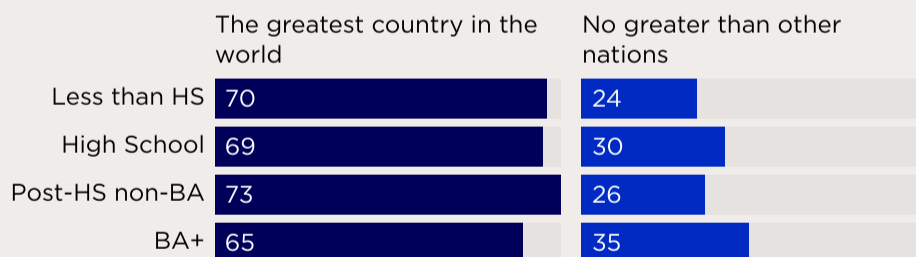
■ The greatest country in the world ■ No greater than other nations



Age



Education



Interested in international news and international current events



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Plurality Prefer Shared Global Leadership, but Many Prefer Chinese Dominance

China has effectively marshaled forces [within some of the international institutions and agreements](#) created and legitimated by the United States, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, and has wielded its veto power to temper the influence of the United States and its Western allies. When Beijing disagrees with some of the norms of organizations within the current international system (such as on human rights), it has sought to create [alternative models and organizations](#) that push for more multipolar governance structures.

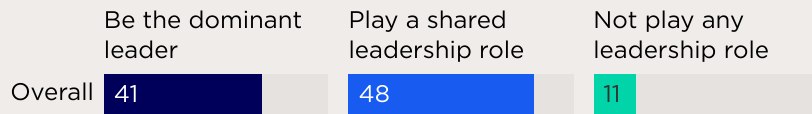
The Chinese public seems to be of two minds on whether China should share global leadership or try to dominate the international stage. While a plurality prefers their country to play a shared leadership role in the world (48%), a sizable four in 10 say it should take a dominant one (41%). One in 10 feel China should have no leadership role (11%).

Unlike many other issues, when it comes to China's leadership role in the world, the public shows more notable divisions along demographic lines. For one, women (45%) are more likely than men (38%) to prefer a dominant role for China. Older Chinese are also more likely to favor a dominant role for China, while those 18 to 29 are the strongest proponents of shared leadership. And those Chinese with at least a college degree are notably more inclined to favor a shared (57%) rather than dominant (35%) leadership role for China.

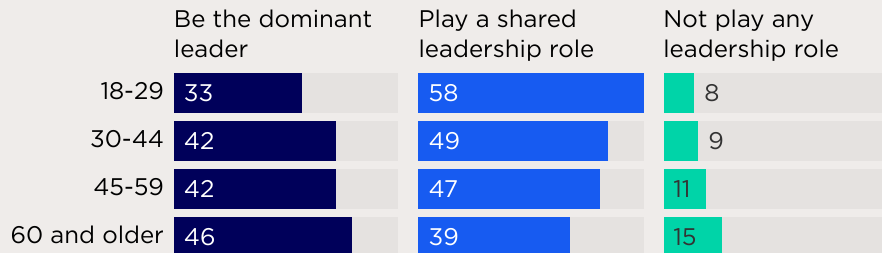
China's Leadership Role in the World

What kind of leadership role should China play in the world? Should it be the dominant leader, play a shared leadership role, or should it not play any leadership role? (%)

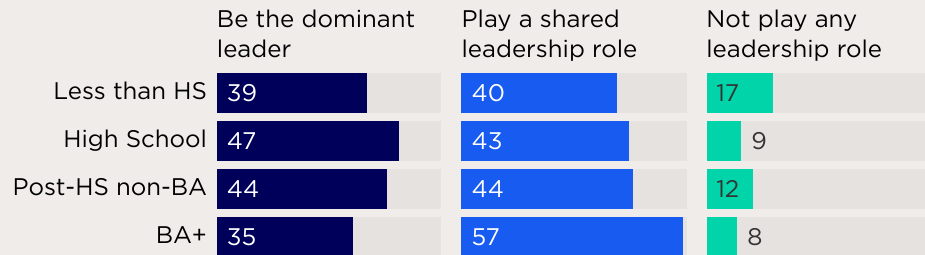
■ Be the dominant leader ■ Play a shared leadership role ■ Not play any leadership role



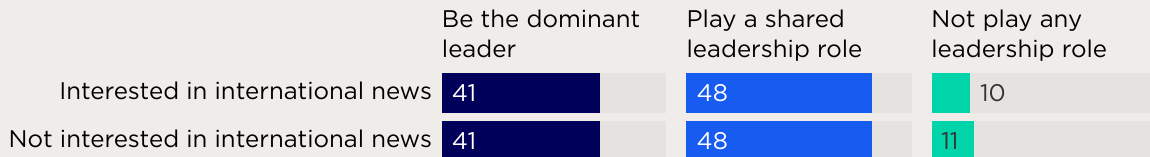
Age



Education



Interested in international news and international current events



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Chinese View UN Participation as Important, Favor Working through United Nations

One way China is already playing a shared leadership role is by participating in the United Nations, where its permanent seat on the UN Security Council and veto powers also give Beijing significant influence. Chinese involvement accelerated when the country started globalizing in the 1990s. Beijing's influence in the United Nations has [increased substantially](#) as China has attained key leadership positions in various UN agencies, increased the number of Chinese nationals working in the UN framework, and boosted financial contributions to UN programs. This has given China more sway in influencing global standards and practices in ways that reflect its economic and political interests.

These gains have not been lost on the public: Two in three Chinese believe their country's participation in the United Nations has been very important for influencing global policies (68%), while 28 percent say it has been somewhat important. And the Chinese do not seem to think global problems need to always be decided solely on Chinese terms: A solid majority agree China should be more willing to make decisions on global problems within the UN framework even if it means China will sometimes have to compromise on policies that aren't its first choice (77%). Just 23 percent disagree.

This dovetails with findings from [survey conducted by China's Tsinghua University in April 2024](#) that shows that Chinese are divided over how China should address disagreements between it and other countries. That survey found that four in 10 think China should rely on China's own strength to resolve such disagreements (42%), compared to a third who prefer to rely on multilateral institutions like the United Nations and international law (33%) and a quarter who say China should cooperate with countries that support China (25%).

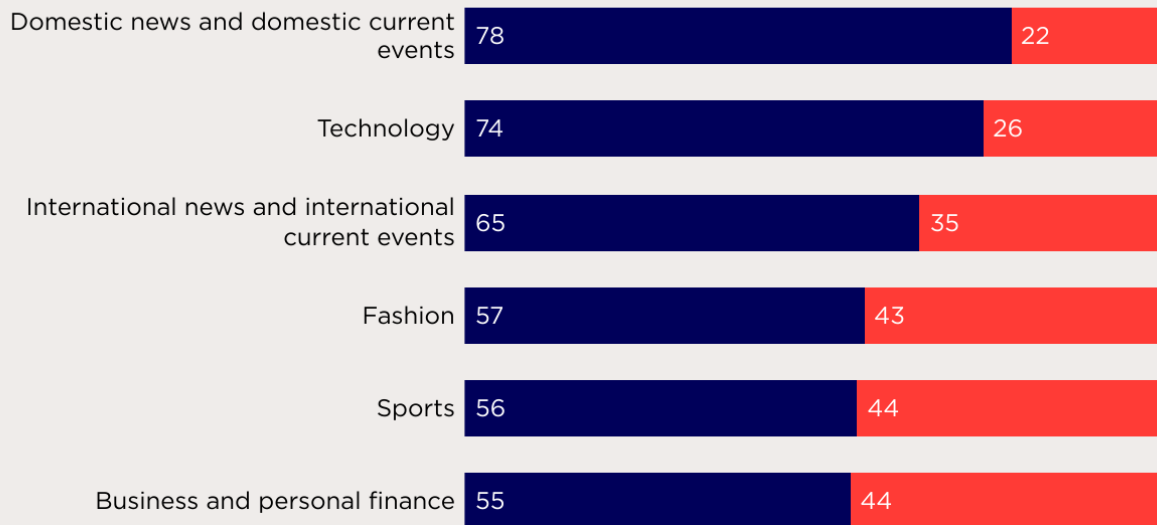
Majority of Chinese Interested in International News and Events

The public in China shows great interest in international news and current events (65% interested) and an even greater interest in technology (74%) and domestic news (78%). Majorities are also interested in other topics such as business and personal finance (55%), fashion (57%), and sports (56%).

Interest in News Topics among Chinese Citizens

I will read you topics that people might be interested in. As I read this list, please tell me for each topic whether or not you personally are interested in it. (%)

■ Yes, I am interested ■ No, I am not interested



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A comparison of the globally interested and uninterested portions of the public does not reveal a strong bearing on Chinese attitudes toward their country's role in the world. Those who indicate they are interested in international news are more likely to support an active role for China on the global stage, but this preference is strong across the entire public (93% interested vs. 82% uninterested). And the interested (79%) are more likely than the uninterested (71%) to agree that China should be open to compromising within the United Nations. For the most part, attention to world matters does not appear to be a strong factor shaping Chinese foreign policy attitudes.

Conclusion

Given the remarkable rise of Chinese military and economic advancement, the public seems cognizant of the clout their country wields internationally. A key difference between Chinese views of Beijing's role in the world compared to American views of Washington's role is that China's public support is widespread across all demographic groups, while the public in the United States is much more fragmented, especially by partisan affiliation. At the moment, these data seem to show there is solid public support among the Chinese public for Beijing advancing its international agenda. In fact, the current US administration's decisions to pull back from global engagement and international institutions will likely facilitate Beijing's international profile and influence even if it does not fill all the gaps left by US retreat.

Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Perceptions of China's Current Economic Conditions

How would you assess current economic conditions for China overall? Are they very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad or very bad? (%)

	Overall
Very good	21
Somewhat good	63
Somewhat bad	13
Very bad	4
Don't know enough to say	0

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Chinese Public Wants a Balanced Approach to the United States

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September 2025

New research conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Carter Center offers a rare window into the attitudes of everyday Chinese citizens on international affairs. The survey, conducted April 25 to June 16, 2025, reveals that few Chinese view the United States as a friend to China (17%, 83% not). And though the public is [confident in China's future global influence and economic stature](#), it is divided over whether the United States or China is currently stronger militarily and economically. Perhaps as a result, the Chinese public wants Beijing to use a mix of cooperation and containment in its approach to Washington. And in a relationship that the Chinese public views as primarily founded on trade and economic ties, the ongoing tension over tariffs and export controls has notable effects on Chinese views of the United States and US-China relations more broadly.

There are numerous challenges in conducting surveys in China, including designing a representative sample, a closed media environment, and the potential for self-censorship. While treating these results with a degree of skepticism is healthy, previous and repeated surveys conducted by [other organizations](#) have found similar patterns among Chinese public opinion on international issues.

Key Findings

- Most Chinese (61%) say China should pursue a dual-pronged approach to the United States, undertaking either friendly cooperation or limiting US power when appropriate.
- The Chinese public is divided over which country—China or the United States—is stronger economically or militarily.
- Those who see the United States as a stronger economic power are more likely to favor friendly cooperation with the United States (32% vs. 23% overall). Those who see China as stronger are more likely to favor actively limiting American power (25% vs 15% overall).

- The top two perceived threats to China both involve the United States: 57 percent say a US-China conflict over Taiwan is a major threat, and 55 percent say economic competition with the United States is a major threat.
- Most Chinese say trade between China and the United States does more to strengthen China's national security (71%) than it does to weaken it (28%).
- Examining responses before and after the May 12 announcement of a US-China trade agreement, views of the United States improved, and support for binational cooperation increased following the announcement.

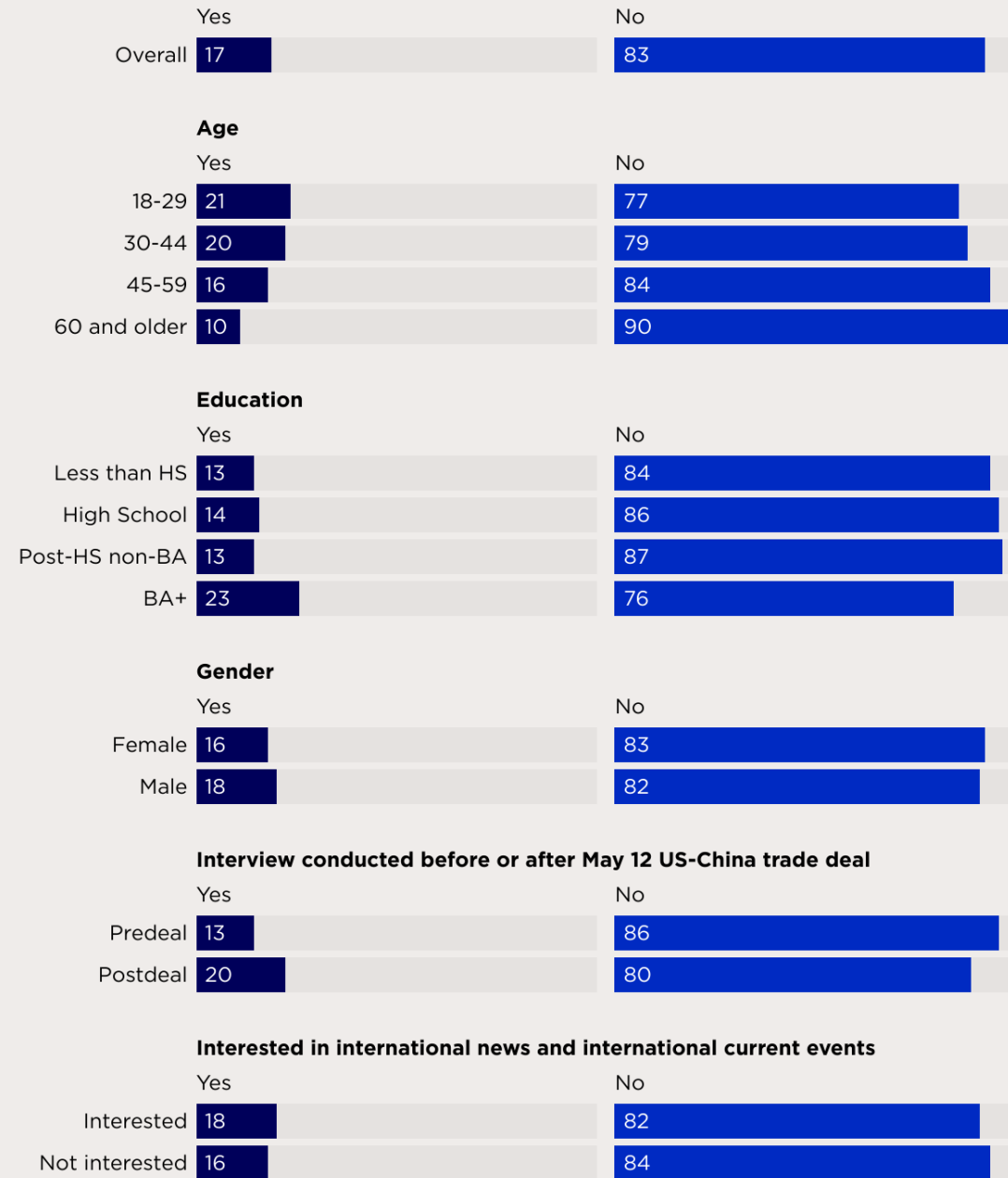
Few Chinese See the United States as a Friend to China

The last decade has been a difficult period for the US-China relationship. US President Donald Trump, in his first term in office, levied wide-ranging tariffs on Chinese goods in an effort to reset US-China trade relations. President Joe Biden continued these tariffs, escalating some, in what became a focusing element of US foreign policy: great power competition between the United States and China. As US-China relations have taken a sharp turn toward increasingly comprehensive competition, American opinion on China has grown increasingly negative, [according to Chicago Council Surveys](#)—and reciprocal views across the Pacific are also quite negative.

Today, the Chicago Council/Carter Center survey finds just 17 percent of Chinese say the United States is a friend to China, while 83 percent say it is not. This is the lowest percentage recorded [for all the countries asked about](#), and it rivals Chinese low opinion of Japan (18% friend, 81% not a friend). These findings are consistent with results from a [survey conducted by China's Tsinghua University in April 2024](#), which found that 81 percent of Chinese people held unfavorable views of the US government. Other public opinion surveys conducted in China suggest that these views represent a further decline in the Chinese public's esteem for the United States. A [Eurasia Group Foundation poll](#) in 2020, for example, found 39 percent of the Chinese public held a favorable view of the United States (28% unfavorable, 33% neutral). Contemporary negative opinions of the United States hold true across age and educational groups, though younger Chinese and those with a college education or higher are somewhat more likely to view the United States as a friend of China.

Few Chinese View US as a Friend to China

For each of the following, please say if you think it's a friend to China or not? **The United States** (%)



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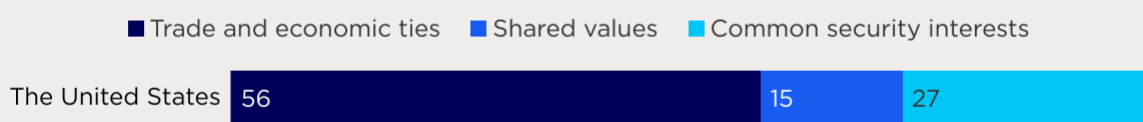
At the same time, survey evidence also suggests that these negative attitudes may not be fixed but are responsive to events in the US-China relationship. Because our survey was in the field when Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping agreed to a [tentative trade deal](#), the data allow for pre- and postdeal comparisons. Prior to the agreement, just 13 percent of Chinese viewed the United States as a friend; afterward, that rose to 20 percent—a notable uptick in attitudes.

Economic Relationship Seen as Most Important Basis for US-China Relations; Most Say Trade with the United States Strengthens China's National Security

One additional reason the May 12 de-escalation of tariffs agreed to in Geneva affected public attitudes: A majority of Chinese point to trade and economic ties as the most important basis for the US-China relationship (56%), with smaller proportions naming common security interests (27%) or shared values (15%). With the economic relationship acting as the primary ballast for US-China ties, changes in that relationship may have more significant effects on Chinese public attitudes toward the United States.

Trade and Economic Ties Most Important Basis for US-China Relations

*What do you think is the most important basis for the relationship between China and the following. Is it trade and economic ties, shared values, or common security interests? **The United States** (%)*



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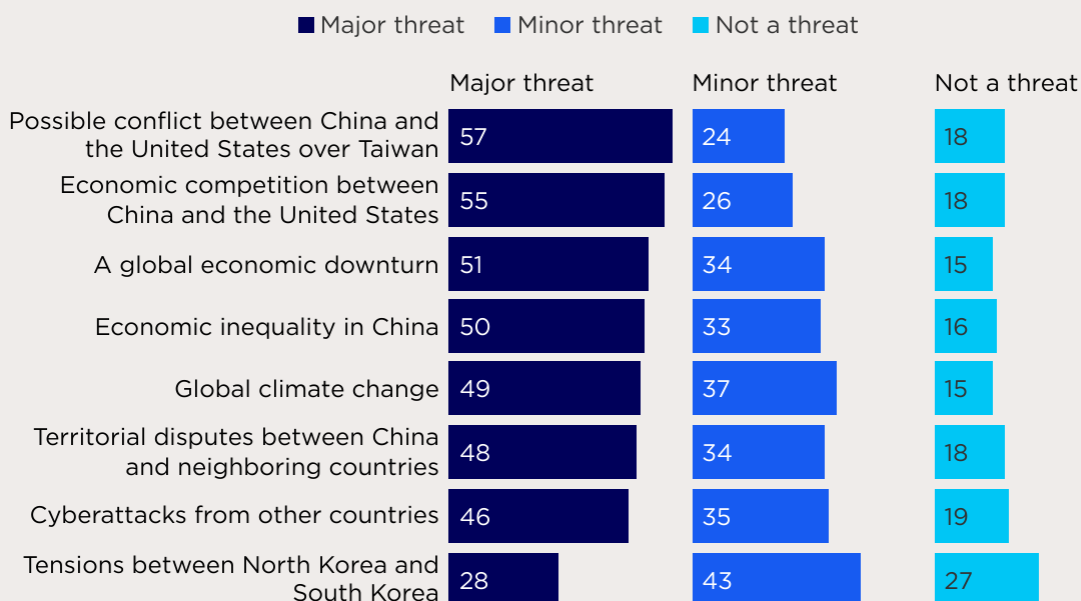
Although the economic relationship has been strained in recent years, most Chinese say trade between China and the United States does more to strengthen China's national security (71%) than it does to weaken it (28%). In a [notable contrast to American opinion](#) in recent years, Chinese support for US-China trade is consistent with results from [Carter Center polling](#) in 2024, despite negative attitudes toward the United States. This view holds across a range of demographic groups. And as with several other questions about US-China relations, the May 12 trade announcement boosted views that US-China trade is good for China's national security: rising from 68 percent beforehand to 74 percent after the announcement.

Majorities of Chinese View US Economic Competition, Potential Taiwan Conflict as Major Threats

Issues involving the United States lead a list of potential concerns for the Chinese public. Nearly six in 10 (57%) believe a possible conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan represents a major threat to China, while a quarter (24%) say it is a minor threat, and just 18 percent do not view it as a threat at all. About the same proportion say economic competition between China and the United States is a critical threat to China (55%, vs. 26% minor threat, 18% not a threat).

Possible Threats to China

I'd like your opinion about some possible concerns for China. For each of the following items, do you think it is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to China?



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Those who are interested in international news and those who hold a college degree are more likely to view both issues as a major threat to China. This pattern holds across most of the potential threats to China asked about in the question (see appendix figures A and B).

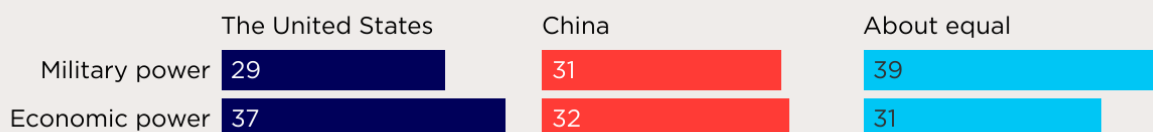
Chinese Public Divided on Assessing US Economic and Military Power

The Chinese public is split over whether China or the United States is the stronger power, both economically and militarily. When it comes to military power, a plurality (39%) say the two nations are about equal. The rest of the public is divided, with similar proportions viewing China (31%) and the United States (29%) as the stronger military power. Economically, a narrow plurality (37%) view the United States as the stronger power, with a third (32%) viewing China as the stronger, and another three in 10 (31%) saying the United States and China are about equal.

Chinese Public Divided over US-China Balance of 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?

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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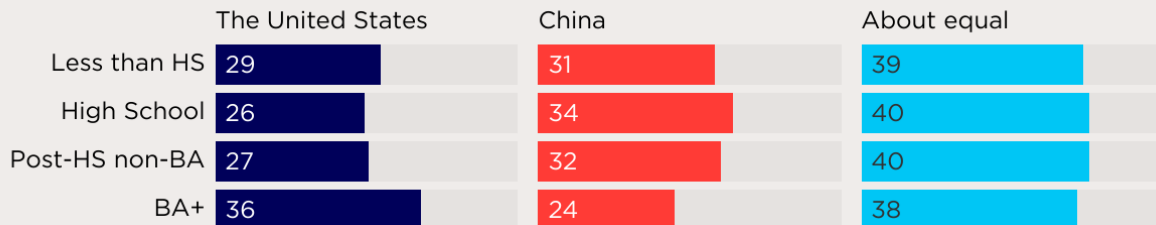


While views of comparative US-China power are generally similar across age cohorts, those with a higher level of education are more likely to say that the United States is the stronger economic and military power. Half of Chinese with a bachelor's degree or higher (49%) say the United States is the stronger economic power, and a third (36%) say the same for the military balance of power.

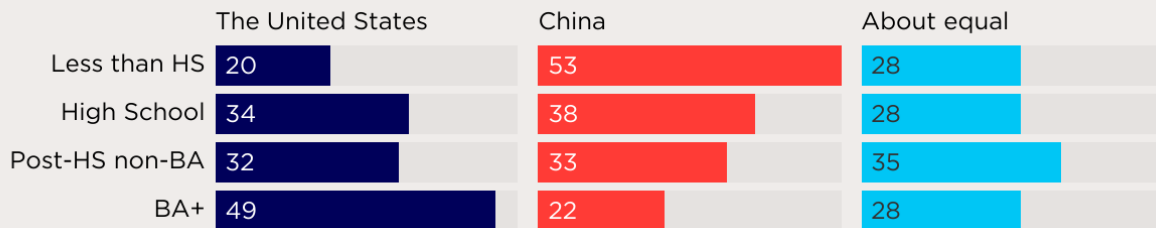
Education and Power Perceptions

■ The United States ■ China ■ About equal

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?



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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Most Want China to Pursue a Balanced Approach to the United States

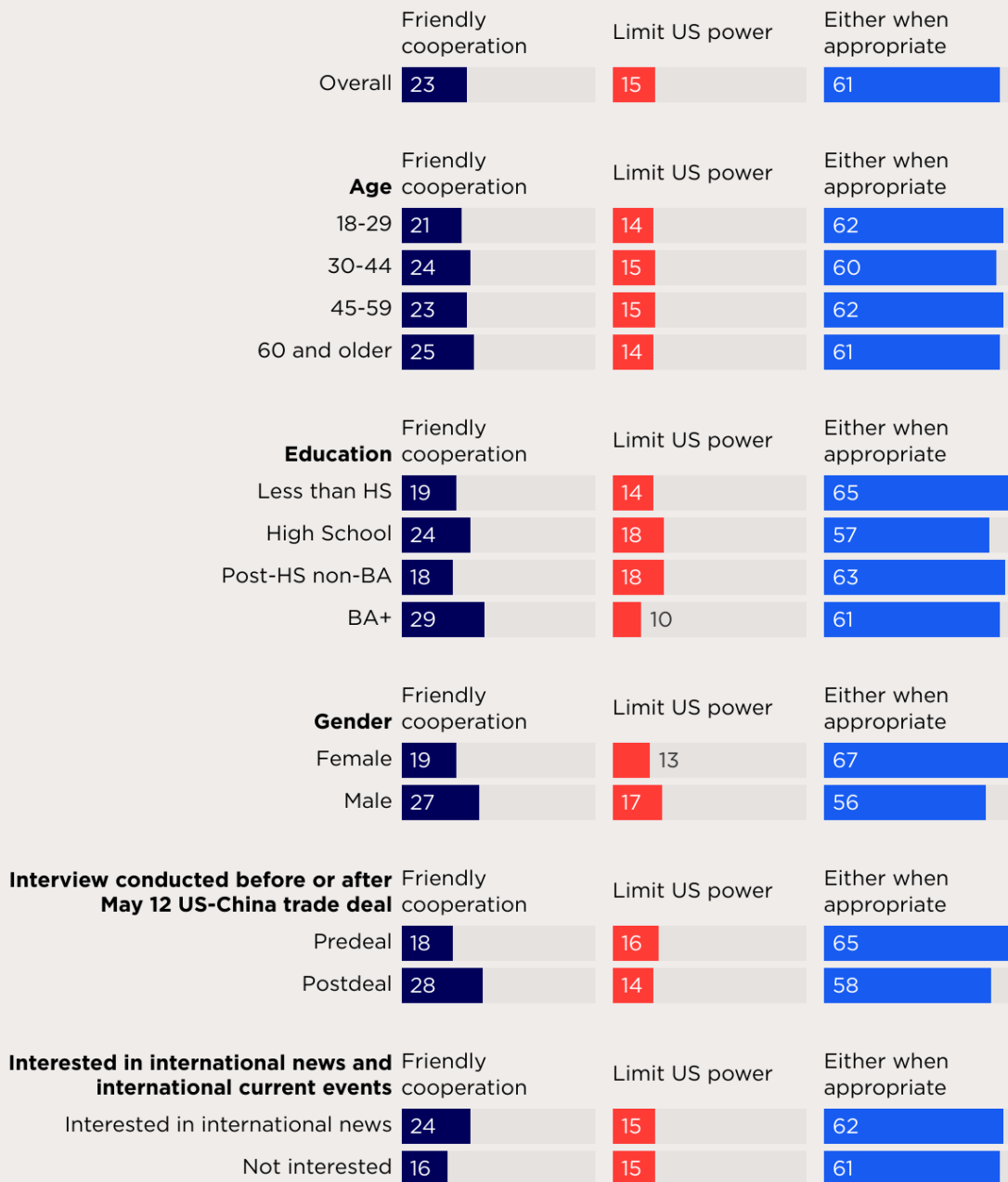
Most Chinese say their country should pursue a balance of approaches to the United States, undertaking friendly cooperation when appropriate and limiting US power when appropriate (61%). Fewer say Beijing should pursue primarily a policy of friendly cooperation (23%) or a policy of actively limiting US power (15%). This preference for a balanced approach holds true across a variety of demographic groups, though men are more likely than women to favor pursuing friendly cooperation without conditions.

The trade deal reached in May between Washington and Beijing also had a distinct effect on the Chinese public's preferred approach to the United States. Prior to the deal's announcement, just 18 percent of the public wanted Beijing to pursue a policy of friendly cooperation; this rose to 28 percent following the May 12 trade deal. This again indicates that Chinese public opinion toward the United States and US-related policies is sensitive to developments in the US-China relationship.

Most Chinese Want a Balanced Approach to US-China Relations

In dealing with the United States, do you think China should undertake friendly cooperation with the United States, actively work to limit US power, or undertake friendly cooperation when appropriate and limit US power when appropriate? (%)

■ Friendly cooperation ■ Limit US power ■ Either when appropriate



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Another factor affecting public policy preferences is the perception of the US-China balance of power. Those who see the United States as a stronger economic power are more likely to favor friendly cooperation with the United States (32% vs. 23% overall). Those who see China as stronger are more likely to favor actively limiting American power (25% vs 15% overall). And those who see the two nations as equally matched economically are the most likely to favor pursuing a balanced policy (71%). Similarly, those Chinese who see the United States as the stronger military power are more likely to favor pursuing friendly cooperation with the United States (36% vs. 23% overall)—though there are no significant differences between those who say China is stronger and those who see the two militaries as evenly matched.

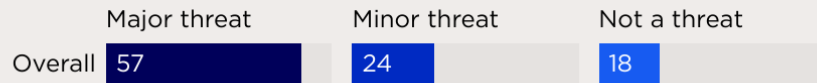
Conclusion

On the one hand, the Chinese public clearly does not see the United States as a friend to China. In that, they are matched by Americans' own [increasingly-negative views of China](#). However, the Chinese public is not unremittingly hostile toward the United States, and [like the attitudes of most Americans](#) toward China, they want to see their government pursue a balanced approach in relations with Washington. Additionally, the Chinese public's views of the United States and US policy are notably responsive to news and developments in the US-China relationship. This suggests that should Beijing and Washington succeed in their ongoing trade and tariff negotiations, Chinese public opinion could become more favorable toward the United States—and should they fail, those views could turn even more negative. Moreover, many among the Chinese public see their country as America's equal militarily and economically—and significant portions believe Beijing has the upper hand on both fronts. Though the Chinese public is hardly spoiling for a confrontation with Washington and views potential economic and military conflicts with the United States as critical threats, this polling suggests they are unlikely to be cowed by American pressure.

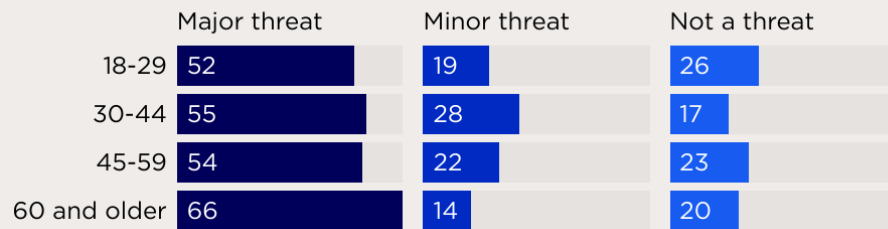
Appendix

Appendix Figure A: Threat of a US-China Conflict over Taiwan

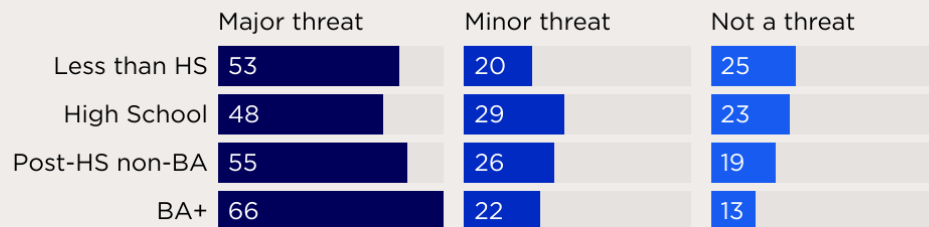
*I'd like your opinion about some possible concerns for China. For each of the following items, do you think it is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to China? **Possible conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan** (%)*



Age



Education



Interested in international news and international current events



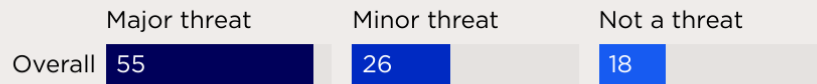
April 25 - June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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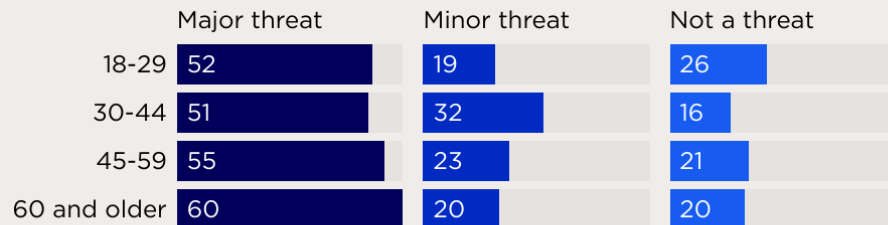


Appendix Figure B: Threat of a US-China Economic Competition

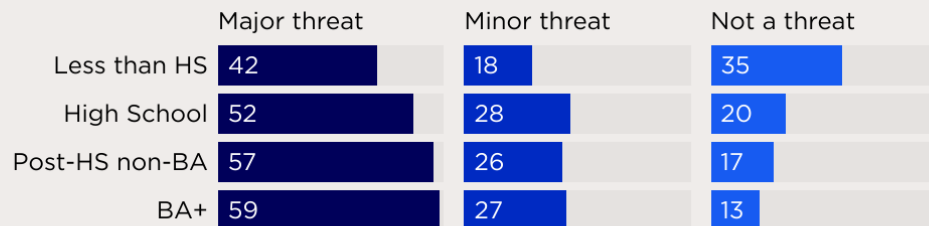
*I'd like your opinion about some possible concerns for China. For each of the following items, do you think it is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to China? **Economic competition between China and the United States** (%)*



Age



Education



Interested in international news and international current events



April 25 - June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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Chinese Public Broadly Confident in Country's Economy

Sam Dong, Research Consultant, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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Dina Smeltz, Vice President and Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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September 2025

New research conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Carter Center offers a rare window into the attitudes of everyday Chinese citizens on international affairs. Fielded April 25 to June 16, 2025, the survey results show that despite the challenges of US-China economic competition, [a real estate slump, and slowed consumer spending](#), the Chinese public is generally upbeat about China's current economic conditions and believes the economy will continue to improve. This extends to their own personal economic situation. Additionally, the Chinese public broadly embraces international free trade as good for their standard of living, job creation, and the Chinese economy, despite US President Donald Trump's "[Liberation Day](#)" [tariffs](#) and Chinese [countermeasures](#) which were in effect at the start of this survey. Though demographic factors like age and education affect perceptions somewhat, the data paint an overall picture of a Chinese public with economic confidence and strong support for global trade.

There are numerous challenges in conducting surveys in China, including designing a representative sample, a closed media environment, and the potential for self-censorship. While treating these results with a degree of skepticism is healthy, previous and repeated surveys conducted by [other organizations](#) have found similar patterns among Chinese public opinion on international issues.

Key Findings

- A large majority (84%) believe China's economy is doing well overall, and more than half feel comfortable with their own personal financial conditions, with a majority saying they have disposable income after taking care of necessities (56%).

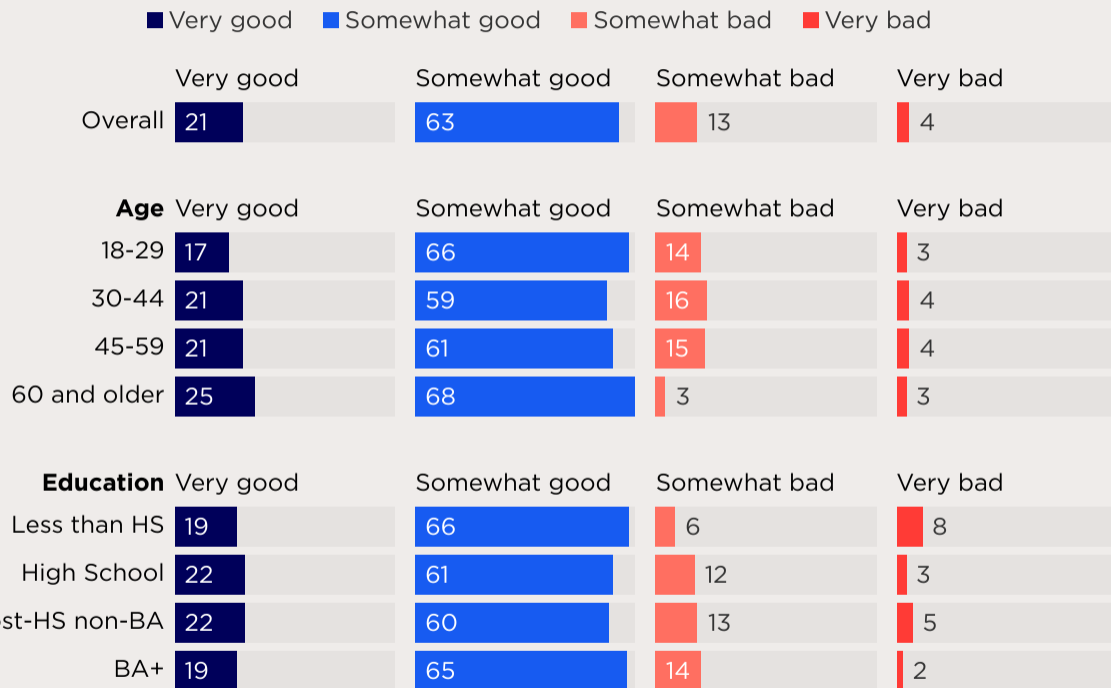
- For the minority who think economic conditions are currently bad (16%), the top concerns are youth unemployment (33%) and capital flight (24%).
- Sizable majorities believe trade is good for China's overall economy (73%), domestic job creation (76%), consumers like themselves (70%), and their own standard of living (73%).
- Most prefer a policy of global free trade (60%), with the remainder split between advocating for a trade bloc of friends and partner countries (21%) or less commerce and more self-reliance (18%).
- Educational attainment is a key factor in Chinese citizens' personal economic situations, their opinions about the future of China's economy, and their views of international trade.

Broad Optimism about China's Economic Present and Future

Despite economic challenges, Chinese citizens express broad optimism about the national economy. A large majority (84%) assess China's current economic conditions as either very good (21%) or somewhat good (63%). As the figure below demonstrates, positive economic assessments extend across age and educational cohorts.

Broadly Positive Views of China's Economic Conditions

How would you assess current economic conditions for China overall? (%)



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Additionally, respondents are upbeat when evaluating changes in China's economy over the past year. A majority (61%) feel the economy has gotten better over the last 12 months, with close to half (46%) saying conditions have improved somewhat and 16 percent reporting a lot of improvement. Almost a quarter (23%) see no significant change, while relatively few think things have worsened somewhat (13%) or a lot (2%). Projections for the next year follow a similar pattern. Around one in five (23%) predict China's economic conditions will stay roughly the same. But roughly half (48%) expect the economy to get somewhat better, and a fifth (21%) expect a lot of improvement.

China's Economic Situation, Past and Future



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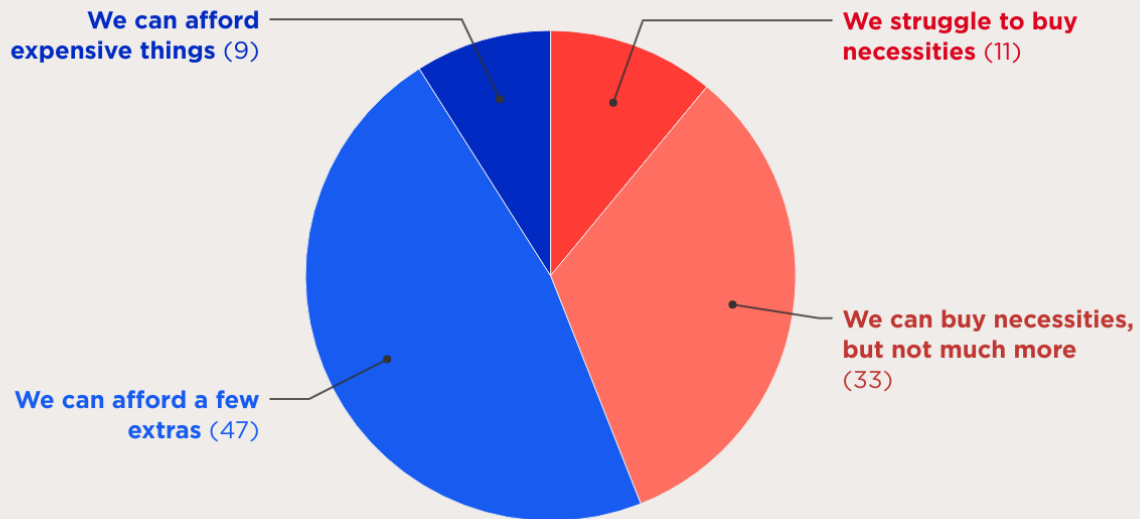


Most, Especially the Higher Educated, Believe Household Finances Are Decent and Getting Better

In addition to favorable ratings for the health of the national economy, most Chinese seem to feel pretty comfortable with their living standards. Almost six in 10 (56%) feel they can at least keep themselves afloat and treat themselves on occasion. This includes a plurality (47%) who say they can afford a few extras after taking care of the basics, while another nine percent say they can afford expensive things. On the other end of the spectrum, 11 percent report struggling to buy necessities, while a third (33%) say they can afford necessities but not much more.

Personal Economic Situation

Which description of how people are getting by best suits your situation? (%)



April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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A demographic breakdown shows just how much education matters for perceived financial well-being. Just 36 percent of Chinese without a high school diploma can afford more than necessities, and fully a quarter (26%) are struggling to get by. Meanwhile, a majority of Chinese with a college degree or more (63%) are able to afford more than just necessities, with one in 10 saying they can afford expensive things (11%).

Higher education has only recently become widely available in China. As of 2024, 60.8 percent of China's college-aged population are enrolled in a university, including vocational and technical tertiary education. But that number was just 5 percent in the early 1990s and did not reach 50 percent until 2019. As a result, only 15.5 percent of China's total population completed college as of the most recent census in 2020.

Education a Key Factor in Personal Economic Situation

Which description of how people are getting by best suits your situation? (%)



April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

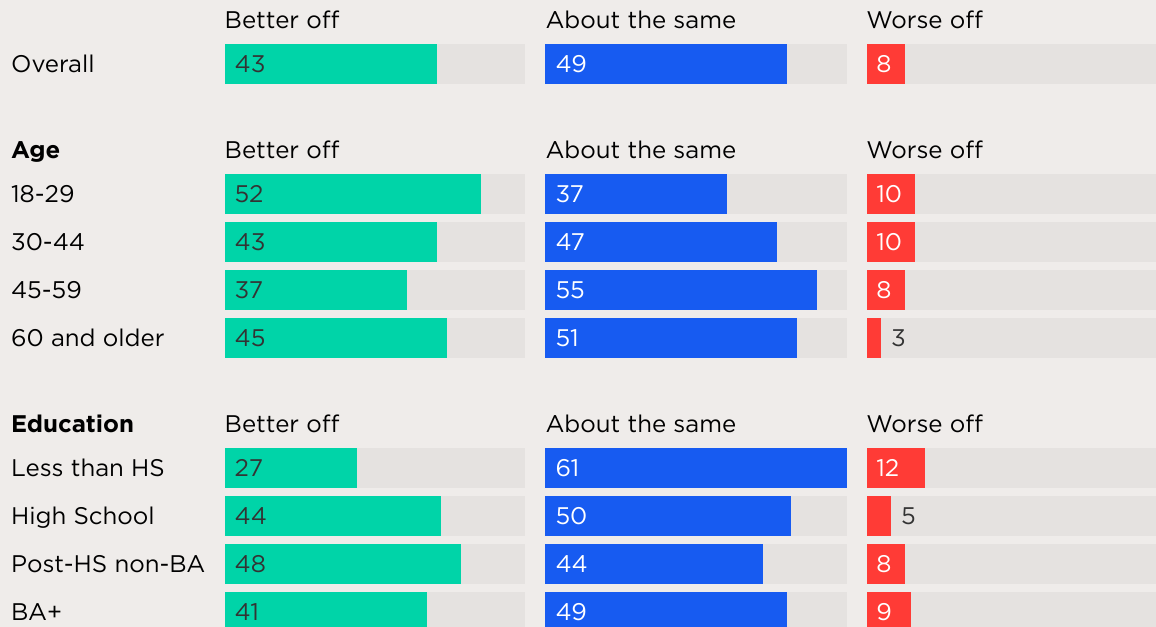
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When invited to speculate about what the next year will bring for their personal finances, most anticipate stability or improvement in living standards. While half believe they will be roughly in the same boat as today (49%), four in 10 Chinese believe they will be better off in a year (43%). Just 8 percent believe they will be worse off financially after 12 months.

Great Expectations for Economic Improvement

Twelve months from now, do you expect to be economically worse off, better off, or about the same? (%)



April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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As with other economic indicators, optimism for economic growth also varies by educational attainment. Those with more formal schooling are more likely to say they will be better off in the future. Just 27 percent who have not completed high school are optimistic their economic situation will improve in the next year, compared to four in 10 or more of those with at least a high school degree (see figure, above).

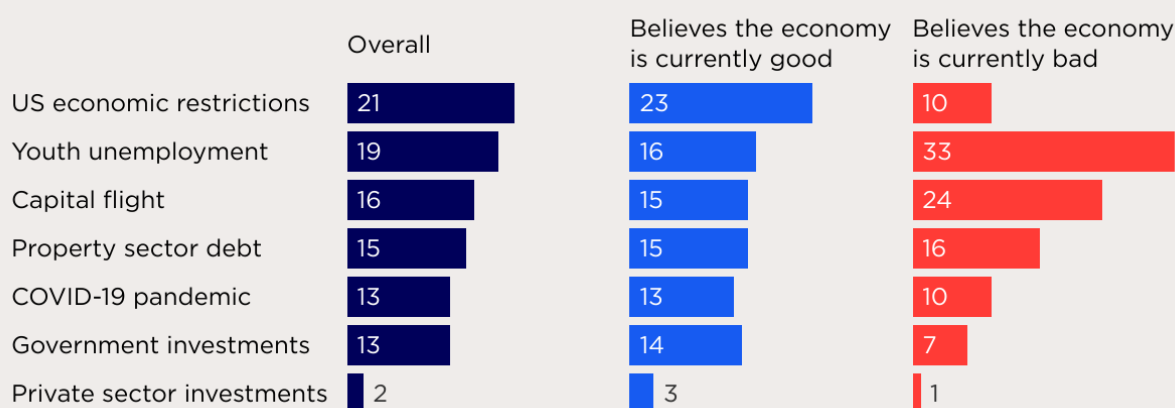
At the same time, however, those Chinese with a college degree are slightly less optimistic than those who have a non-BA post-high-school educational credential (41% vs. 48%). This may reflect the boom in undergraduate and postgraduate education and a lack of [commensurate job growth](#). Over the past two decades, Chinese universities have [rapidly expanded postgraduate enrolment](#). Some 1.3 million students received grad-school acceptances in the 2023 academic year, double the figure for 2011 (560,000). Amid an explosion of masters degrees and PhDs, those Chinese with a college education may be keenly aware they are facing educational credential competition in the job market.

Perceived Threats Loom over Economic Outlook; Private Investment Least Significant

When asked what factors are contributing most to China's current economic conditions, Chinese split most sharply by their initial perceptions of their country's economy. Economic optimists (those who view China's economy as very or somewhat good) are much more likely than pessimists (those who view China's economy as very or somewhat bad) to focus on America's role in China's economy, suggesting they see external factors playing a critical role. A plurality of those who believe China's economy is either somewhat or very good (23%) point to US restrictions as the top factor in China's economic outlook. Just a tenth (10%) of pessimists agree. By contrast, economic pessimists are twice as likely as optimists to point to more-domestic factors. A third (33%) name youth unemployment as the greatest factor contributing to China's economic outlook (vs. 16% among optimists). In recent years, youth unemployment has risen so quickly that China's statistical bureau [suspended data reporting in 2023 before revising the metric](#) to exclude students. But even the massaged figure remains [depressingly high](#). As entry-level corporate jobs [evaporate](#) and [cuts loom](#) over the most-vaunted sectors, first-time jobseekers brace for [extreme competition](#) while millennials make memes about [mid-career layoffs](#). And perhaps unsurprisingly, youth unemployment is seen as the greatest factor in China's economic outlook for Chinese under age 45 (22%) and for those Chinese with at least a college degree (25%).

Greatest Factor in Economic Outlook

In your view, what has contributed most to China's economic outlook? (%)



April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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Another critical issue: capital flight, which a quarter of pessimists (24%) point to as the top factor shaping China's economic outlook (vs. 15% of optimists). Capital leaving the country has [cast a pall over China's economy](#) as flagging demand and geopolitics drive foreign businesses to reconsider their investments in the country. To maintain stability, Beijing has [ramped up enforcement of capital controls](#) and [vigorously defended the yuan](#). But while these measures may help, Chinese economists nevertheless expect [capital flight to persist](#).

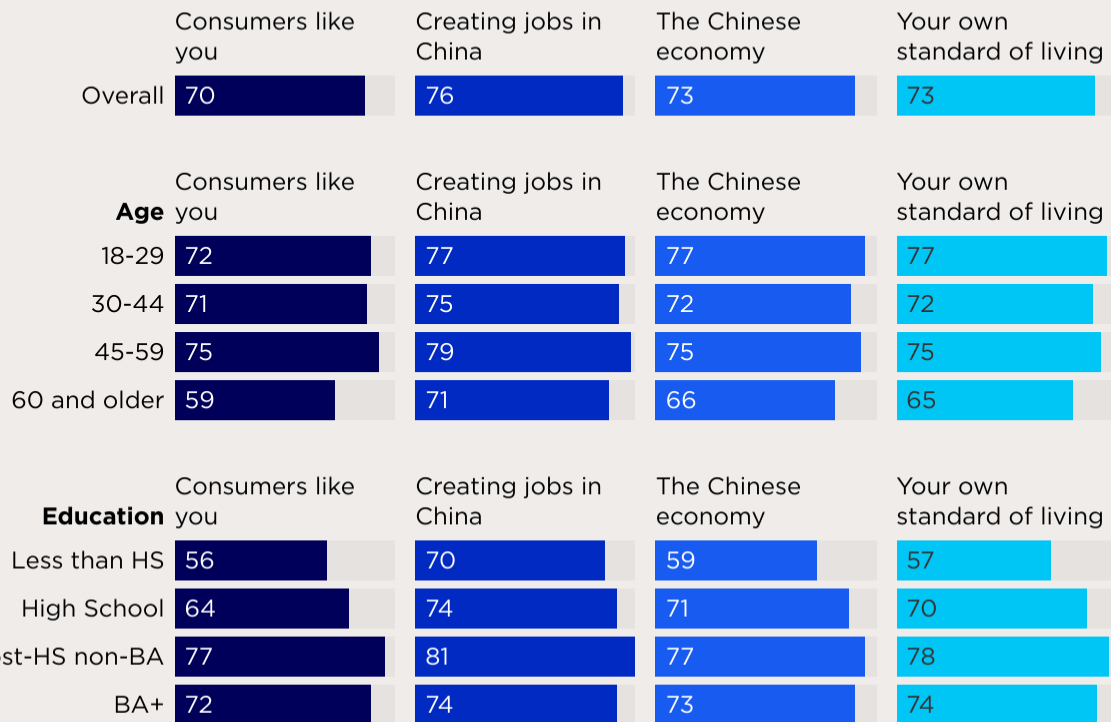
Majorities View Trade Favorably, Support Global Free Trade

Chinese citizens take kindly to international trade. When asked about its overall impact on the economy, three quarters (73%) offer a positive evaluation. In terms of the labor market, 76 percent say trade helps create jobs in China. Most (70%) feel they benefit from China's commercial ties with the outside world as consumers, and 73 percent of Chinese believe foreign trade is good for their own standards of living. As is true for other economic issues, better-educated Chinese are more likely to view international trade as good.

Widespread View of International Trade as Good

Overall, do you think international trade is good or bad for the following (% good)

■ Consumers like you ■ Creating jobs in China ■ The Chinese economy ■ Your own standard of living



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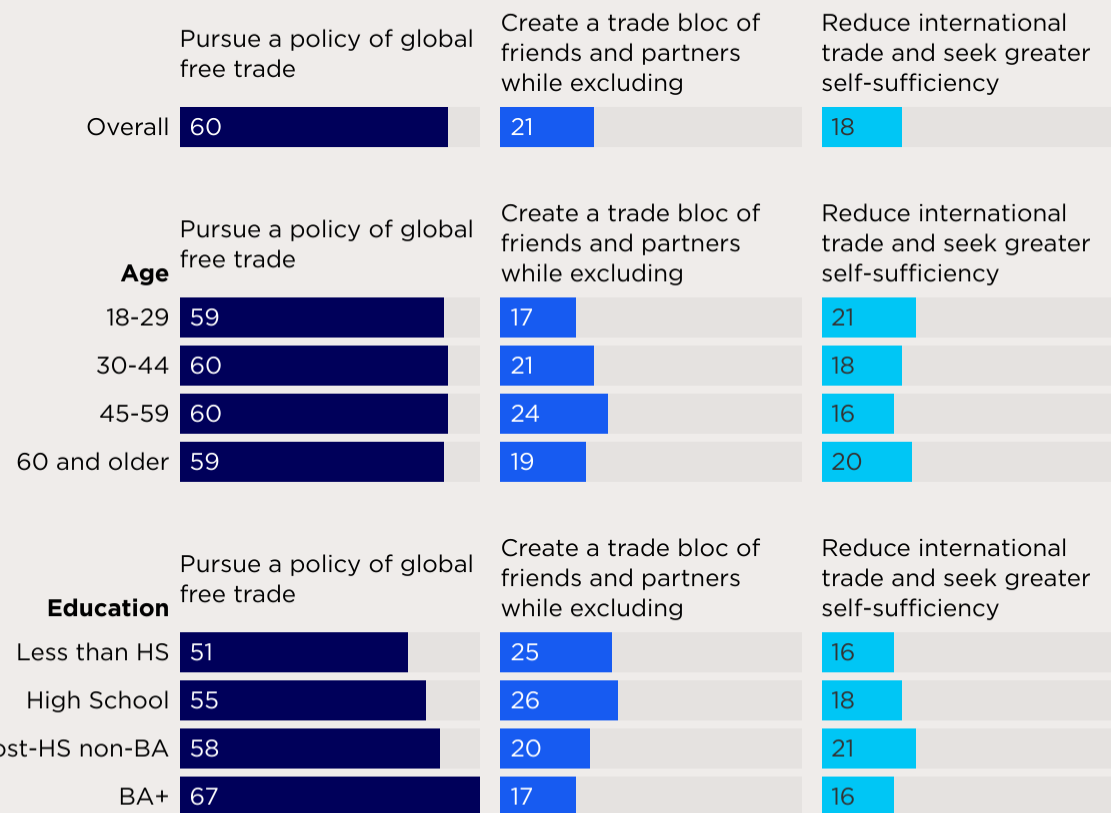


On a broader level, a majority of Chinese (60%) also advocate for a policy of global free trade. In contrast, one in five (21%) support the creation of exclusive trading blocs that shut out certain countries. And just 18 percent wish to pull back from world markets and seek greater self-sufficiency. While at least half of all educational cohorts favor pursuing global free trade, those Chinese with at least a bachelor's degree are the most likely to back a free trade policy (67%).

Chinese Public Favors Global Free Trade

Should China pursue a policy of global free trade, create a trade bloc of friends and partners while excluding other nations, or reduce international trade and seek greater self-sufficiency in all areas? (%)

■ Pursue a policy of global free trade ■ Create a trade bloc of friends and partners while excluding ■ Reduce international trade and seek greater self-sufficiency



April 25 - June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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Conclusion

Chinese public opinion paints a picture of cautious optimism: People generally feel secure in their financial footing and hopeful about the future, even amid structural challenges. Confidence in the national economy is widespread, and support for open, global trade remains strong. Yet this optimism is tempered by demographic divides, with less-educated citizens particularly more likely to feel vulnerable to job market instability and less connected to the benefits of globalization.

The data also highlight general trends for young adults in China, who have high expectations but also confront historic levels of youth unemployment. The highest educated, who tend to be younger on average, face a similar tension: Their ability to realize their ambitions requires the job market to absorb their skills, a tall order owing to the structural mismatch between labor supply and demand.

Friends with Benefits: Chinese See Russia and North Korea as Beijing's Closest Comrades

Dina Smeltz, Vice President and Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Sam Dong, Research Consultant, Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Craig Kafura, Director, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Yawei Liu, Senior Advisor on China, The Carter Center

Nick Zeller, Senior Program Associate, Peace Programs—China Focus, The Carter Center

September 2025

New research conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Carter Center offers a rare window into the attitudes of everyday Chinese citizens on international affairs. Fielded between April 25 and June 16, 2025, the survey reveals how ordinary Chinese view their country's international partnerships. The data show distinctly positive and negative attitudes toward blocs of countries and a sense that the Chinese feel they are surrounded by unfriendly neighbors. But a few countries hold promise as potential intermediaries if needed during current US-China tensions, including US allies Australia and the European Union, and Vietnam, which also has positive relations with the United States.

There are numerous challenges in conducting surveys in China, including designing a representative sample, a closed media environment, and the potential for self-censorship. While treating these results with a degree of skepticism is healthy, previous and repeated surveys conducted by [other organizations](#) have found similar patterns among Chinese public opinion on international issues.

Key Findings

- Large majorities of the public in China consider Russia (83%) and North Korea (76%) as their country's friend. They also view the Taiwanese people (91%)—but much less so the Taiwanese government (44%)—as friendly.

- About half the Chinese public says Australia (51%), the European Union (50%), and Vietnam (47%) are friends to China.
- On the less congenial side, six in 10 Chinese say these Indo-Pacific countries are not friends of China: India (62%), the Philippines (61%), and South Korea (63%).
- Of all the countries presented, the Chinese people consider the least friendly toward their country to be Japan (81% not a friend) and the United States (83% not a friend).

Who Is a Friend to China?

Beijing's increased profile in global institutions and as an economic and security competitor has translated into greater political clout. Its actions have worldwide effects on climate change, trade, technological developments, and a host of other issues. On the soft power front, Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative has helped project Chinese influence across the globe, and China's active participation in international institutions gives it a platform to challenge Western ideas of global governance.

China has diplomatic relations with [over 100 countries and partnerships](#) in various regional organizations, including the European Union, the African Union, ASEAN, BRICS, and the Arab League. These relationships vary in organization and description. For example, some are labeled "strategic" or "cooperative," and others are "comprehensive," "all weather," and "permanent." As the survey data show, the Chinese public clearly sees some countries as friends of China, sees others as clearly not friends of China, and is divided on a number of others.

Friendship with "No Limits": Large Majority See Russia as China's Friend

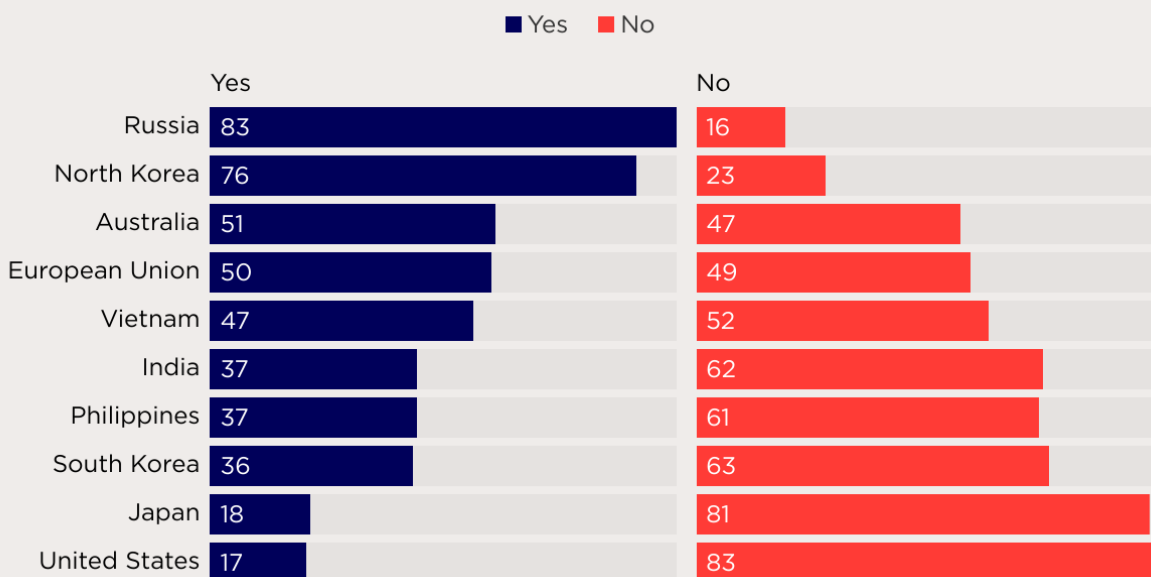
Reflecting a shared opposition to US global dominance, China's ties with Russia have been growing since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In February 2022, just days before the Russian military action, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin described their partnership as one with ["no limits"](#) and announced plans to increase economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation. China's trade with Russia has been an economic lifeline that helps Moscow fund the continuing war in Ukraine. Moreover, a [2024 Tsinghua University survey](#) of the Chinese population found that only 6 percent thought Russia is primarily to blame for the Ukraine conflict. Sixteen percent blamed Ukraine, and a third said both Kyiv and Moscow are responsible (36%). Yet a plurality of 42 percent said they believed that "other

third parties” are primarily responsible for the Ukraine crisis beyond the two combatants.²

The Chinese public seems to recognize these growing ties. Eight in 10 Chinese (83%) describe Russia as a friend to China, one of the highest ratings of all the countries presented in the survey. A plurality of the public in China believes the basis for Sino-Russian relations is common security interests (44%), an area of growing coordination. Another third selects trade and economic ties (33%) as the basis for bilateral relations, while two in 10 believe common values (22%) underlie this friendship.

Friends of China

For each of the following, please say if you think it's a friend to China or not? (%)



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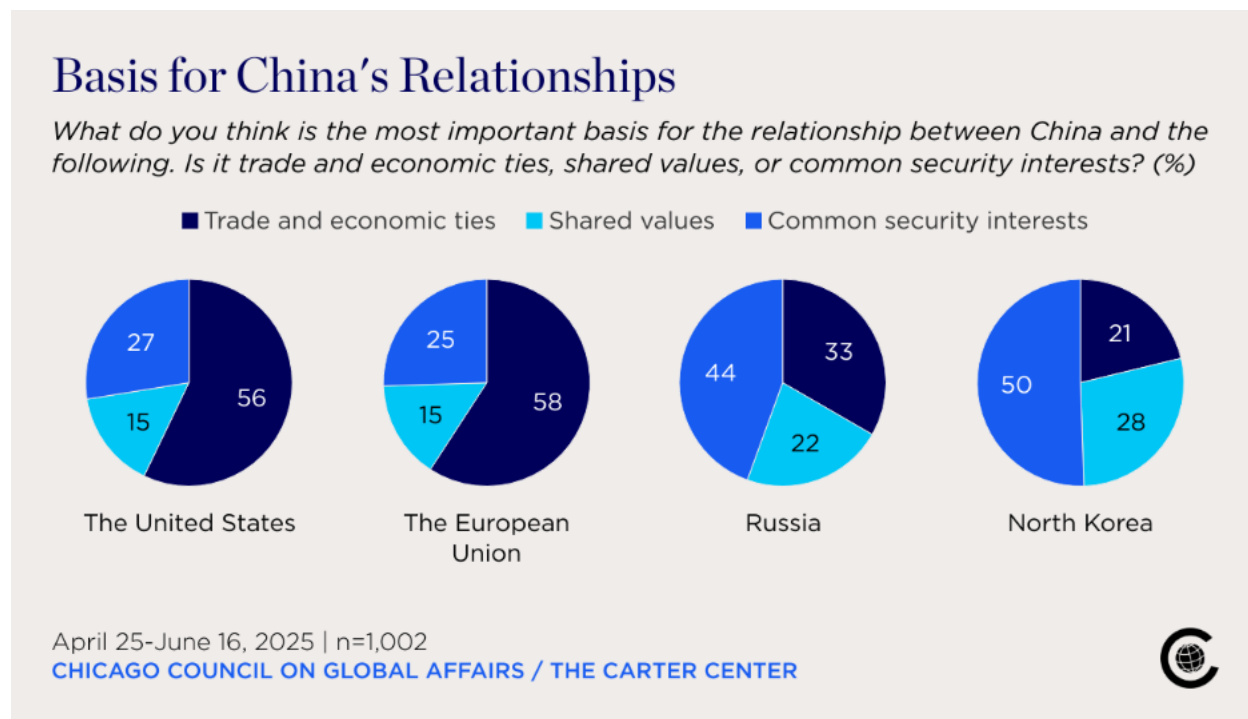
Three in Four Consider North Korea a Friend to China

While China and North Korea have longstanding economic and security ties, these relations have often [been tense](#). Chinese leaders have struggled to temper Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons aspirations, and North Korea’s recent defense pact with Russia has given North Korean leader Kim Jong Un another

² This perception is similar to Chinese leadership views that [“hostile Western forces”](#) were behind the 1989-student-led protests in Beijing, which were ultimately suppressed by the military.

potential source of cash and imports over which China has far less visibility or control.

For their part, a solid majority of Chinese (76%) describe North Korea as a friend to China. They see, by far, a common priority in common security interests (50%)—likely a shared anti-Western orientation—followed by shared values (28%) and trade/economic ties (21%).



About Half Consider Australia, European Union, and Vietnam as Friends

About half the Chinese public says fellow Indo-Pacific nations Australia (51%) and Vietnam (47%) are friends to China. China and Australia have [strong economic](#) and trade links, and leaders of the two countries have recently met to discuss increased collaboration in trade, clean energy, and climate change. In 2023, the United States upgraded its ties to Vietnam, which were particularly focused around improving Vietnam's position in [the global semiconductor ecosystem](#). However, with a new US administration and heavy tariffs levied on Vietnam, Beijing has renewed efforts to [bring Vietnam closer](#).

Half of Chinese also view the European Union as a friend (50%). Yet EU-China relations, once defined by strong and growing trade ties, have weakened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, recently described EU-China relations as having reached an ["inflection point,"](#) specifically raising China's ties with Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU's large trade deficit with Beijing, and

China's export controls on critical minerals as significant challenges for the EU-China relationship. Despite these recent developments, China remains the [largest source](#) of EU imports. And perhaps for that reason, the Chinese public still sees the main basis for Chinese-EU relations as trade and economic ties (58%, 25% common security interests, and 15% shared values).

Not Friends: India, Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and United States

About six in 10 Chinese say these countries are unfriendly toward China: India (62% not a friend), the Philippines (61%), and South Korea (63%). Chinese perceptions of India are likely [colored by](#) a history of conflict and border disputes, economic and military competition, and rising power rivalry. Although China and the Philippines share [diplomatic and trade](#) relations, the limited percentage of Chinese describing that country as a friend likely relates to long-standing [territorial disputes](#) in the South China Sea and the Philippines (including US bases).

Of all the countries presented to the Chinese respondents, they view Japan (81% not a friend) and the United States (83% not a friend) most suspiciously. The legacy of Imperial Japan's wartime atrocities in China still cast a long shadow over the relationship, and anti-Japan protests have broken out [from time to time](#) in response to [particular downturns](#) in the relationship. As [Genron-NPO/CIPG polls](#) over the past two decades have shown, Chinese and Japanese attitudes toward one another have been generally poor, with a serious deterioration in attitudes particularly evident over the past year.

Current [tensions](#) between China and the United States are based on trade, defense, and technological competition. In the past, the United States has also been critical of China's human rights record. While each of these issues likely feed into the sense that the United States is antagonistic toward China, the tensions over trade likely have the most apparent impact currently: 56 percent of the Chinese public considers trade and economic ties to be the most important basis for US-China relations (27% common security interests, 15% shared values).

The [2024 Tsinghua University survey](#) of the Chinese public highlights a large difference between Chinese perceptions of the US government and the American people. In those results, more than eight in 10 Chinese (82%) express a neutral or favorable attitude toward ordinary Americans, while a similar majority voice somewhat or very unfavorable views toward the US government (81%).

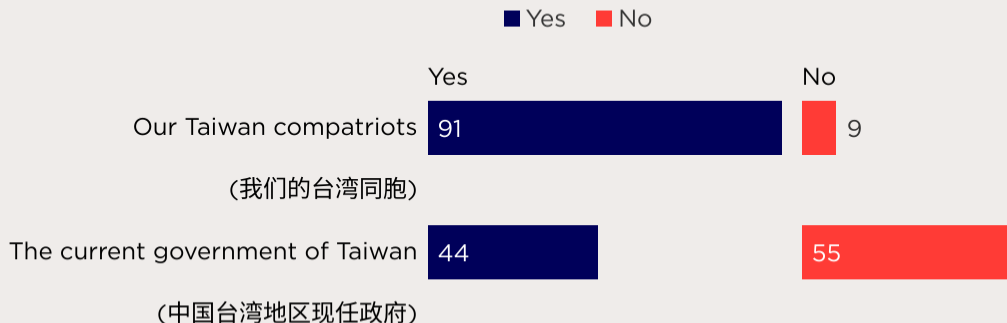
Chinese Differentiate between Taiwanese Government and People

Taiwan is a complicated case. Beijing considers Taiwan a breakaway territory that must be unified with the mainland, by force if necessary. In recent years, Beijing has [increased political and military pressure](#) on Taiwan with more [extensive military drills around the island](#), more military patrols [across the midline](#) of the Taiwan Strait, and [continued pressure](#) on Taiwan's international partners. Many in the United States [defense establishment fear](#) that Beijing is preparing to take the island by force, perhaps [as early as 2027](#).

Despite cross-strait tensions, the survey finds that the Chinese public clearly differentiates between the people of Taiwan and the government of Taiwan. The Taiwanese people, referred to as “Taiwan compatriots” in the survey, are viewed more favorably than any other group, with 91 percent describing them as a friend to China. Only 44 percent consider the “current government of Taiwan” to be a friend to China—though this is notably higher than a number of other nations asked about.

Views of Taiwan

For each of the following, please say if you think it's a friend to China or not? (%)



April 25 - June 16, 2025 | n = 1,002

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Conclusion

This survey of Chinese public opinion reveals a worldview that is shaped by the current geopolitical winds. On one side, Chinese citizens view ordinary Taiwanese people, Russia, and North Korea with warmth. On the other side, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other US allies elicit hostility. In the middle, Chinese citizens are split on the European Union, Australia, Vietnam, and the Taiwanese government.

Overall, however, Chinese citizens believe economic and security ties undergird relationships with allies and adversaries, leaving little room for shared ideals and values. As China navigates an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, this survey offers valuable insight into how ordinary people reconcile national pride with practical considerations in foreign relations.

Survey Methodology

This analysis is based on data from a poll conducted by NORC from April 25 through June 16, 2025, using a random digit dialing (RDD) CATI telephone methodology among mainland China's adult population. The final poll includes 1,002 completed surveys with adults 18 and older, excluding 52 test cases. The design effect is 1.77 with an overall margin of sampling error of ± 4.12 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

The RDD sample frame was created using the national numbering plan provided by the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. The sample included only mobile phone numbers used for residential services and excluded those for commercial services. The sample frame excluded Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

The sampling frame of active mobile phone numbers was drawn from the four government-owned mobile service networks, which total more than 1.75 billion subscriptions. The numbers were prescreened to include working nonbusiness numbers. The sample frame included 91,806 numbers stratified by the proportion of each network. The following mobile service networks were used:

- CBN: 1.83%
- China Mobile: 56.59%
- China Telecom: 22.86%
- China Unicom: 18.72%

There was no within-household sampling, so any adult 18 or older who picked up the call was eligible to take the survey. There was a maximum of eight attempts to reach an adult for each number.

The fieldwork was conducted by a NORC-trained, phone-data-collection firm using live interviewers. Interviewers were at least 20 years old, mostly women. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, however the field staff included interviewers with sufficient fluency in major Chinese dialects (such as Cantonese or Shanghainese) to conduct interviews with respondents who use a dialect other than Mandarin. Only interviewers who were born in mainland China were hired for the project, to avoid the potential impact of language/dialect on respondent cooperation.

This project was made possible with generous support from the Dr. Scholl Foundation.

About the Council

Founded in 1922, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing knowledge and engagement in global affairs. Our in-depth analysis and expert-led research influence policy conversations and inform the insights we share with our growing community. Through accessible content and open dialogue of diverse, fact-based perspectives, we empower more people to help shape our global future.

About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy

We believe the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. We aim to influence discourse and decisions on important US foreign policy and national security issues by researching public opinion and producing original policy analysis.

About The Carter Center

Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope.

A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in over 80 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former US President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide.

About The Carter Center's China Focus

The Carter Center's China Focus initiative is an independent, nonpartisan organization committed to improving the US-China relationship through a sober assessment of the international records of both countries. We convene leading Chinese and American policy professionals and academics, support next-generation foreign policy experts, publish research-backed opinion, and conduct independent research. Our goal is to contribute to lasting international peace, which is the foundation for solving the biggest problems facing humanity today.

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