

Chinese Public Values Global Leadership More than Americans Do

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The competition between the United States and China for influence in global matters has been growing sharper over the past decade. While the strength of US international clout has traditionally rested on its networks of security allies and trading partners, those relationships are fraying. In the meantime, China has been extending influence internationally through the Belt and Road Initiative and growing involvement in international institutions.

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey, fielded July 18-30, 2025, finds that after several decades of US direction over the rules-based liberal international order, key segments of the American public now question the value of maintaining a US global leadership role. By contrast, a joint Chicago Council-Carter Center survey fielded April 25–June 16, 2025, in China finds a Chinese public in nearly universal support for Beijing’s efforts to shape global developments.

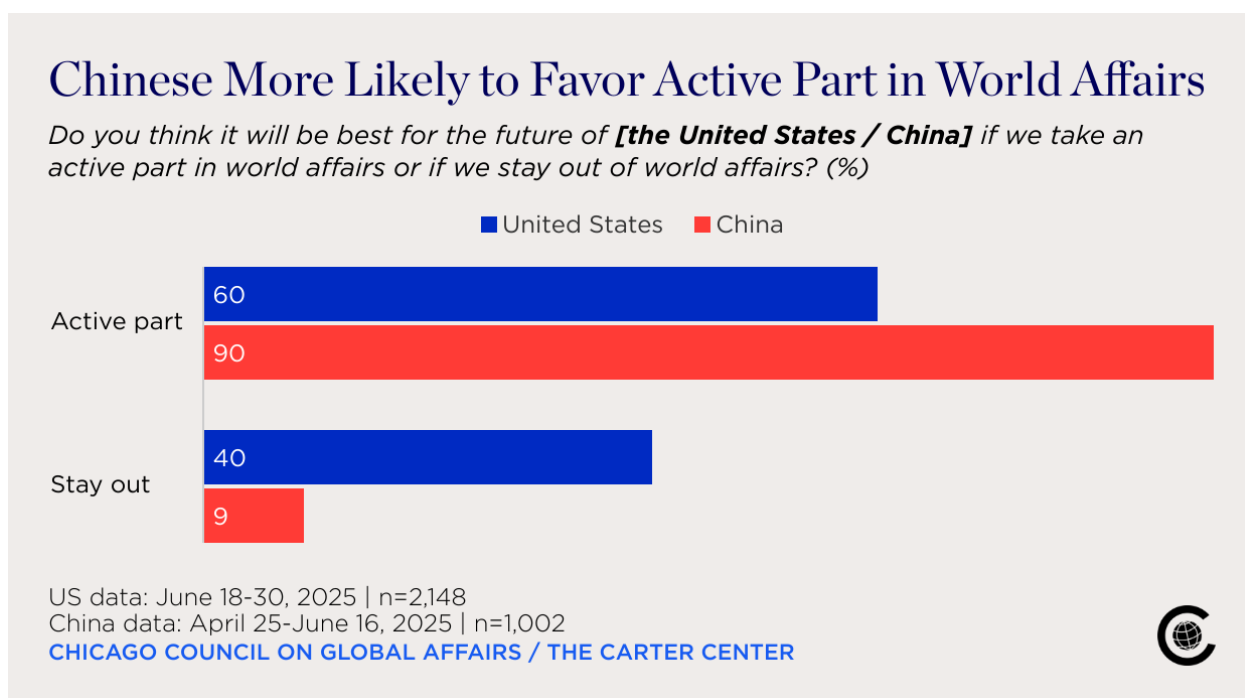
Key Findings

- Nine in 10 Chinese (90%) versus six in 10 Americans (60%) say their respective country should play an active role in world affairs.
- Seven in 10 Chinese (69%), compared to 53 percent of Americans, believe their country’s unique characteristics make it the greatest in the world.
- Two thirds of Americans (66%) prefer shared global leadership, while the Chinese public is somewhat split between shared leadership (48%) and Chinese dominance (41%).
- Both Chinese (60%) and American (55%) publics favor a policy of global free trade, and both see international trade as good for their economies (79% Americans, 73% Chinese).

- Majorities in both countries (60% in the United States, 61% in China) favor cooperating with the other when possible and limiting the other's influence when necessary.

Larger Majority of Chinese than Americans Support Global Engagement

The most striking difference between US and Chinese opinion on their countries' role in the world is how much more Chinese citizens support taking an active part on the world stage compared to their American counterparts. Ninety percent of the Chinese public, compared to 60 percent of Americans, say it would be best for their respective countries to play an active role.



Since the Chicago Council on Global Affairs started conducting public opinion surveys 50 years ago, Americans' endorsement of an active global role has averaged around 63 percent and peaked at [71 percent](#) in the 2002 survey, just after the September 11 attacks. Support for an active role in the world has declined among the public in recent years, with a majority of Republicans in 2023 even favoring the United States staying out of world affairs.

More Americans than Chinese Support a Shared Leadership Role

Though Americans and Chinese have different levels of support for playing an active role in the world, most say they want their country to play a leadership role in the world. Only 11 percent in China and 12 percent in the United States favor no leadership role at all. But whereas Americans prefer to share

leadership with other countries, the Chinese public is more divided, with many saying China should play a dominant role.

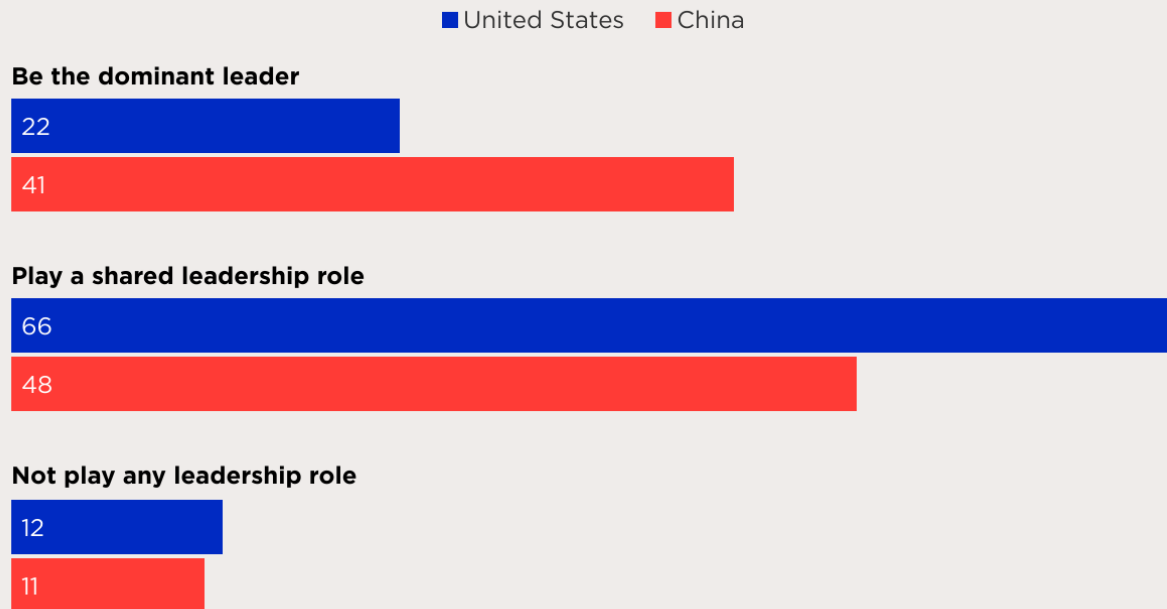
A majority of Americans advocate sharing global leadership with other countries instead of taking the lead alone. When last asked in [the 2023 Chicago Council Survey](#), two thirds of Americans (66%) preferred a shared leadership role, with just 22 percent calling for the United States to be the world's dominant leader. But there were major partisan differences on this question: While 16 percent of Democrats preferred US dominance, Republicans were more than twice as likely to hold that opinion (36%).

The Chinese are more divided on the issue. Just under half (48%) favor a shared leadership role, while four in 10 (41%) advocate for a dominant role of China. This could reflect changing government rhetoric around China's role in the world. In the decade after Xi Jinping assumed leadership of China, Chinese diplomats began unleashing [combative discourse](#) directed largely at the United States and its partners. This sort of "Wolf Warrior diplomacy," named for a patriotic, *Rambo*-style [action film](#) from the mid-2010s, [boosted](#) the Chinese public's support for their government and for aggressive foreign policy but severely alienated foreign publics.

Perhaps as a result, Chinese officials have [toned down the vitriol](#). Over the past four years, China has unveiled a series of "[Global Initiatives](#)" for development, security, civilization, and governance. The initiatives emphasize Xi's vision of building a "community with a shared future for mankind." More recently, China has responded to the Trump administration's open disdain for multilateralism by [positioning itself](#) as a responsible defender of the existing international order. This newer, more egalitarian expression of leadership contrasts sharply with almost a decade of combative official discourse, possibly splitting Chinese opinion on preferred leadership style.

Chinese More Likely to Favor Dominant Global Role

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



US data: September 7-18, 2023 | n=3,242
China data: April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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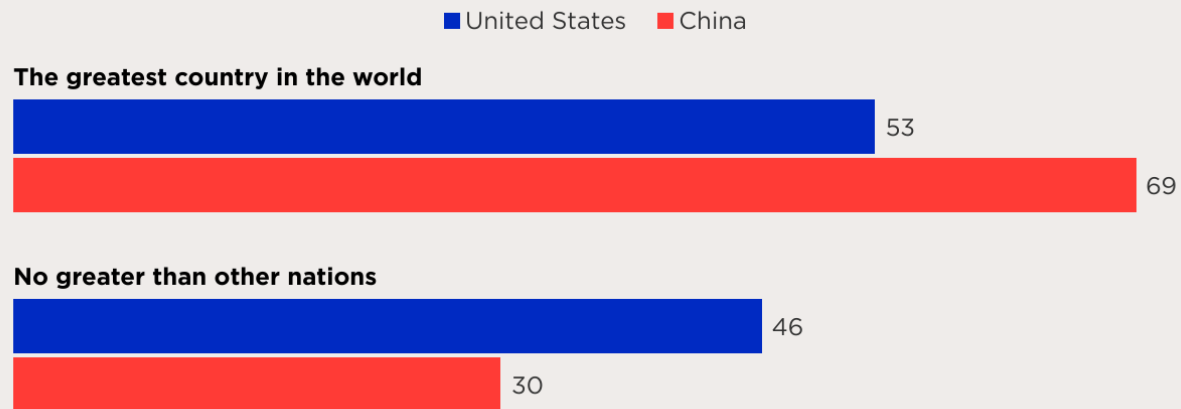


More Chinese than Americans Describe Their Country as the Greatest

Another striking difference in US and Chinese attitudes is in their differing beliefs in national exceptionalism, whether each public thinks their country is the greatest country because of its unique character. Seven in 10 Chinese (69%), compared to just over half of Americans (53%), believe their country has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world.

American and Chinese National Exceptionalism

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



US data: June 18-30, 2025 | n=2,148

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

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Americans' characterization of the United States used to be more like the Chinese view of their own country: In 2012, 70 percent of Americans called the United States the greatest country in the world. This view, however, has [steadily declined](#) in popularity since then, particularly among Democrats and Independents, with Republicans remaining strongly confident in American exceptionalism. Age also plays a much greater factor in American attitudes than Chinese attitudes. While six in 10 young Chinese (aged 18-29) view China as the greatest country in the world, just 39 percent of their American counterparts say the same about the United States.¹

The lower scores Americans give their country are not necessarily a statement on about their assessment of the health of the country. The US public still rates the United States as [the most influential](#) on the world stage (8.6 out a possible 10), with China rated the closest at 7.5. But the gap in Americans' perceptions of US and Chinese influence has [narrowed considerably](#) over time. Meanwhile, when the Chinese public is asked to rate how strong China's position in the world is currently, [more than nine in 10](#) say it is strong (43% very strong, 54% somewhat strong).

¹ Americans' characterization of the United States used to be more like the Chinese view of their own country: In 2012, 70 percent of Americans called the United States the greatest country in the world. This view, however, has [steadily declined](#) in popularity since then.

Economic Power and Military Strength Considered Top Sources of Influence

Americans believe US economic power is a very important source for US influence in the world today (71%), followed by its military strength (63%) and technology and innovation (62%). Fewer point to its economic assistance to other countries (37%) or its culture (34%).

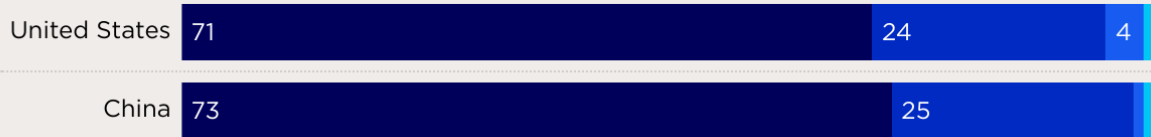
For Chinese, the most important levers of their country's global influence are its military strength (79%), followed closely by China's technology and innovation (76%) and economic power (73%). Two in three also say Chinese culture is very important to China's influence (66%), but like Americans, relatively few say Beijing's economic assistance to other countries is a very important source for China's influence (37%).

Sources of Influence Compared

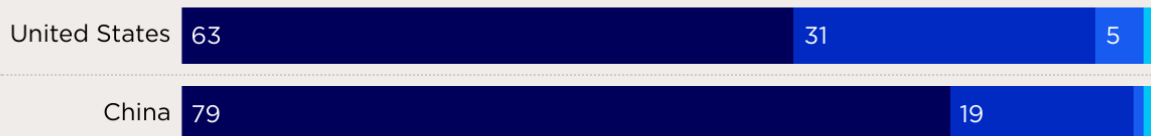
How important do you think each of the following is to *[the United States' / China's]* influence in the world today? (%)

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

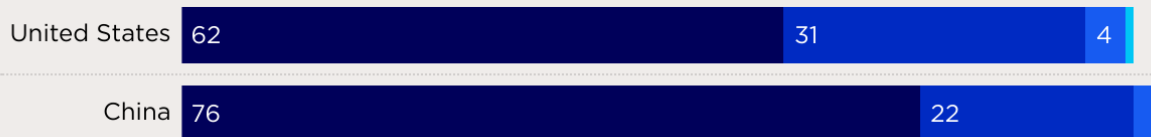
Its economic power



Its military strength



Its technology and innovation



Its economic assistance to other countries



Its culture



US data: June 18-30, 2025 | n=2,148

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

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US Public Thinks America Retains Military Superiority; Chinese Public Begg to Differ

Compared to Chinese military power, half of Americans believe the United States retains military superiority over Beijing (53%), while a third believe the

two countries are equal militarily (34%), and 11 percent think China is the superior military power. In terms of economic influence, it's more of a tossup: A third of Americans think the United States is economically stronger (34%), but just as many think China's economic power is stronger (33%). Another three in 10 say China and the United States are equally matched economically (31%).

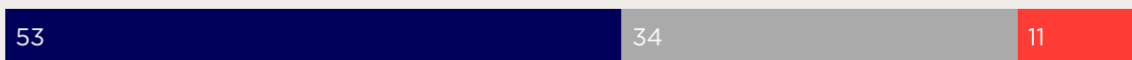
For their part, the Chinese tend to feel their country has already reached military and economic parity with or even surpassed the United States. Four in 10 Chinese say Beijing is about equal to Washington in terms of military power (39%), with an additional 31 percent saying China is the stronger military power. An additional three in 10 (29%) say the United States is stronger militarily. Similarly, while four in 10 say the United States is stronger economically (37%), a combined majority say China is at least equal to (31%) or exceeds the United States (32%) in terms of economic power.

Perceptions of Relative Military and Economic Power

■ The United States ■ About equal ■ China

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

US respondents



Chinese respondents



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

US respondents



Chinese respondents



US data: June 18-30, 2025 | n=2,148

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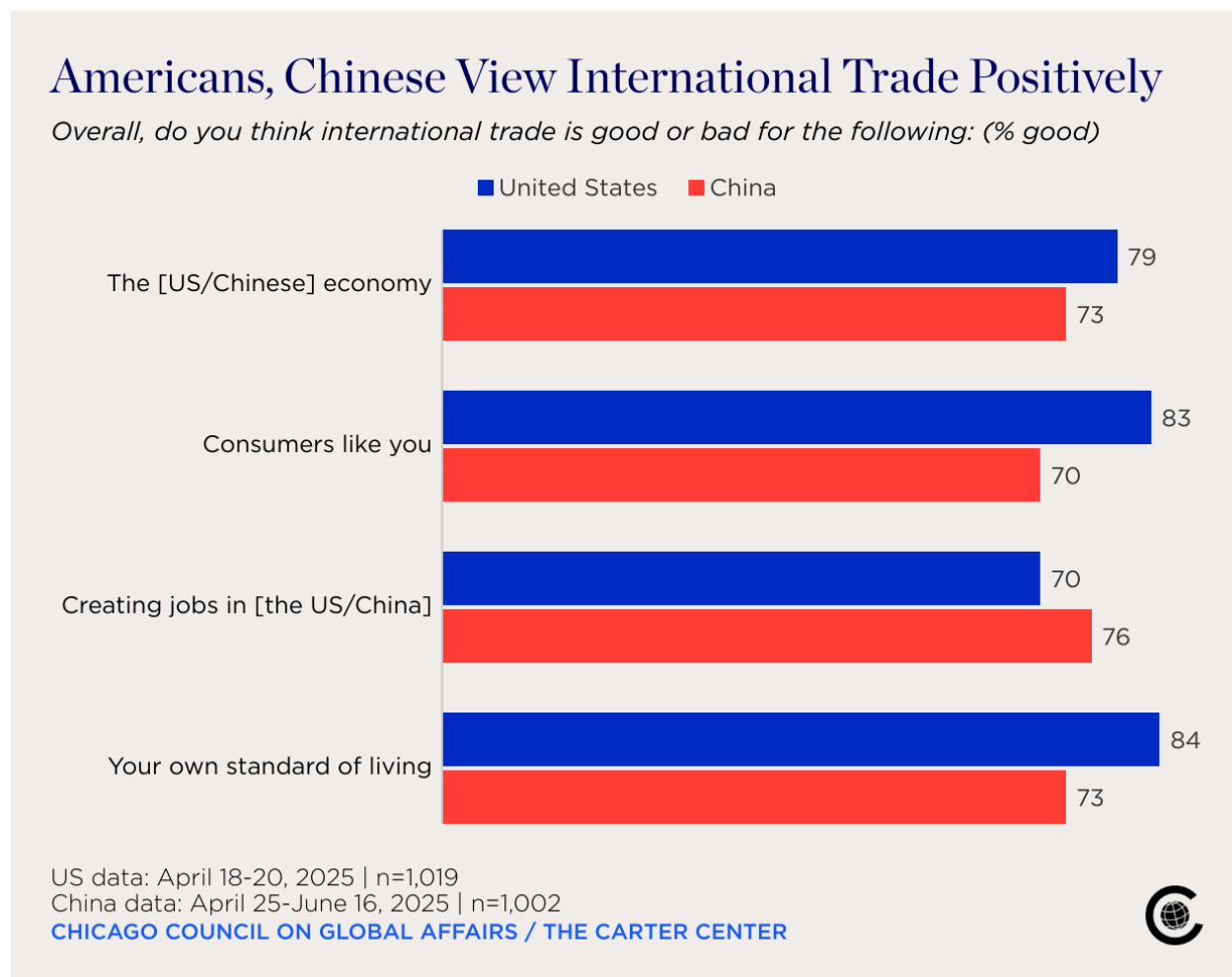
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Both Publics Support Free Trade

While they may differ on which country has the upper hand in the military and economic arenas, both publics appear to be advocates for free trade. China and the United States are the world's [top trading nations](#), generating close to a quarter of all trade worldwide last year. And the two commercial giants remain deeply intertwined: [In 2024](#), China remained the second-largest source of US imports while serving as America's third-largest export market.

Majorities of at least seven in 10 say trade is good for their countries' economies (79% United States, 73% China), consumers like themselves (83% United States, 70% China), creating jobs (70% United States, 76% China), and standards of living (84% United States, 73% China).



In addition, majorities of both the Chinese (60%) and American (55%) publics say their respective countries should pursue a policy of global free trade. Of the other options, Americans are more likely to favor reducing trade and seeking greater self-sufficiency (29%, 18% Chinese), while the Chinese are

more likely to favor a friendshoring approach of creating a more closed trade bloc of friends and partners that excludes outside nations (21%, 12% Americans).

Chinese and Americans Both Prefer Global Free Trade

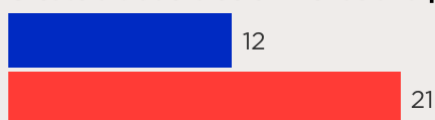
Should [the United States / China] pursue a policy of global free trade, create a trade bloc of friends and partners while excluding other nations, or reduce international trade and seek greater self-sufficiency in all areas? (%)

■ United States ■ China

Pursue a policy of global free trade



Create a trade bloc of friends and partners while excluding other nations



Reduce international trade and seek greater self-sufficiency in all areas



US data: April 18-20, 2025 | n=1,019
China data: April 25-June 16, 2025 | n=1,002

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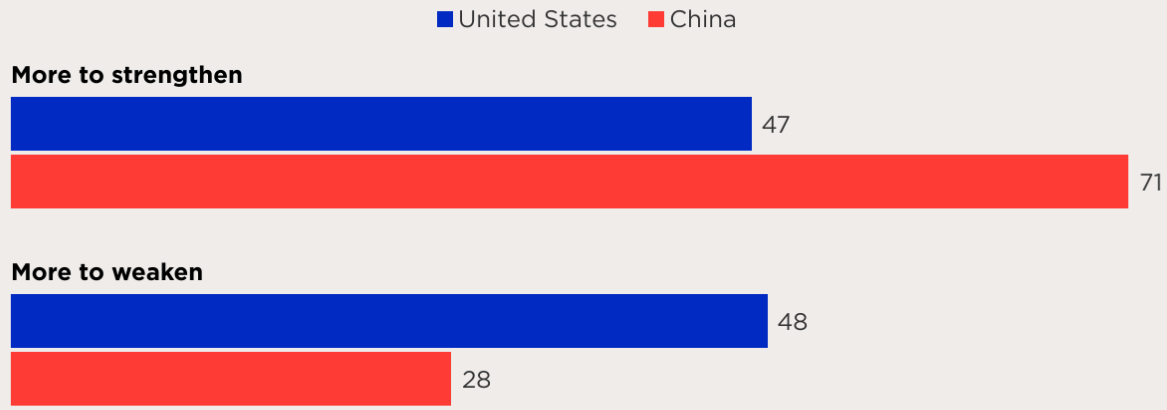


Chinese Say Bilateral Trade Strengthens China's Security; Americans Split

Though both Americans and Chinese favor a policy of global free trade and see international trade as good for their countries, the US-China bilateral trade relationship is increasingly fraught with national security issues. Nevertheless, seven in 10 Chinese (71%) believe US-China trade relations strengthen China's national security, while 28 percent say bilateral commercial ties weaken security. Americans are more divided (47% strengthen, 48% weaken) with [large partisan differences](#) on this issue: A majority of Democrats (60%) believe US-China trade strengthens US national security, while a majority of Republicans (63%) see it as weakening US national security.

Chinese and American Views on Trade and Security

Does trade between [the United States and China / China and the United States] do more to strengthen [US/China's] national security or weaken [US/China's] national security



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Both Publics Support a Blend of Cooperation and Limiting Influence of Other Country

After their negotiators [agreed to a framework](#) in Malaysia, US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Busan, South Korea for their first face-to-face meeting of Trump's second term in office. Following months of trade tension, with Trump [repeatedly threatening](#) increased tariffs and Xi in turn threatening [export controls](#) on critical minerals, the [deal](#) served as a [truce](#) in the simmering US-China trade war.

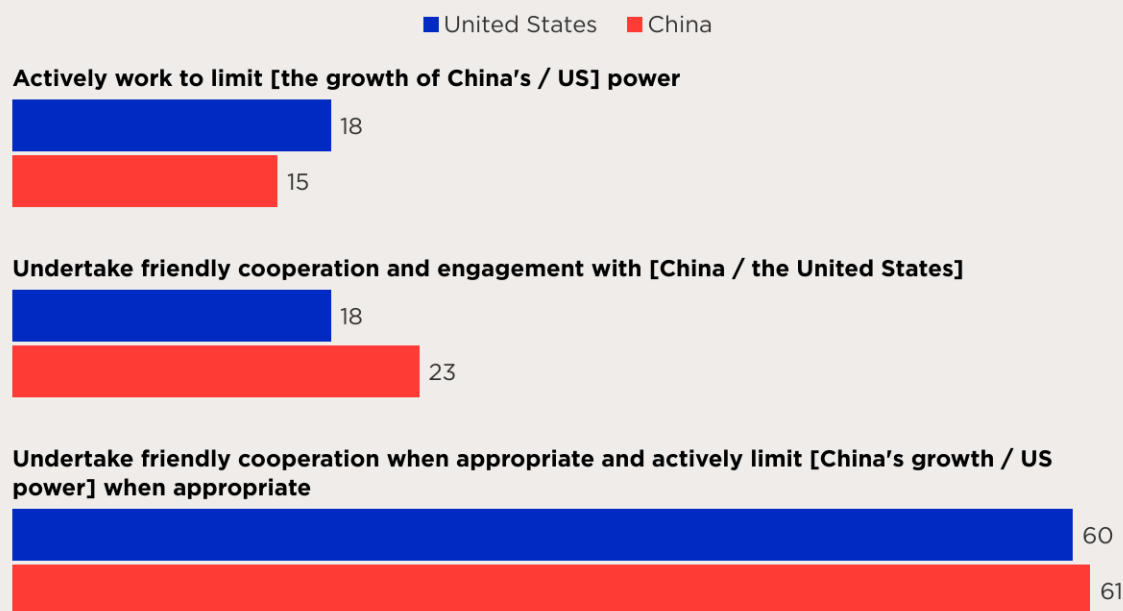
Chicago Council polling shows that Americans oppose US tariffs on Chinese imports if it means increasing prices for consumers (54%), though there are partisan differences (with a majority of Republicans [supporting the tariffs](#)). For their part, the Chinese public views economic competition with the United States (55%) as a top threat to their country. They also want to avoid a military conflict with the United States over Taiwan (57%).

Reflecting these mixed sentiments—concerns about the other nation blended with a desire to avoid a serious confrontation—both publics agree that each country should pursue friendly bilateral cooperation when appropriate and, at the same time, limit the other country's power when appropriate (60% in the United States, 61% in China). Among other options, the Chinese public leans toward friendly cooperation alone (23%) rather than actively working to limit US power (15%). Americans are

equally divided between those who prefer friendly cooperation (18%) and actively attempting to limit China's influence (18%).

Chinese, Americans Favor Balanced Approach to One Another

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



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Conclusion

This unique pair of surveys conducted in the United States and China demonstrate both the differences and the common ground between the American and Chinese publics. Chinese citizens show strong confidence in their country's global role and believe China should take an active part in international affairs. Americans are more divided on their nation's global role than in the past. After decades of US prominence internationally, many Americans prefer shared leadership over solo dominance and are less likely to express a strong belief in the uniqueness of their country's greatness.

Despite these differences, both publics agree that trade and global engagement benefit their countries. Majorities in each support cooperation when interests align, while also favoring limits on the other's influence when

necessary. This balance reflects a realistic view of a complex relationship rather than a narrowly competitive or cooperative outlook.

Overall, the findings suggest that both societies recognize the need for engagement and stability despite, or perhaps due to, growing bilateral differences, many of which are irreconcilable in the near-term. The future of the “[most consequential relationship for America in the world](#)” will depend on how both sides navigate this mix of cooperation and rivalry in the years ahead.

Methodology

US Public Opinion Survey

This analysis is primarily based on data from the 2025 Chicago Council survey of the American public on foreign policy and the 2025 Chicago Council-Carter Center survey of Chinese public opinion on international affairs.

The Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy is a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2025 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 18–30, 2025, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel (KnowledgePanel) in English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,148 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.07.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The data for the total sample were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, Census region, metropolitan status, and household income using demographic benchmarks from the 2024 March Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The specific categories used were:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18–29, 30–44, 45–59 and 60+)
- Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, 2+ Races Non-Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School, Some College, Bachelor or Higher)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan Status (Metro, Non-Metro)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000–\$49,999, \$50,000–\$74,999, \$75,000–\$99,999, \$100,000–\$149,999, \$150,000+)

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown Family and the Korea Foundation.

China Public Opinion Survey

Polling for the 2025 Chicago Council-Carter Center China survey of Chinese public opinion on international affairs was 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.

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Dr. Scholl Foundation and The Carter Center.

Acknowledgments

Nick Zeller and Yawei Liu were instrumental in making the Chicago Council-Carter Center China survey of Chinese public opinion on international affairs possible. In addition, Craig Kafura included several comparative figures for this report.

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).

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Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that 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. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974. For the latest research from the Crown Center, follow [@ChiCouncilFP](https://twitter.com/ChiCouncilFP).

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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. Follow our newsletter or go to chinafocus.info to learn more.