



American Views toward US-Japan Relations and Asia-Pacific Security

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Introduction

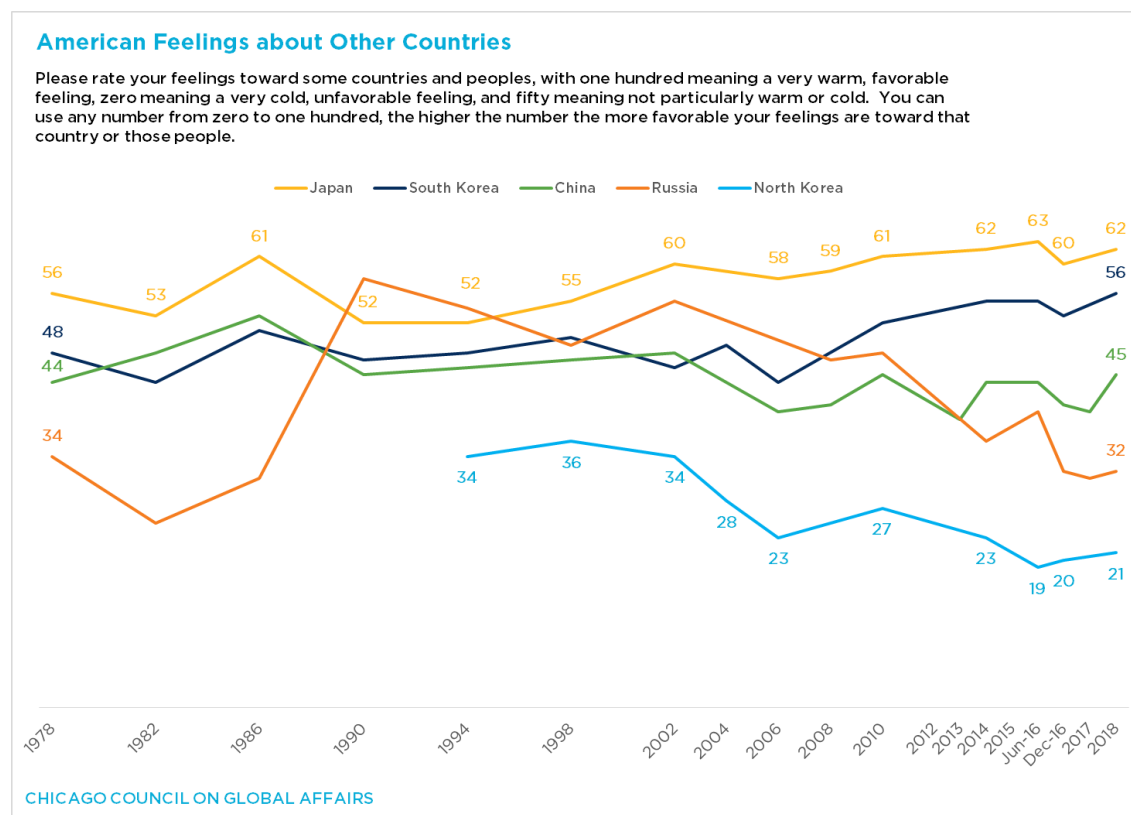
At a time when the Asia-Pacific faces an uncertain future, the resiliency of the US-Japan alliance is increasingly important. As the United States seems to willfully withdraw from its leadership position in the region, China is keen to step in and fill this void. This has put much of the region on edge, especially as North Korea continues to rapidly work towards achieving a credible ICBM and advanced nuclear weapons program. How do Americans view these changes and how do they affect their attitudes towards the US-Japan alliance?

Key Findings

- Six in ten Americans (62%) say that China is a rising military power. However, only 39% see China's military power as a critical threat facing the United States. North Korea's nuclear program is the top threat included in the survey (78% critical).
- As China's power increases, the American public either wants to make no change to the alliance with Japan (46%) or strengthen the alliance with Japan (43%).
- A plurality (46%) support Japan assuming greater responsibility to address regional challenges in East Asia. But Americans prefer that greater responsibility to take place within the existing framework of the alliance. Fifty-eight percent approve of Japan taking part in international peacekeeping operations and one half (49%) support Japan building up its military. However, 39 percent support Japan undertaking independent combat missions.

Americans Broadly Favorable toward Japan

As in past surveys, the American public continues to view Japan favorably. More than eight in ten (86%) say that the United States and Japan are mostly partners, and on a scale of 0 to 100, where higher numbers represent warmer feelings towards the country, Japan was rated an average of 62. This was largely consistent with readings since 2002, and up since the question was first asked in 1978 (56). This makes Japan the second most favored country included in the survey, just behind Australia (71) and just ahead of South Korea (56). Two other major players in the region—China and North Korea—are viewed more negatively. While China rates a slightly cool 45, North Korea (21) is the least favored country included in the survey, with Russia (32) second from the bottom. (See Appendix Figure A for full figure.)

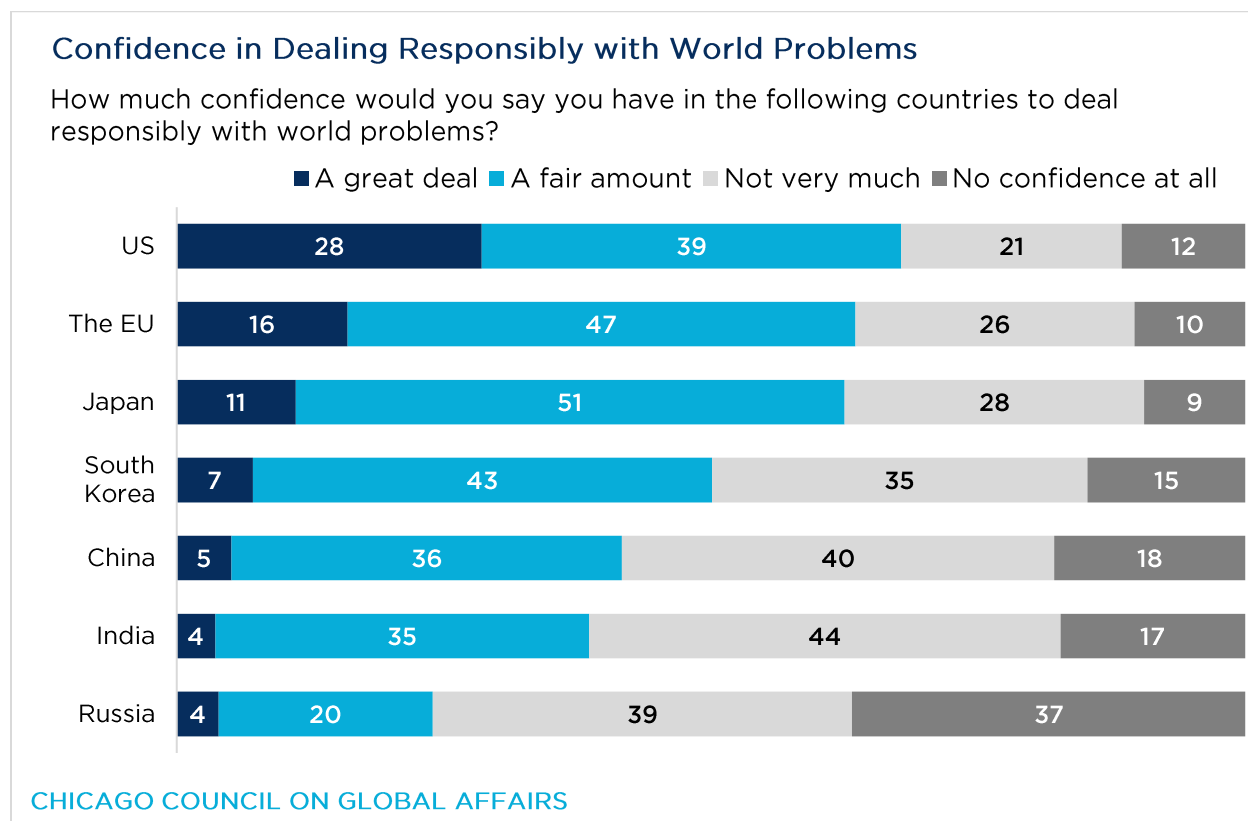


Americans not only like Japan, they also express favorable views of Japan’s prime minister. At 64 percent favorable, Shinzo Abe is the most favored leader included in the survey, slightly ahead of South Korea’s Moon Jae-in (63%). Other leaders in the region—all from US competitors or adversaries—are much less popular. Only minorities say they have favorable views of Xi Jinping (32%), Vladimir Putin (14%), and Kim Jong Un (3%).¹

In addition to favorable views of Japan and its leader, a majority of Americans (62%) say they have a great deal (11%) or a fair amount (51%) of confidence in Japan’s

¹ This survey was conducted prior to the announcement that President Trump agreed to meet Kim Jong Un at a summit.

ability to responsibly deal with world problems—an increase of four percentage points when the question was first asked in 2015.² This was virtually identical to the confidence shown in the European Union (63%, down from 66% in 2015), and only just behind American confidence in the United States (68%, down from 82% in 2015) to do the same. Notably, there was less confidence in China (41%, 34% in 2015) and India (38%, 34% in 2015).



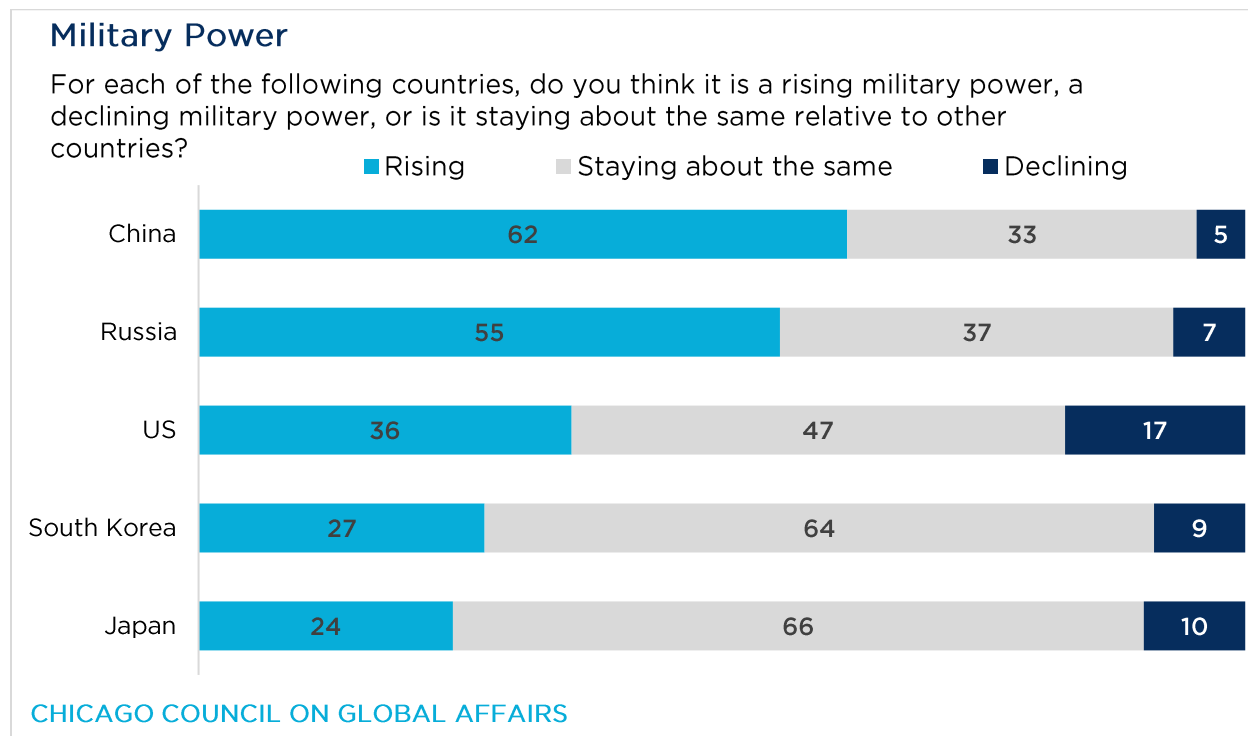
China on the Rise, but Not a Critical Threat

Americans tend to believe that the Middle East (50%) is the most important region for US security. While China is increasingly seen as a challenger to the United States in Asia, and North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests have made it a growing threat, only a quarter say that Asia (23%) is the most important region. Americans think that in 10 years the Middle East will still be more important for US security (42%), with three in ten (29%) identifying Asia.

China is viewed as a growing power but is not yet one to be feared. While 62 percent identify China as a rising military power, majorities of Americans see their Japanese and South Korean allies’ military power as staying about the same (66% and 64%,

² The warm feelings toward Japan and the confidence in it are likely not based on personal experience with Japan. Just 7 percent reported actually having visited Japan. Moreover, of those who had not traveled to Japan, only a minority (41%) expressed interest in doing so.

respectively). A plurality says the same about US military power (47%). Notably, Republicans are far more likely to say that the United States is a rising military power (48%, vs. 30% of Democrats and 31% of Independents). Fifty-five percent also view Russia as a rising military power.



At the same time, only minorities consider China’s economic power (31%) and military power (39%), critical threats facing the United States.³ Americans appear to be more concerned about Russia, with 47 percent saying its territorial ambitions are a critical threat to the United States. This is not to say that Americans do not see any threats in Asia. In fact, the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear program is the top threat included in the survey, identified by 78 percent as critical. The next closest is international terrorism at 70 percent. (See Appendix Figure B for full figure.)

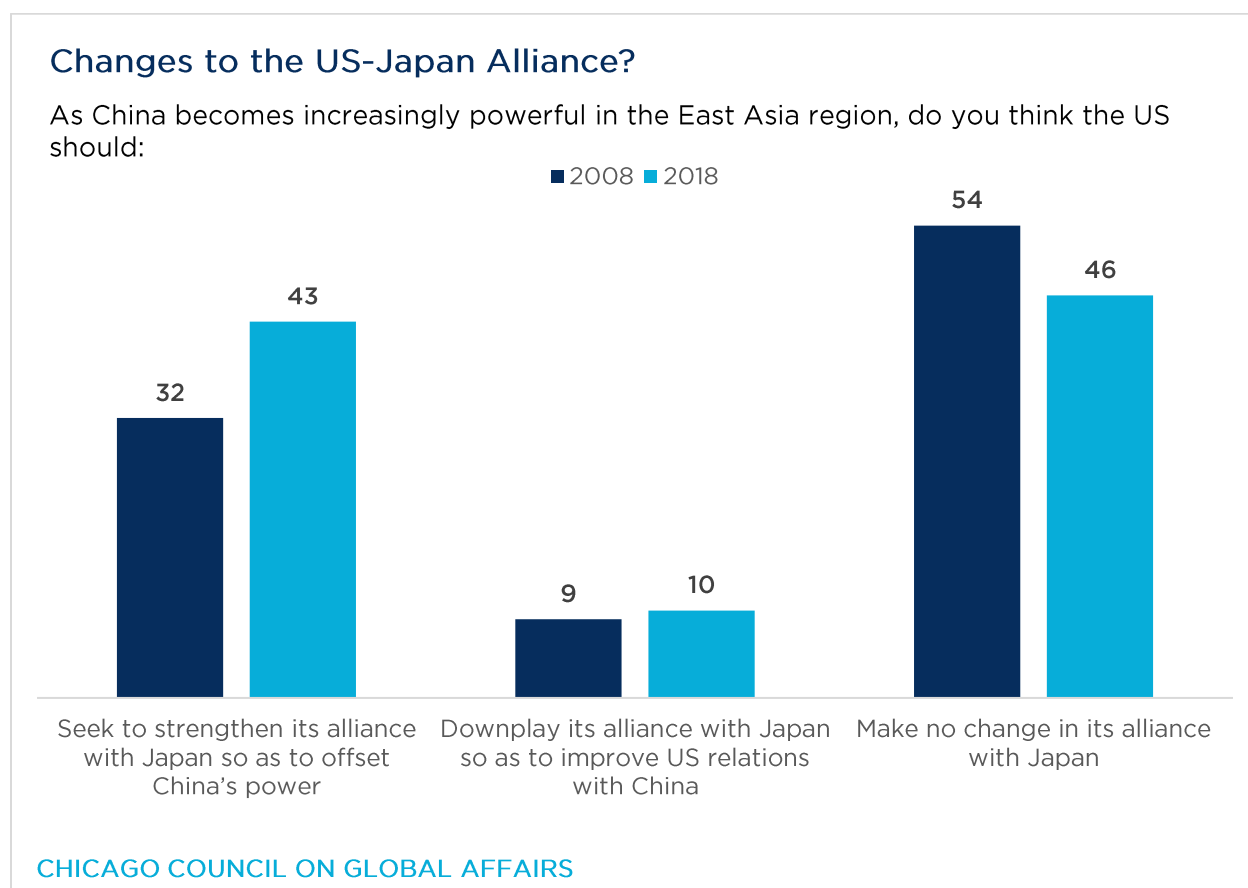
Even with the threat of North Korea, there is little appetite among Americans to increase the US military presence in Asia. Americans say that the US military presence in Asia should be kept at present levels (61%), with similarly-sized minorities supporting increasing (22%) and decreasing (17%) the US military presence in the region.⁴

³ Those that say China’s economic or military power is a critical threat facing the United States are as likely to say that Asia is the most important region for US security interests as to say the same about the Middle East.

⁴ Results are similar for Europe and the Middle East. Just 9 percent support an increased presence in Europe, and 23 percent say the same of the Middle East. Majorities favor maintaining the current US military presence in Europe (65%) and the Middle East (52%). While this may be related to threat perceptions, there are likely many other factors that drive these attitudes.

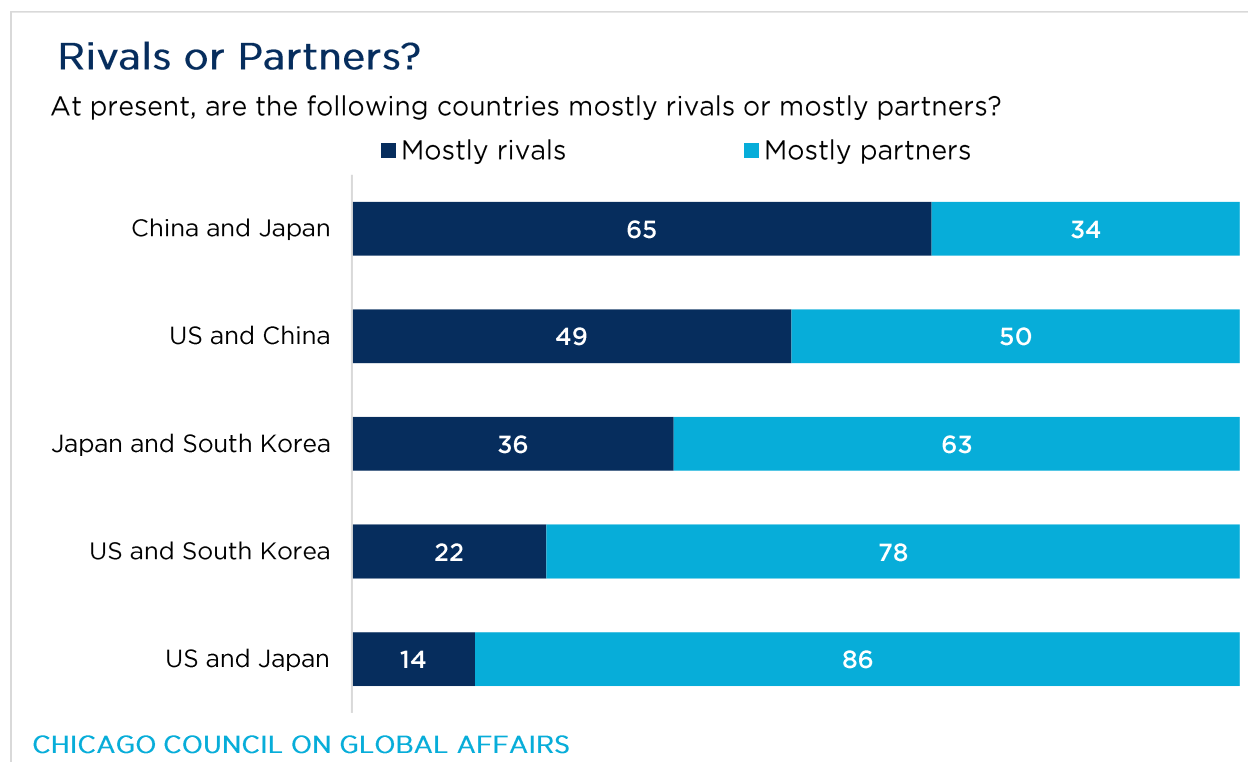
Support for US-Japan Alliance Steady

With broad agreement that China's power is on the rise—even if it is not seen as a critical threat—there are questions about how the United States should respond in terms of its alliances in the region. The United States could seek to downplay those alliances in order to better accommodate China or it could bolster those alliances to better deal with a rising China. When it comes to the US alliance with Japan, Americans are clear: the United States should not seek to downplay its alliance with Japan in order to improve relations with China. Just 10 percent view this as the best option. Instead, 46 percent state that the United States should make no changes to the alliance and 43 percent prefer strengthening the US-Japan alliance to deal with a rising China. Support for strengthening the US-Japan alliance to counterbalance China has risen notably since 2008 (from 32% to 43%).



Part of this may be due to American views of bilateral relations in the region. Japan has long been one of the closest allies of the United States, and a large majority of Americans (86%) cite the United States and Japan as mostly partners. But when it comes to the US-China relationship, the public is nearly evenly split. While 50 percent cite the two states as mostly partners, a further 49 percent cite them as mostly rivals.

For the relationship between China and Japan, Americans see them as mostly rivals (65%).



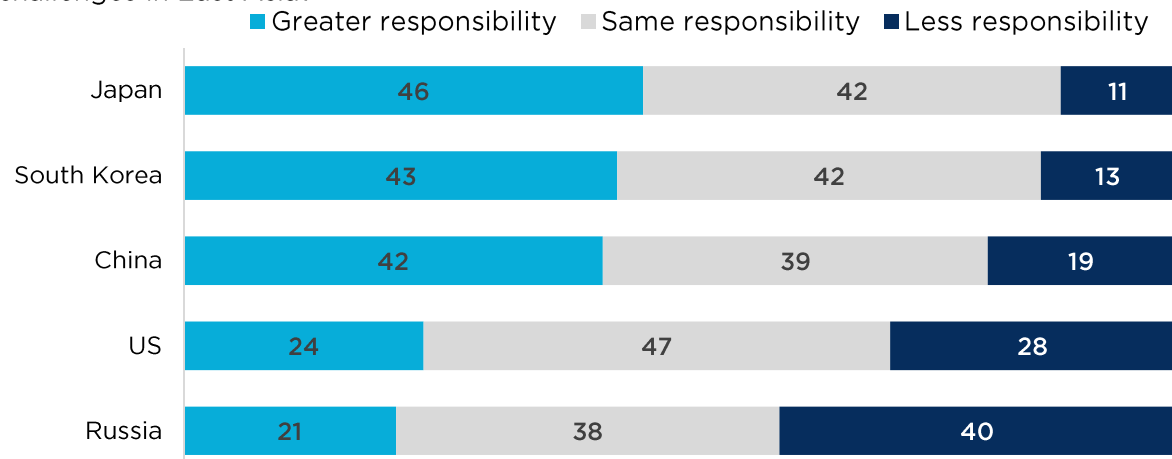
US-Japan Alliance

A core question facing Japan and the Asia-Pacific is Japan’s security role in the region. Japan’s Self Defense Forces face constitutional limitations on the actions it can conduct, but as pressure grows from China’s continued rise there are calls for Japan to increase the role it plays. The American public is broadly supportive of Japan taking on a more active role in security in the Asia-Pacific, with 63 percent in support.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the many critical issues at play in East Asia, Americans themselves are not in a hurry to take on more responsibilities in the region. Only one in four (24%) say the US should have greater responsibilities; more (28%) say that the US should have *less* responsibility, and a plurality (47%) support keeping US responsibilities the same. But many Americans do support US allies Japan (46%) and South Korea (43%) taking on greater responsibilities in the region. And as China’s rise continues, many Americans also support China taking on greater responsibilities (42%).

Responsibilities in East Asia

In your opinion, should the following countries have greater responsibility, less responsibility, or have the same responsibility they have now to address regional challenges in East Asia?

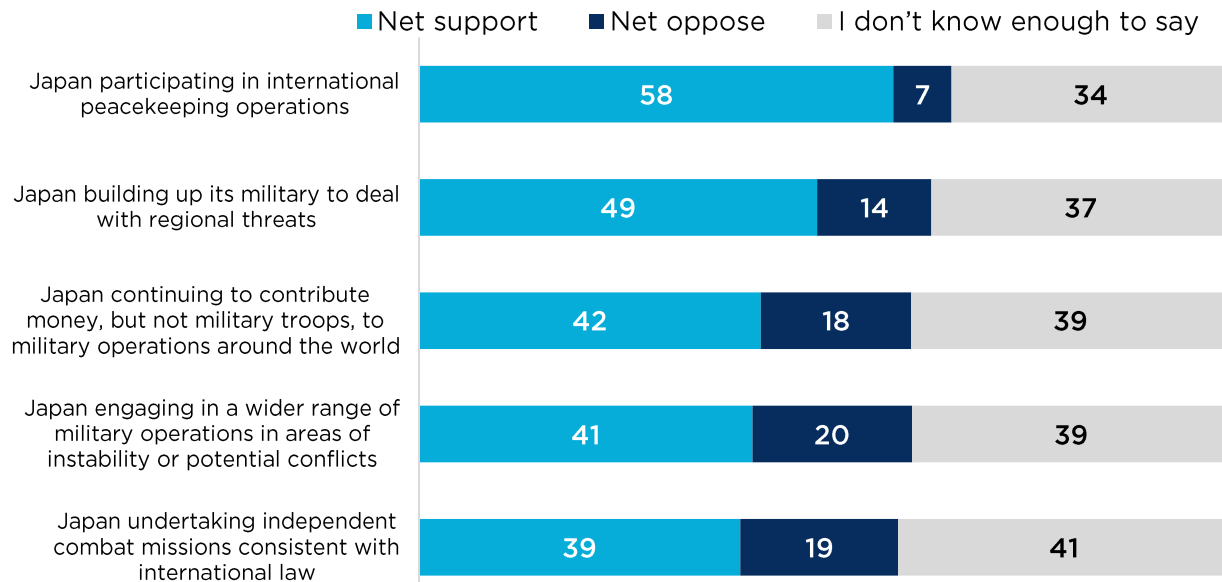


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When asked about various ways Japan could increase its role in regional security, many Americans say they simply do not know enough to say one way or the other. Nonetheless, a majority (58%) back Japanese participation in international peacekeeping operations, and half (49%) support Japan building up its military to deal with regional threats. Pluralities of Americans support a variety of additional actions on Japan's part, including engaging in a wider range of military operations in areas of instability or potential conflicts (41%) and undertaking independent combat missions consistent with international law (39%). A similar proportion (42%) support Japan continuing to contribute money, but not troops, to military operations around the world. Notably, across all of these various policy options, there was little outright opposition to potential Japanese actions.

Japanese Actions and International Security

Please indicate if you would strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose Japan taking the following actions (%)



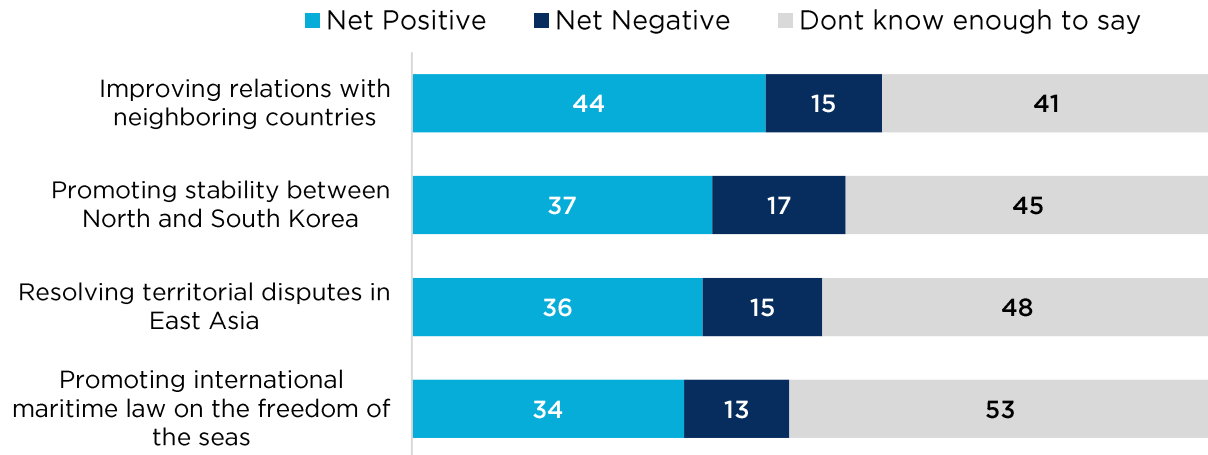
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Similarly, Americans also do not always know what Japan is currently doing on a variety of issues, though impressions are more positive than negative.⁵ On a variety of contemporary issues, including improving relations with neighboring countries (44%), promoting stability between North and South Korea (37%), resolving territorial disputes in East Asia (36%), and promoting international maritime law on the freedom of the seas (34%), more Americans said Japan was playing a positive role than a negative one. Yet with the exception of Japan's role in improving relations with neighboring countries, more Americans feel that they don't know enough to say one way or the other.

⁵ This matches Americans' generally warm feelings towards Japan and their perception of Japan as a US partner, with those Americans who feel more warmly towards Japan more likely to view Japanese efforts as more positive.

Japan's Role on Issues in Asia

When it comes to _____, do you think Japan is currently playing a very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative role?



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Conclusion

Americans clearly view Japan as a close and trusted ally, and there is little opposition to Japan further expanding its role in the region. Indeed, even as China rises, Americans continue to say that the alliance with Japan should either remain unchanged or be strengthened. A plurality of Americans support Japan building up its military to deal with regional threats, but they are hesitant to support Japan undertaking independent combat missions. This suggests that if Japan does pursue an expanding role in the region, Americans want to see that happen within the framework of the US-Japan alliance.

Methodology

This report was produced in collaboration with the Japan Institute of International Affairs. The analysis in this report is based on data from a survey conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel between February 20 and March 6, 2018 among a weighted national sample of 1,037 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error is ± 3.2 percentage points with a design effect of 1.1328.

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?"

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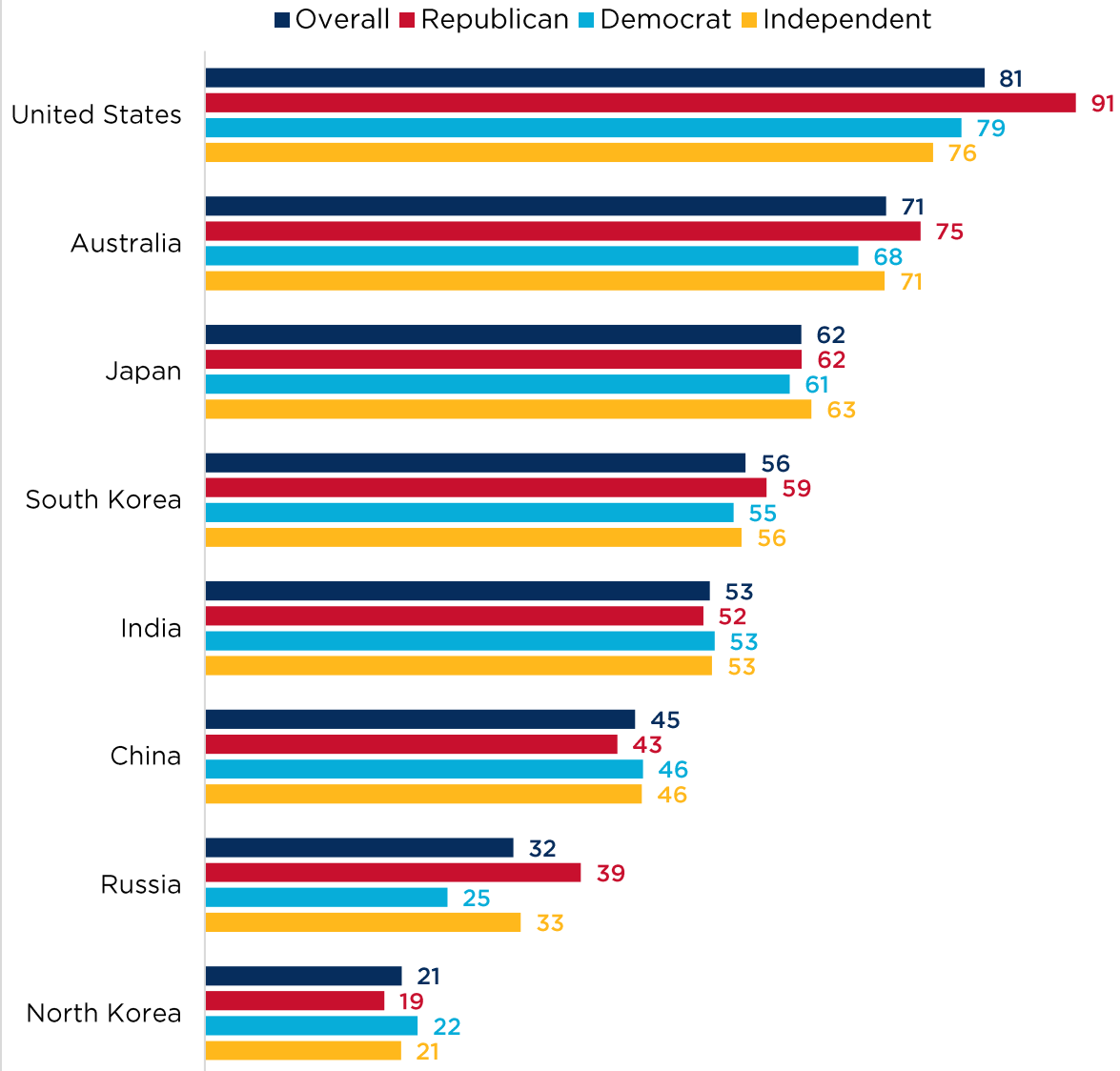
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Appendix

Appendix Figure A

Feeling Thermometer

Please rate your feelings toward some countries and peoples, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that country or those people.



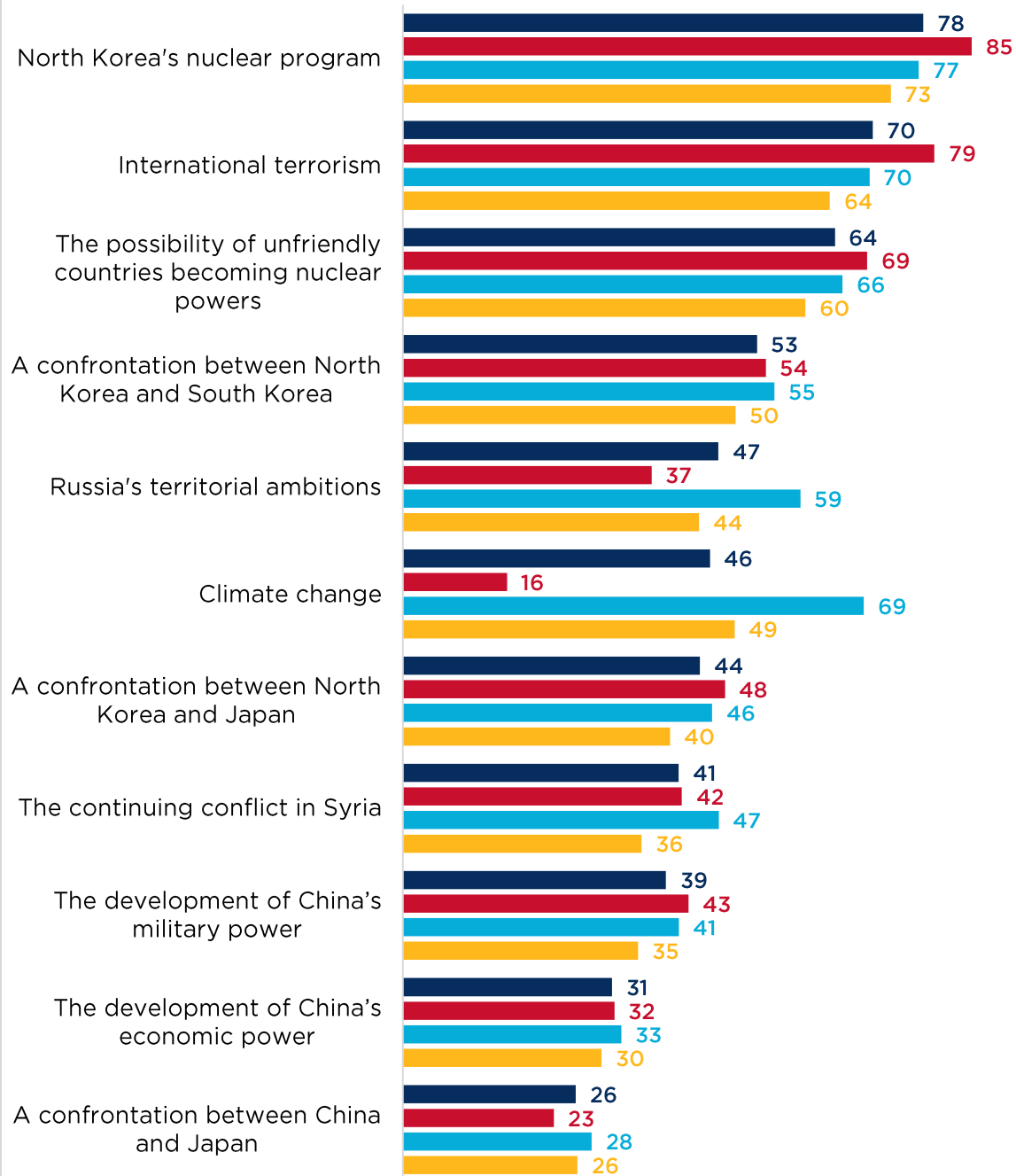
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Appendix Figure B

Threats

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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 (% critical threat)

■ Overall ■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Independent



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