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Cooperation and Hedging: Comparing US and South Korean Views of China

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Introduction

While Seoul and Washington currently agree on using high-level diplomacy to encourage North Korea to denuclearize, South Korean and US approaches toward China differ and could become a source of friction between the two allies. Under President Donald Trump, the United States has confronted China through tariffs on Chinese imports and identified China as a near-peer adversary. Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon Jae-in has made efforts to end a dispute with China over the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and indicated openness to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Public preferences in both the United States and South Korea are not necessarily aligned with their own governments' policies toward China. Chicago Council and Asan Institute surveys conducted in 2019 find that both South Koreans and Americans see a strengthened US-ROK alliance as an asset in dealing with China, suggesting that Washington and Seoul can afford to strengthen coordination between their policies toward China.

Key Findings

- While Americans are divided over US tariffs on Chinese goods (49% support, 47% oppose), they decidedly prefer a cooperative approach toward Beijing. Sixty-eight percent of Americans say the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than try to limit Chinese power.
- South Koreans are generally more cautious in dealing with China. While half prefer that South Korea undertake friendly cooperation (52%) with China, 40 percent want to actively work to limit Beijing's power.
- Three-quarters of South Korean respondents (78%) say that South Korea should prioritize strengthening ties with the United States over those with China, whereas 14 percent say ties should be strengthened with China over the United States.
- In 2018, 66 percent of Americans said the United States should prioritize building up strong relations with Japan and South Korea over relations with China. Only 26 percent favored building a new partnership with China over Asian allies.

American Approaches to China's Rise

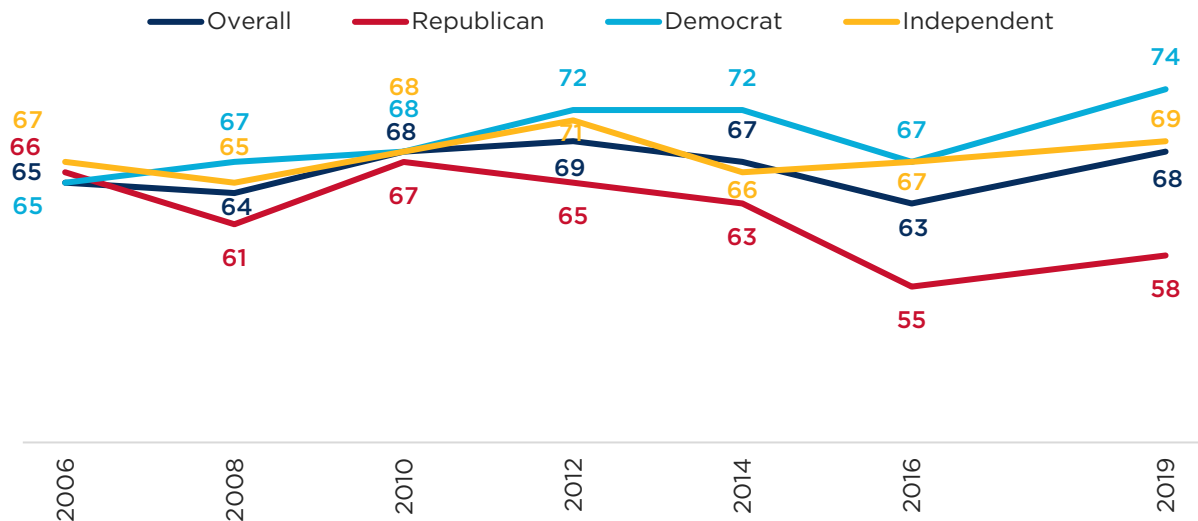
In contrast to previous US administrations that took a more accommodative tact toward China, the Trump administration has portrayed China as a geostrategic rival and competitor. The 2017 National Security Strategy states that “China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”¹ In response, President Trump has employed tariffs in an attempt to correct the US trade deficit with China. The Trump administration has also led efforts to ban Chinese tech companies from involvement in the rollout of 5G around the world on security grounds.

The sense of alarm about China within the Trump administration and across the broader US foreign policy community has not caught on with the American public. In 2019, 68 percent of Americans say the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China. This has been strikingly consistent going back to 2006, when 65 percent favored friendly cooperation.

¹ The White House. [National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#). President Donald J. Trump. December 18, 2017.

American Approaches To China's Rise

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



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

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These results are partly informed by the fact that Americans do not see China as a critical threat to the United States. While 42 percent do identify China as a critical threat, this number is lower than that of other potential threats included in the survey. (See Appendix for full results.) The number of Americans who identify China as a critical threat is higher among self-described Republicans (54% vs. 36% of Democrats), although still significantly lower than the threat levels Republicans perceive from cyberattacks, terrorism, or the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs.²

As China gains regional and international influence, US leaders need to balance relations with a rising China and with ties to traditional Asian allies. In 2018, two-thirds of Americans said the United States should place a higher priority on building up strong relations with traditional allies such as South Korea and Japan, even if this diminishes US relations with China (66%). Support had risen notably since 2010, when 58 percent preferred this approach.

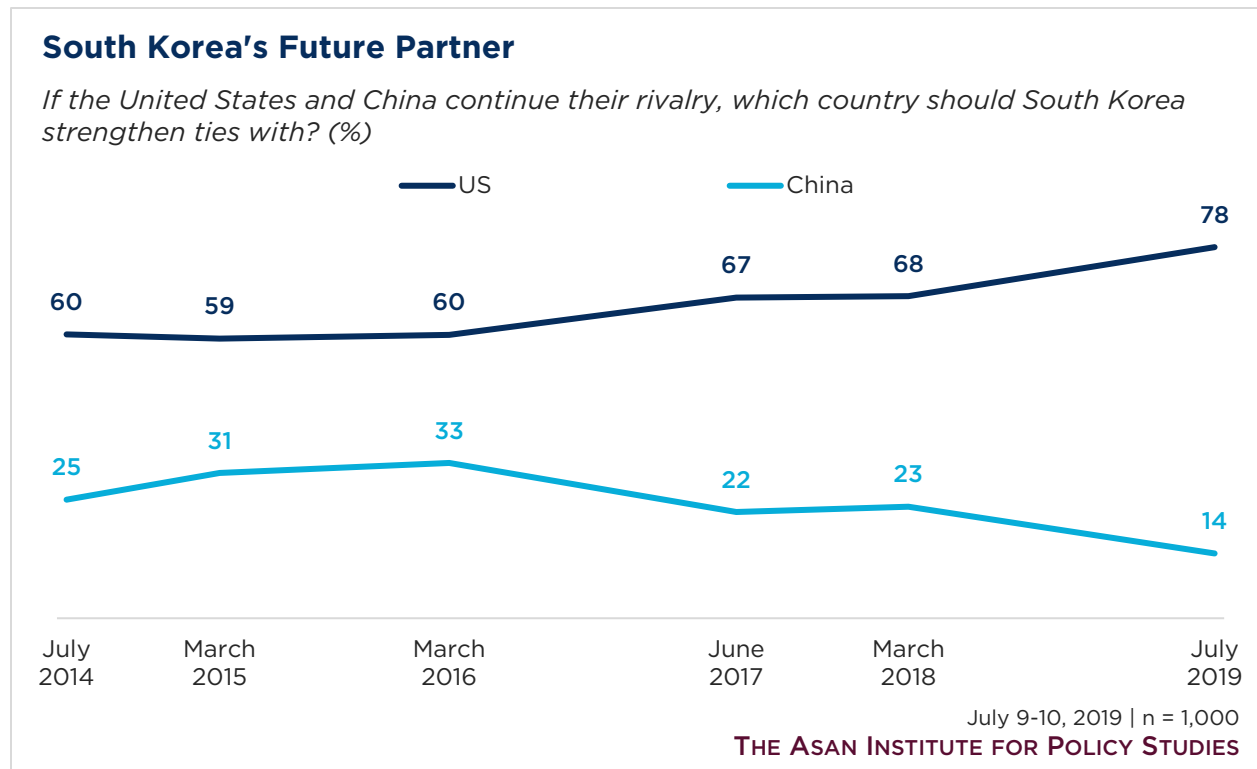
South Korean Approaches to China's Rise

Historically, South Korea has pursued a strategy of choice avoidance in its management of relations with the United States and China. But the South Korean public seems more willing to take a side, likely responding to China's economic retaliation as of March 2017 after South Korea's 2016 decision to accept deployment of a US mid-range missile defense system to counter North Korea's ongoing missile

² See "Rejecting Retreat", Smeltz, et. al., The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 2019.

development.³ While the ongoing US-China rivalry will affect the future of South Korean foreign policy, the South Korean public emphatically believes that a strong US-ROK alliance best serves South Korea's interests.

Three-quarters in South Korea now say that Seoul should prioritize strengthening ties with the United States over China (78%). Fourteen percent prefer Seoul strengthen ties with China over Washington. This preference for the United States over China has continued to grow steadily since 2016, with majorities across political ideology (self-described progressives 77%, moderates 77%, and conservatives 83%).



Although China is Seoul's top trading partner, South Koreans consider the United States to be stronger economically (78%) and militarily (84%) than China.⁴ These patterns also correspond with relative favorability ratings of the United States and China among South Koreans. In 2019 the United States received a mean score of 6.0 on a 0 - 10 scale. China lagged behind at 3.8, on par with North Korea (3.8), followed by Japan (3.1).⁵

³ China responded to South Korea's decision to accept the deployment of THAAD on the peninsula by accusing South Korea of working with the United States to threaten China's strategic interests and called for a nationwide boycott against South Korean goods and services. Bilateral South Korea-China relations have not yet recovered.

⁴ Just 8% believe China has the stronger economy and 13% say they both are equally strong; 3% say that China is stronger militarily and 12% say equally strong.

⁵ Favorable views of each country also roughly align with views of the leaders of each country. South Koreans have a more favorable view of China's President Xi Jinping (3.3) than

South Koreans Believe Their National Interests Lie with the United States

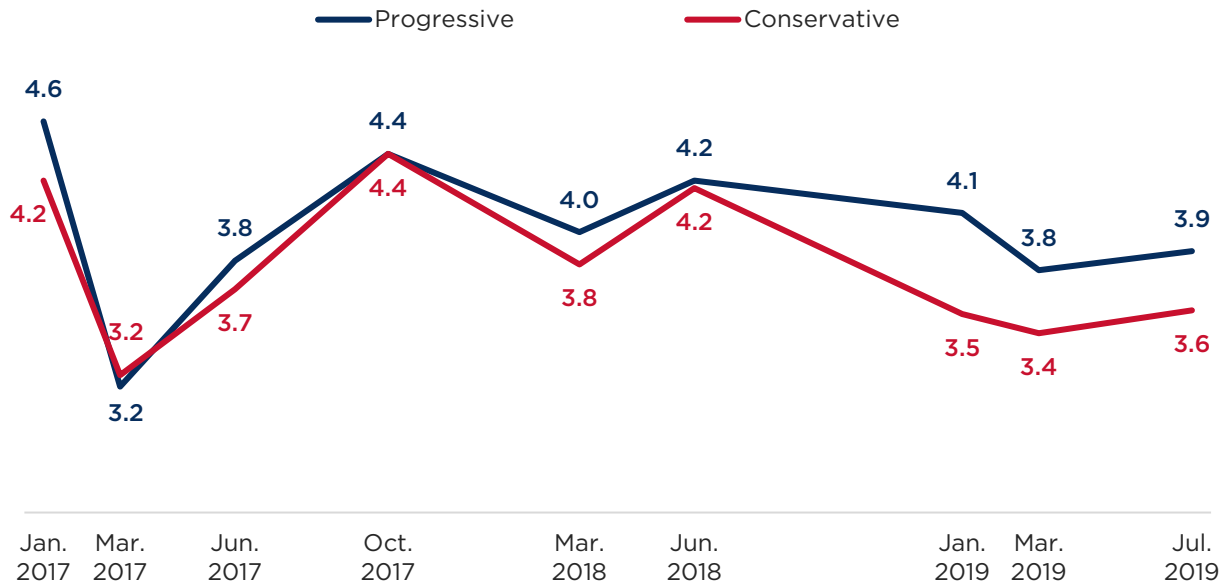
Under Moon, the South Korean government has tried to reassure China by announcing that there will be no additional missile defense deployment, no South Korean integration into a US missile defense network, and no formation of a US-Japan-South Korea security alliance. But the South Korean public is circumspect about the best way to deal with the rise of China. South Koreans prefer that South Korea undertake friendly cooperation with China (52%) rather than actively work to limit the growth of China's power (40%). Self-described progressives prefer a more cooperative approach to China (59%) than conservatives (44%). Conservatives are more closely divided about what to do about China (cooperation 44% vs. limit the growth of China's power 49%).

South Korean public expectations for the US role are more hawkish than both current South Korean government policy and American public views of how to deal with China. When asked how the United States should deal with China, South Koreans are almost evenly divided on whether the United States should pursue cooperation (44%) or actively work to limit the growth of China's power (46%). Among progressives, 51 percent prefer that the United States pursue cooperation with China while 44 percent want the United States to limit the growth of China's power. For conservatives, 55 percent want the United States to limit the growth of China's power while 40 percent want the United States to pursue cooperation. These findings align with the tendency of South Korean conservatives to have a marginally less favorable view of China since January 2019.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (2.9) and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (1.6), but Trump (4.9) is the most favored leader of the four.

China Favorability by Self-Identified Ideology

How would you rate the favorability of China? Please, indicate on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not favorable at all, and 10 most favorable. (mean)



July 9-10, 2019 | n = 1,000

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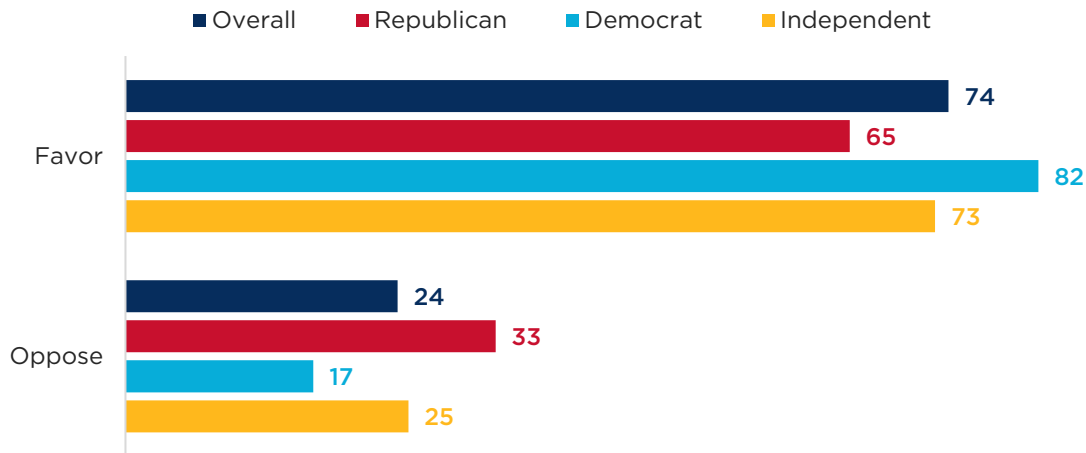
US Policy Options on China

The Trump administration's placement of tariffs on a wide range of Chinese goods has stimulated debate over how best to confront China without imposing self-inflicted damage to the US economy. The American public is split on tariffs. While 49 percent support placing tariffs on products imported from China, 47 percent oppose the use of these tariffs. Preferences are heavily shaped by partisanship, with 73 percent of Republicans in favor compared to just 27 percent of Democrats. The perception of China as a critical threat had less impact on support for tariffs. Half (51%) of Americans who identify China as a critical threat also support tariffs.

The hesitance over tariff use may stem from American support for trade with China and views on national security. Three-quarters of Americans (74%) favor engaging in trade with China.

Trade With China

Do you favor or oppose engaging in trade with the following countries? **China** (%)



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

The American public does not seem to view trade as a tool for promoting national security. While just 14 percent say trade with China would increase the likelihood of military conflict, 41 percent say it does more to decrease those chances, and 43 percent say it makes no difference.

South Korean Perceptions of the US-China Trade War

The US-China trade war understandably has South Korean leaders on edge. China and the United States are South Korea's [top two](#) trade partners and turbulence in US-China trade relations will have repercussions for South Korea's national interest. Three-quarters of the South Korean public (75%) expect the US-China trade war to have either an extremely negative (27%) or moderately negative (49%) impact on South Korean national security.⁶

However, the South Korean public does not seem to perceive a connection between the US-China trade war and their views toward the two countries. Those who expect a negative impact on South Korea from the trade war are no more or less favorable toward each country. (See Table 1 in Appendix). This could suggest that the South Korean public does not attribute blame to either the United States or China for the trade war.

Conclusion

Public opinion in the United States and South Korea toward China appears to serve as a counterweight to the policy directions of the respective governments. Despite the more adversarial relationship with China under the Trump administration and

⁶ Due to rounding, these numbers add to 76 percent. The correct number, as stated in the text, is 75 percent.

divided public views on US tariffs against China, the American public prefers to cooperate with Beijing rather than work to contain its influence.

The deepening Sino-US trade war and the US turn toward a more adversarial relationship with China under the Trump administration has put greater pressure on South Korea to make choices between the United States, South Korea's primary security guarantor, and China, South Korea's largest economic partner. While the leadership in Seoul has been somewhat accommodating to China, the public feels burned by China's economic retaliation in response to the THAAD deployment and is now more willing than in previous surveys to strengthen relations with the United States at the expense of ROK-China relations.

Although many outstanding issues remain, including the new Special Measures Agreement, the South Korean public remains largely supportive of the US-ROK alliance. How South Korea navigates rising Sino-US rivalry will have implications for the future of Sino-South Korean relations, as well as for the durability of the US-South Korea alliance.

Methodology

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

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

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

The analysis of South Korean public opinion is based on data from The Asan Institute for Policy Studies' 2019 public opinion survey. The survey was conducted July 9-10, 2019 by Research & Research, using RDD (Random Digit Dialing) for mobile and landline phones and the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) method. Data was weighted by age, gender, and region to create a nationally representative sample ($n=1,000$ adults ages 19+). The margin of sampling error is ± 3.1 at a 95% confidence level.

Ideological stance is based on respondents' answer to the following question: "What is your ideological stance? Please, indicate on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being very progressive, 5 being moderate, and 10 very conservative." For analytic purposes, we recoded the answers into three categories as follows: progressive (0 to 4), moderate (5), and conservative (6 to 10).

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About the Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies is an independent, non-partisan think tank with the mandate to undertake policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as Korean reunification.

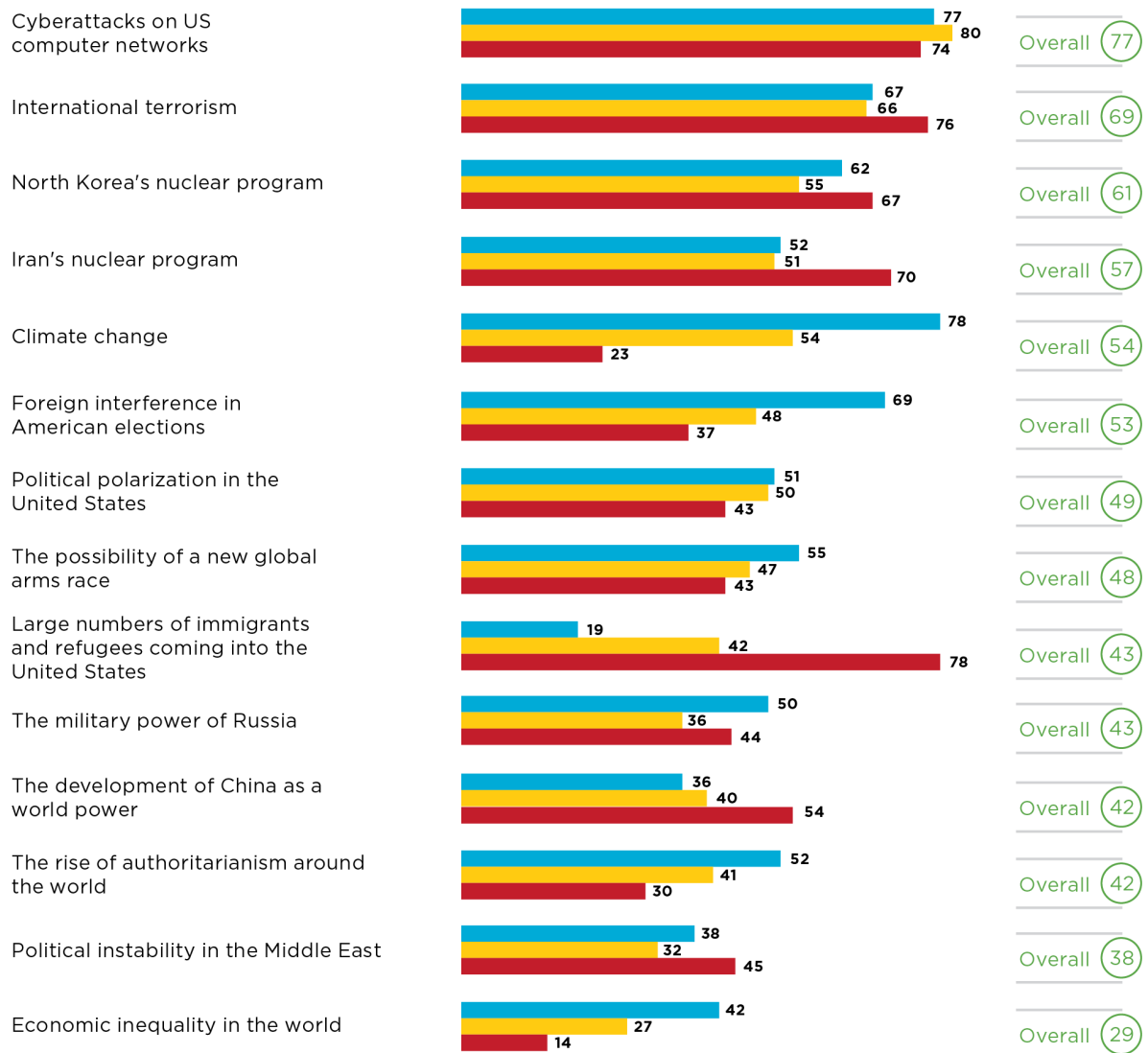
Appendix

Figure 1. Threats to the United States

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

n = 2,059

■ Democrat ■ Independent ■ Republican



2019 Chicago Council Survey

Table 1. Relations Between US/China Favorability and Impact of US-China Trade War (%)

Country	Favorability	Positive	Negative	Test statistic
US	Favorable	17	83	$\chi^2=1.647$, $df=2$, $p=.439$
	Neutral	19	82	
	Unfavorable	21	79	
China	Favorable	19	81	$\chi^2=1.274$, $df=2$, $p=.529$
	Neutral	22	78	
	Unfavorable	18	82	