



Cooperation, Competition, or Confrontation? Republicans and Democrats Split on China Policy

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Results of the [2021 Chicago Council Survey](#) (conducted July 7–26) and the Council’s [2021 Trilateral Survey](#) (conducted in the United States, South Korea, and Japan in March) show that most Americans see the US-China relationship as one primarily defined by competition—or even by conflict—rather than by cooperation. While Republicans and Democrats in Washington have adopted a similar line when it comes to China policy, Council polling finds that Republicans hold more negative views of China and are more likely to support policies that restrict US-China exchanges in trade, education, and technology. These notable and growing partisan divisions among the public suggest that US policy toward China could change direction in future years, depending on which party governs in the majority.

Key Findings

- A plurality of Republicans (42%) consider China an adversary—a country the United States is in conflict with—compared to just 17 percent of Democrats.
- As a broad strategy, Republicans (67%) are far more likely than Democrats (39%) to view limiting China’s global influence as a very important goal for US foreign policy.
- In terms of specific policies, majorities of Republicans favor restricting the exchange of scientific research between the United States and China (73%) and limiting the number of Chinese students studying in the United States (72%). Majorities of Democrats oppose limits on Chinese students (66%) and scientific exchange (59%).
- Republicans also favor increasing tariffs on imports from China (83%) and significantly reducing trade between the two countries, even if this means greater costs for American consumers (77%). Democrats are more divided on trade: half oppose higher tariffs (50%, 45% support), and a narrow majority oppose significant trade reductions with China (53%, 44% support).

Americans—and Especially Republicans—View China as a Rival or Adversary

In recent years, the relationship between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has turned downright frosty. Under the Trump administration, the United States engaged in a protracted trade war with China and labeled the nation a “[strategic competitor](#).” Republicans on Capitol Hill have continued some of the harsh anti-China rhetoric, including Senators Josh [Hawley](#) (R-MO) and Marco [Rubio](#) (R-FL). “We must address the dangerous, growing imbalance between America and China comprehensively, decisively, and swiftly,” [said Rubio](#) in a recent speech. “Or we will live to see a future in which the world’s most powerful nation is a totalitarian, genocidal Communist dictatorship.”

The Biden administration has kept a similar focus, pledging “[vigorous competition](#)” with China while also aiming to avoid escalation into outright conflict. There have been some disagreements among administration officials on how best to engage China on trade issues while maintaining a US competitive edge and protecting vital US industries.

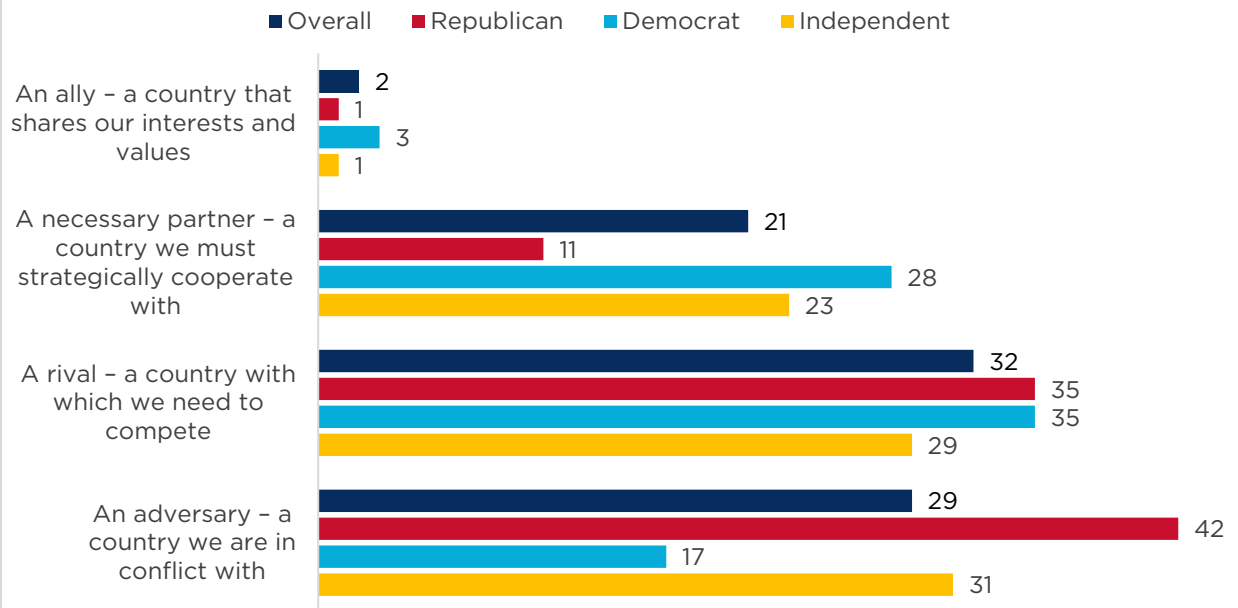
The public debate has also taken a sharply negative turn in recent years. American views of China have fallen to record lows, with a [larger and more-sustained drop](#) than seen in the public backlash following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

This decline in the American public’s favorability toward China has taken place across party lines. Yet Republicans’ views have fallen further, faster, and more intensely than have Democrats’, reflecting the earlier start and more extensive scope of Republican political leaders’ criticisms on China. Republicans (77%) are far more likely than Democrats (52%) to view the US-China relationship as a conflictual or competitive one. In particular, Republicans are likely to view China as an adversary—a country the United States is in conflict with. An additional third (35%) see China as a rival with which the United States needs to compete. And few Republicans (11%) see China as a necessary partner for the United States.

Democrats are more divided in their views toward China. Relatively few Democrats (17%) view China as an outright adversary for the United States. A third see China as a rival for the United States (35%), but Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to see China as a necessary partner with whom the United States must strategically cooperate (28%).

American Views of China

Generally speaking, which of following descriptions do you feel best reflects the relationship between the United States and the countries listed below? **China** (%)



July 7-26, 2021 | n=1,482

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Republicans are also more negative in their general feelings toward China, according to a March 2021 Council poll. On a 0-100 feeling thermometer scale, where 0 represents a very cold, unfavorable feeling and 100 represents a very warm, favorable feeling, Republicans give China an average rating of 23, a record low in Council polling dating to 1978. Democrats, meanwhile, rate China an average of 39, up slightly from the summer of 2020 though this remains lower than in all Council surveys prior to 2020 (see appendix).

Growing Concerns across Party Lines about China’s Economic, Military Power

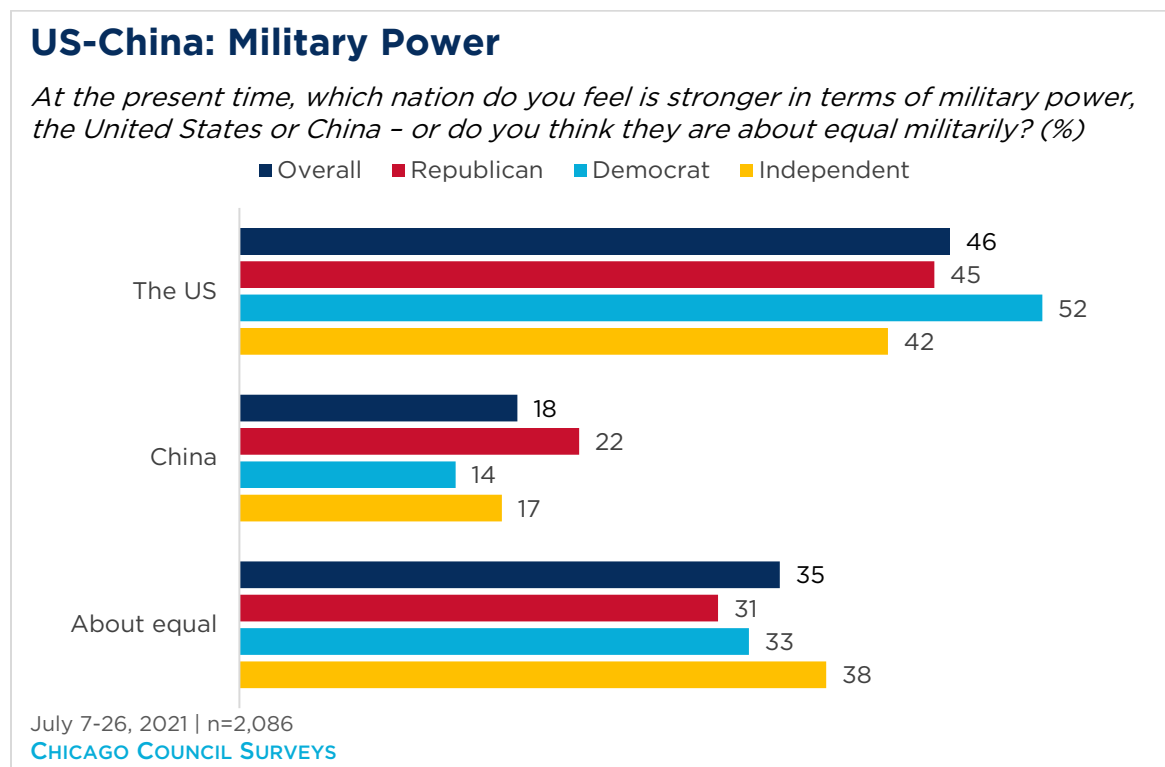
Going hand in hand with their views of China as an adversary or a rival, Republican perceptions of a critical threat from China have increased dramatically in recent years. The Council’s [March 2021 Trilateral Survey](#) found that 66 percent of Republicans named China’s economic power a critical threat to the United States, up from 32 percent in 2018. Democratic concerns also rose slightly (41%, up from 33% in 2018), but not nearly to the same degree as for Republicans. When asked about China’s military power, Republicans display a similar pattern. Nearly seven in 10 (68% in March 2021) say China’s military power represents a critical threat to the United States, an increase from 43 percent in 2018. Democrats are much less alarmed, with

about as many in 2021 (43%) as in 2018 (41%) describing China’s military power as a critical threat (see appendix).

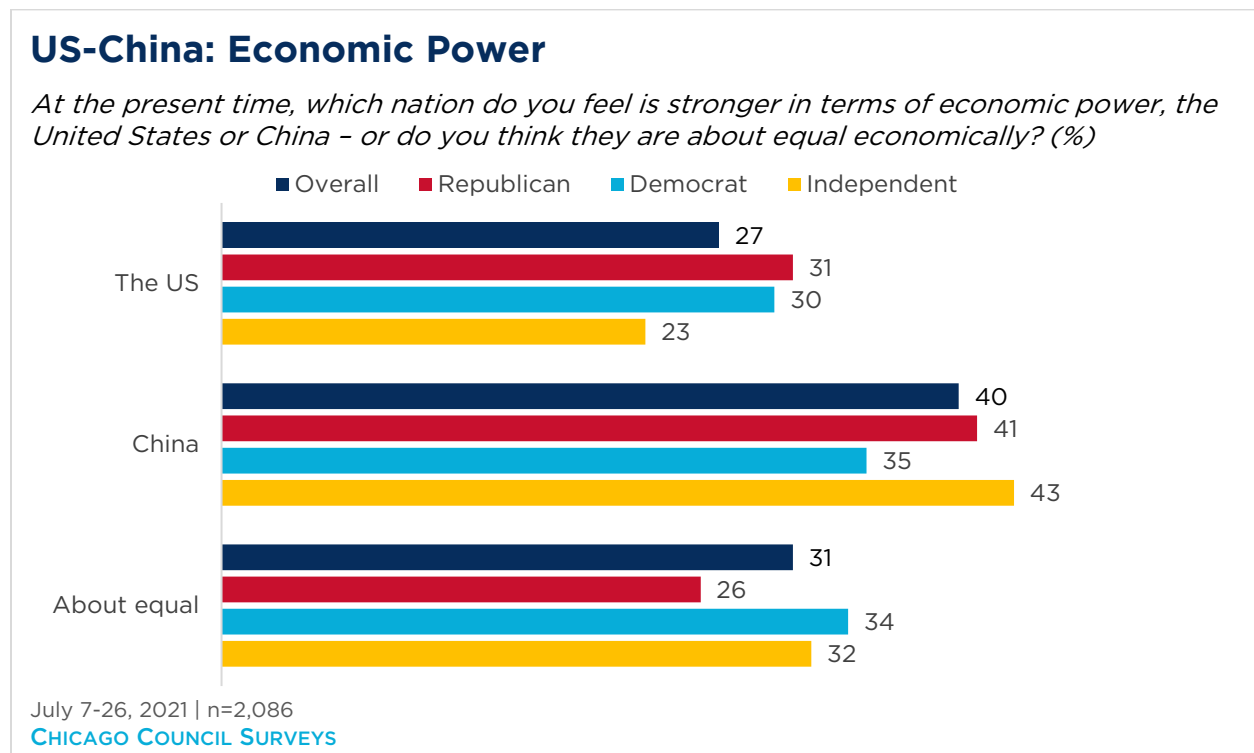
Moreover, across the political spectrum, [Americans believe](#) that China is intent on replacing the United States as the dominant world power. According to the Council’s March 2021 Trilateral Survey, majorities of Republicans (79%) and Democrats (58%) think China seeks to replace the United States as the dominant power in the world. An additional 14 percent of Republicans and 23 percent of Democrats think China is intent on dominating the Asia-Pacific region. Few Americans, regardless of partisan affiliation, believe that China does not seek dominance globally or in Asia (see appendix).

US Public Increasingly Sees China as Militarily, Economically Stronger

The July 2021 survey results show that these perceptions have implications for the way Americans view the balance of economic and military power between the United States and China. Fewer than half (45%) of Republicans believe the United States is stronger militarily than China, a decline from 62 percent in 2019 and the lowest level of Republican confidence in US military power in Council polling. Republicans are also less inclined to see the United States as the stronger country in economic terms. Only 31 percent of Republicans say the United States is the stronger economic power, compared to 44 percent in 2019.



By contrast, Democrats remain more confident in American power in the economic and military realms. Consistent with their past views, a narrow majority of Democrats (52%) see the United States as a stronger military power than China. Democrats are somewhat more concerned about the shifting economic balance of power, but to a far lesser degree than Republicans. Two years ago, a narrow plurality of Democrats (36%) saw the United States as the stronger economic power. Today, Democrats divide three ways between those who see China as the stronger economic power (35%), those who say the two nations are about equal (34%), and those who say the United States is the stronger economic power (30%).

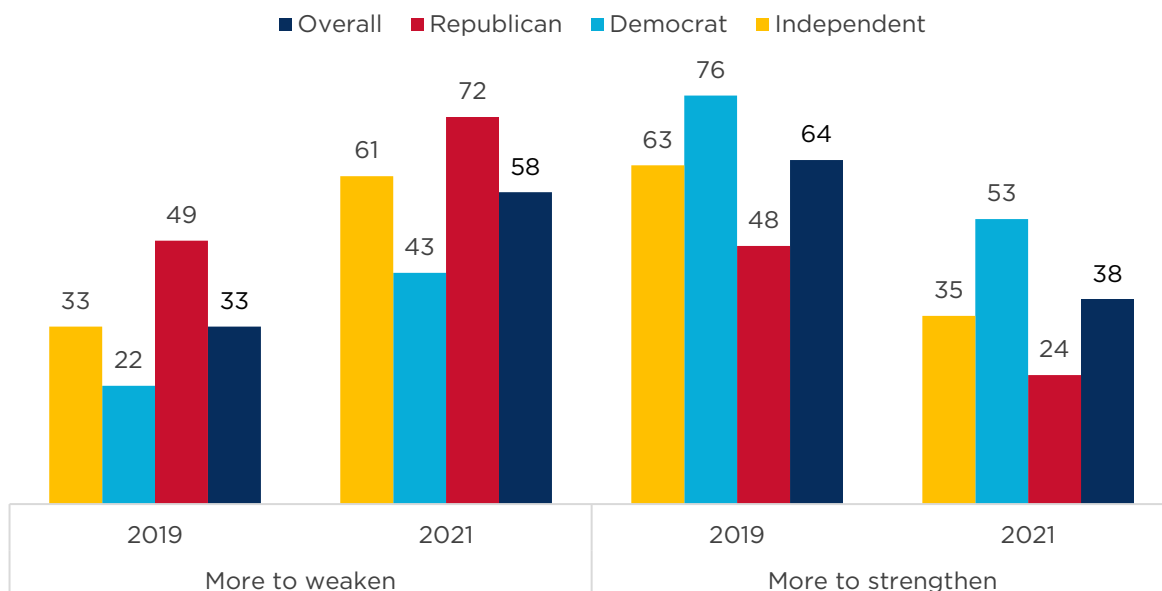


Republicans Say US-China Trade Weakens US National Security; Democrats Divided

While trade tensions ran hot between the United States and China in 2019, the Chicago Council Survey of that year found that three-quarters of Democrats (76%) and half of Republicans (48%) considered trade with China as strengthening US national security. But Republicans are now far more negative on the security impacts of US-China trade. Seven in 10 Republicans (72%) see US-China trade as weakening US national security. By contrast, a majority of Democrats (53%) continue to say that trade with China strengthens US national security.

U.S.-China Trade and US National Security

Does trade between the United States and China do more to strengthen US national security or weaken US national security? (%)



July 7-26, 2021 | n=2,086

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Despite the differences between Republicans and Democrats, all partisans have seen a similar shift in attitudes. Over the past two years, Republicans (up 23 percentage points), Democrats (up 21 points) have all become more likely to say that US-China trade weakens US national security.

Republicans More Likely than Democrats to Favor Hardline Approaches to Contain China

As an overall strategy, Republicans are far more likely to favor an approach that limits China's influence around the world (67%) than are Democrats (39%). But as the [2021 Chicago Council Survey finds](#), limiting China is a lesser priority for Democratic and Republican Party supporters than is protecting the jobs of American workers, preventing cyberattacks, and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. This corroborates the results from the March 2021 Trilateral Survey, which found that a majority of Republicans now support the United States actively working to limit the growth of China's power (71 percent, up from just 40 percent in 2019). Democrats, however, remain more split on how Washington should deal with Beijing: half (49%) favor limiting

China's power, and half (51%) favor a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement (see appendix).¹

Republicans Broadly Support Limits to US-China Exchanges

This broad Republican support for containing China, and the relatively more cooperative approach expressed by Democrats, is reflected in partisan attitudes toward more concrete policy options. As the 2021 Chicago Council Survey finds, Republicans are notably more supportive of a wide range of policies aimed at reducing exchanges of goods, people, and ideas between the United States and China.

Trade is a key area in which Republicans, far more than Democrats, support cutting the ties that bind the two nations. Matching their view that trade with China is bad for American national security, large majorities of Republicans favor increasing tariffs on imports from China (83%) and significantly reducing trade between the two countries, even if this means greater costs for American consumers (77%).

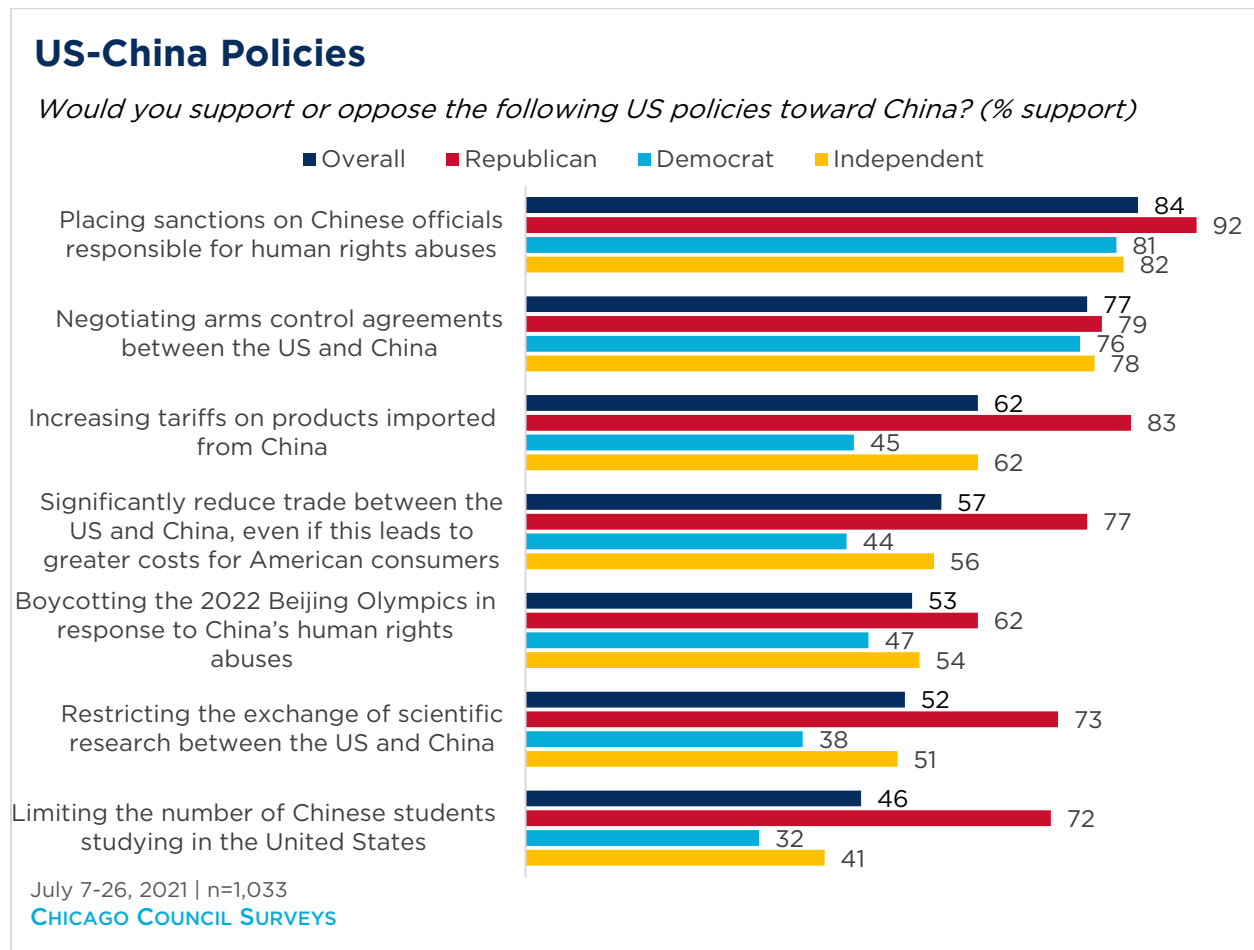
Democrats, divided in their views of how US-China trade affects US security, are also divided on the approach the United States should take to China. But narrow majorities oppose such limitations on US-China trade. Half (50%) oppose increased tariffs on goods from China, and a majority (53%) oppose significant trade reductions with China.

Trade is not the only element of US-China exchange that Republicans support limiting. Nearly three-quarters of Republicans (73%) favor restricting the exchange of scientific research between the United States and China, and a similar proportion (72%) say the United States should limit the number of Chinese students studying here. On these issues, Democrats are less divided, with majorities opposing limits on Chinese students (66%) and scientific exchange (59%).

And with the world's eyes turning to Beijing in February for the 2022 Winter Olympics, a majority of Republicans (62%) now favor boycotting the Games in response to China's human rights abuses, while Democrats are divided (47% favor, 49% oppose). The United States will be engaged in at least a partial boycott of the Games: a [diplomatic boycott](#), meaning that while American

¹ This is not to say that Republicans are dead-set on a policy of confrontation with the PRC in all situations. When offered a third choice—undertaking either friendly cooperation or actively limiting China's power where appropriate—narrow majorities of Republicans (54%), Democrats (52%), and Independents (56%) prefer this option. Yet it is notable that a third of Republicans (34%) continue to prefer a more exclusively confrontational approach even in this scenario (see appendix).

athletes will compete in the Games, there will be no accompanying political delegation.



Despite the public support for these policies aimed at restricting exchanges between the United States and China, bipartisan majorities also support engaging with Beijing on a key issue: arms control agreements. In the November 15 teleconference between President Joseph Biden and Xi Jinping, the two leaders [discussed the need for strategic stability talks](#), a step many experts [see as necessary](#) given the [increasing size](#) of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. Americans, too, support efforts at arms control diplomacy, including majorities of Republicans (79%) and Democrats (76%).

Conclusion: Partisanship and the Future of US-China Policy

In the past five years, relations between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated markedly, leaving policymakers on both sides of the Pacific searching for a new framework. Kurt Campbell, Indo-Pacific policy director for the Biden administration, pronounced the end of the old policy order earlier this year. “The period in US policy toward China that was broadly described

as ‘engagement’ has come to an end,” [said Campbell in a May speech](#) at Stanford University. “The dominant paradigm is going to be competition.”

As relations between Beijing and Washington have pivoted sharply to a more competitive relationship, the American public has also changed how it thinks about China. But not all Americans view China with the same degree of threat.

Across a range of questions, Republicans evince a greater degree of concern about Beijing’s policies and intentions and in turn are more likely to support policies aimed at decoupling the two nations in the economic, scientific, and academic realms.

The Biden administration, in its approach to China and to its posture in the broader Indo-Pacific, seeks to find the right balance of cooperation, competition, and confrontation with Beijing. This matches the views of Democrats among the public, who are comparatively more confident in US power yet divided on how to characterize the United States’ relationship with China.

To be sure, in some areas there is bipartisan agreement. Republicans and Democrats support human rights sanctions on PRC officials, and half or more support sending US troops to [the defense of Taiwan](#). But the many partisan divisions among the public—and among policymakers—suggest that the US approach toward China in future years could experience some policy swings from one election to the next.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the [2021 Chicago Council Survey](#) of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 7–26, 2021, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,086 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 +/- 2.33 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1817. 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?”

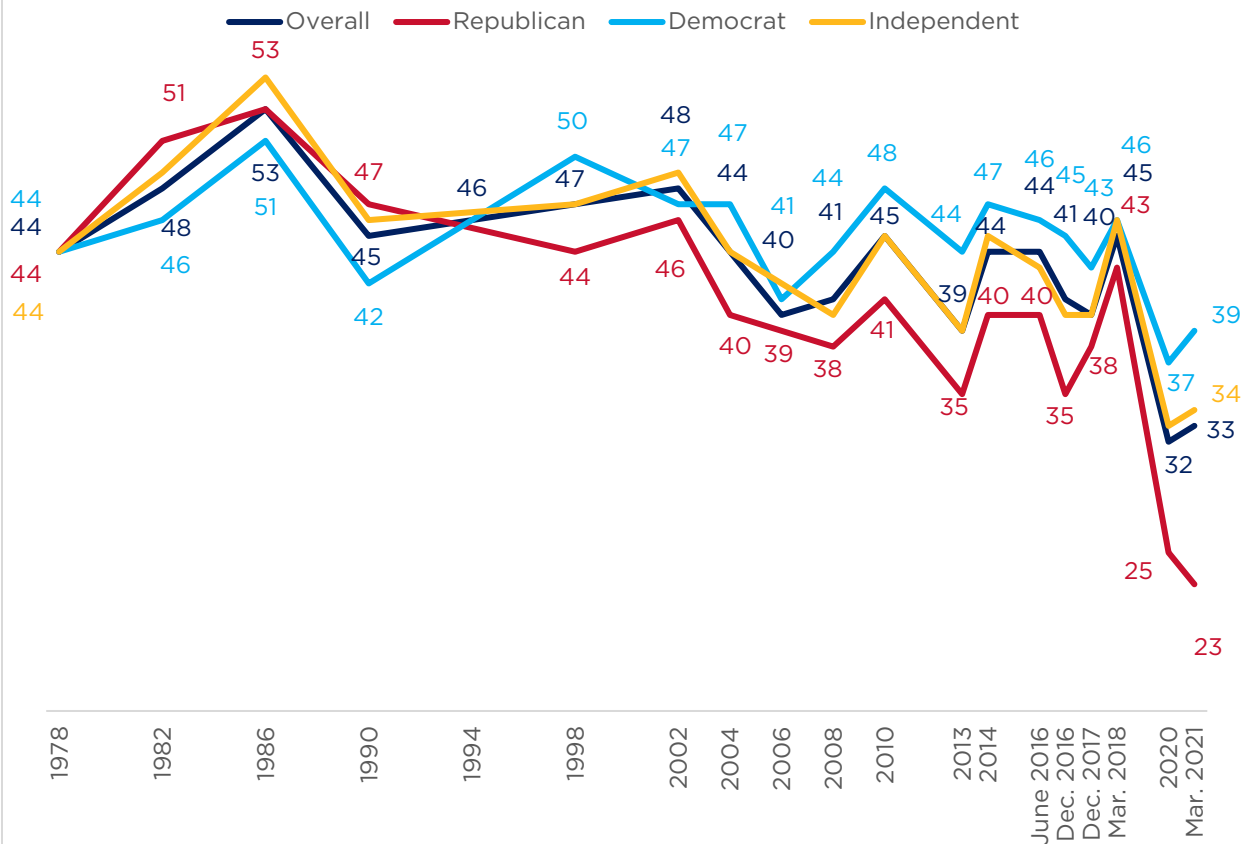
The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

Additional results come from the Council's [2021 Trilateral Survey](#), part of a [larger project](#) focusing on US-Japan-South Korea cooperation. This survey was conducted in the United States by Ipsos from March 19 to 21, 2021, using its large-scale online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,019 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 +/- 3 percentage points. The Trilateral Survey was made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Korea Foundation, and the Nakasone Peace Institute.

Appendix

Feeling Thermometer: China

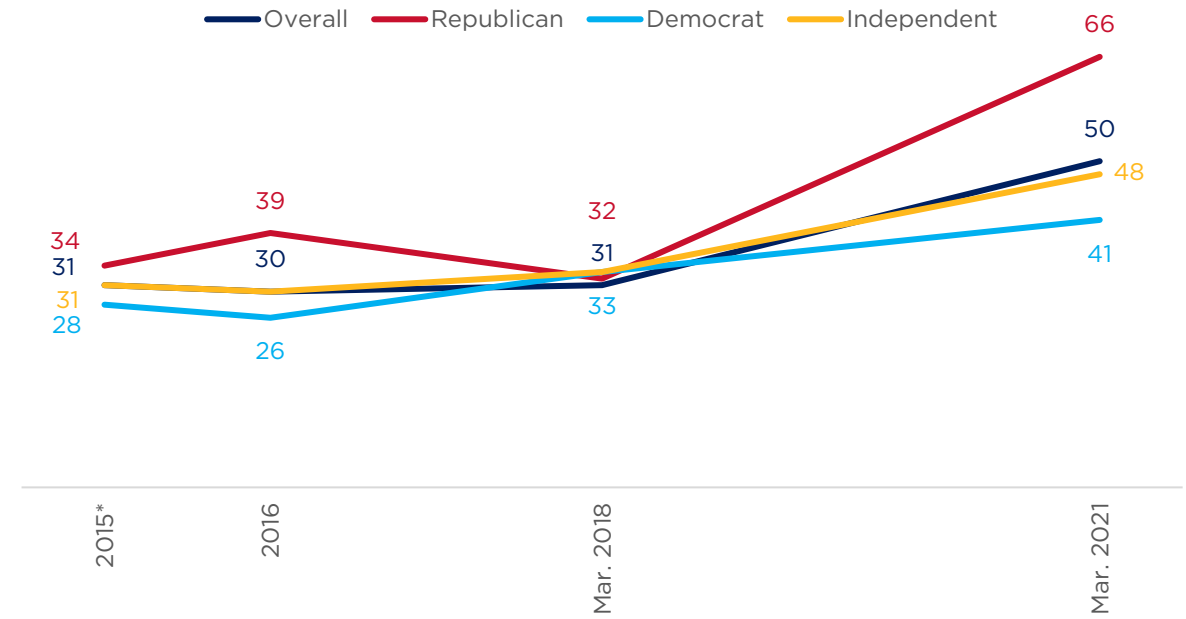
Please rate your feelings toward some countries and peoples, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from zero to one hundred, the higher the number the more favorable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



March 19-21, 2021 | n= 1,017
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Threat of China's Economic Power

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. **China's economic power** (% critical threat)

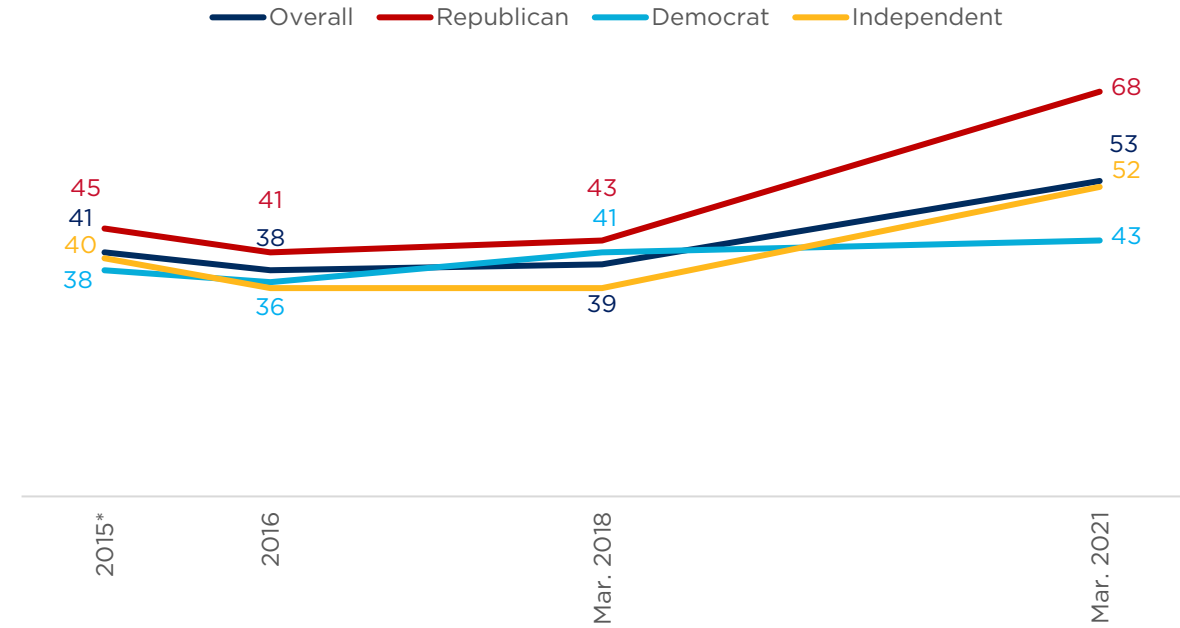


March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

**In 2015, the items were prefaced by "The development of..."*

Threat of China's Military Power

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. **China's military power** (% critical threat)

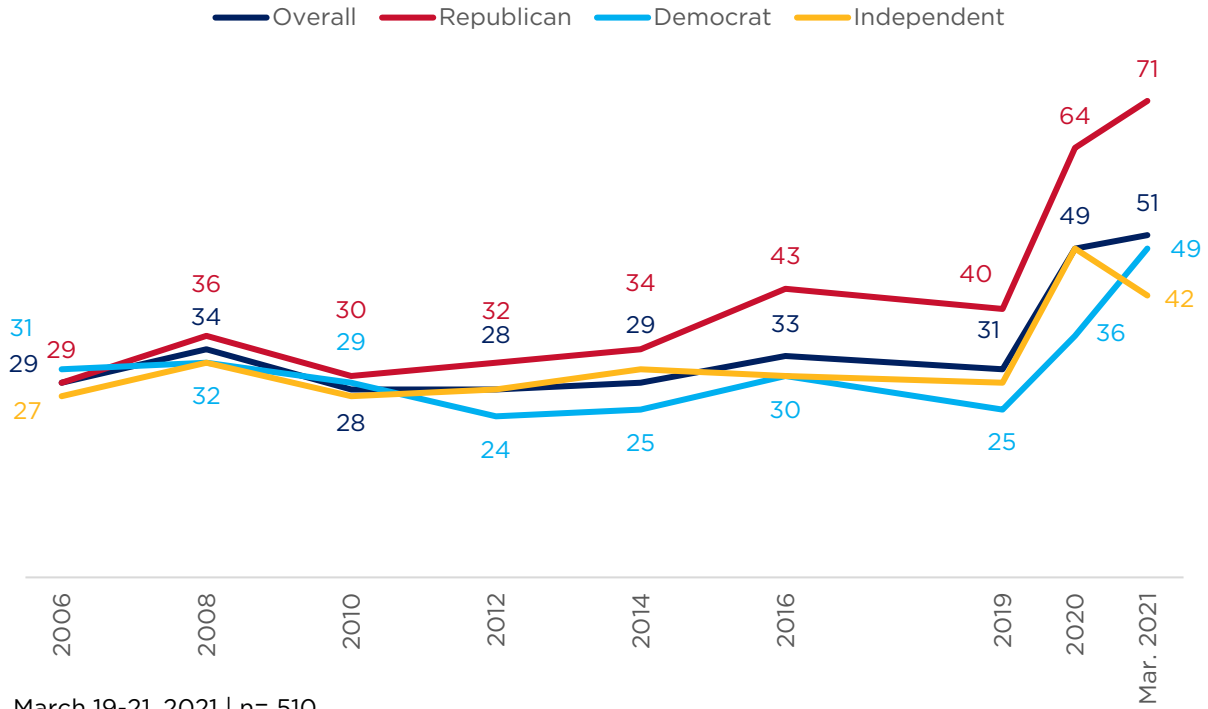


March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

*In 2015, the items were prefaced by "The development of..."

Support for Actively Limiting the Growth of China's Power

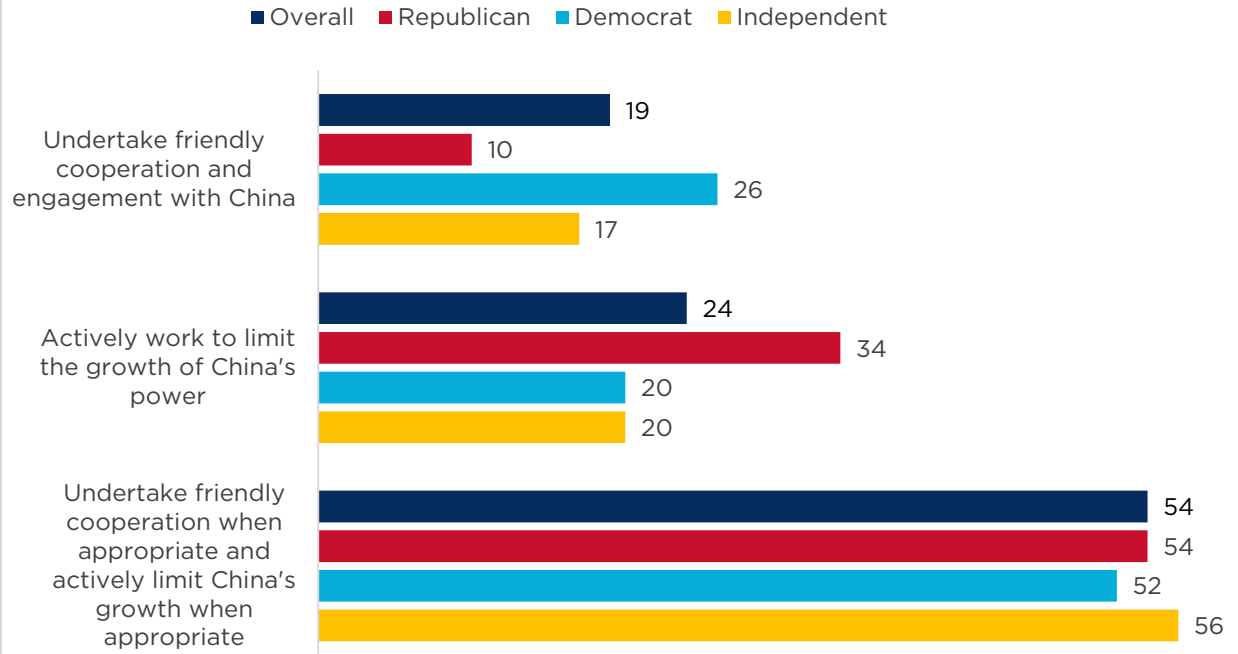
In dealing with the rise of China's power, do you think the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China, or actively work to limit the growth of China's power? (% actively work to limit growth of China's power)



March 19-21, 2021 | n= 510
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Dealing with the Rise of China's Power

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



March 19-21, 2021 | n=507

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