



WASHINGTON HAS TURNED ON CHINA. HAVE AMERICANS?

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There is perhaps no more important bilateral relationship in the world than the one between the United States and China. But that relationship may now be characterized more by competition than by cooperation. The Trump administration has taken an aggressive stance on the economic relationship, focusing on the US-China trade deficit and imposing tariffs on Chinese goods.

The national security discussion has also pivoted. The [Obama administration's 2015 National Security Strategy](#) is long past, with its welcome of “the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China” and its aim “to develop a constructive relationship.” The [Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy](#) states bluntly that “China...want[s] to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.” As Wang Jisi of Peking University writes in [Foreign Affairs](#), “a new American consensus is emerging ... that China is a major ‘strategic competitor’ and ‘revisionist power’ that threatens US interests.”

A cool US view of China-US relations

While elite rhetoric around the US-China relationship has changed significantly in recent years, public views remain more moderate. Polling data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows the US public is divided, neither embracing nor rejecting China.

Despite many dramatic changes in China-US relations over the past 40 years, US attitudes toward China have

remained stable. In a thermometer rating scale, where 0 represents a cold, very unfavorable feeling and 100 represents a warm, very favorable feeling, Americans today rate China an average of 45 degree. Forty years ago, in 1978, Americans rated China nearly the same: 44 out of 100. Americans are also divided over whether the US and China are mostly rivals (49 percent) or mostly partners (50 percent). This split on the US-China relationship has been consistent since the question was first asked in 2006, when 49 percent of Americans described China as a rival and 41 percent thought of China as a partner.

China: growing power, but not a critical threat

While Americans feel less warmly toward China than other nations, those less favorable views are not rooted in a view of Chinese power as a threat: only [minorities of the public](#) describe China's economic power (31 percent) and China's military power (39 percent) as critical threats to the US. This puts Chinese power far behind other critical threats facing the US, such as North Korea's nuclear program (78 percent), Russia's territorial ambitions (47 percent), and even climate change (46 percent).

Though most Americans don't describe Chinese military power as a critical threat to US interests, they do see Chinese military power growing. Six in 10 (62 percent) say China is a rising military power, while only one in three (36 percent) say the same about US military power. Americans are likely to see US military power staying about the same (47 percent); one-third say the same about China (33 percent). Majorities of Americans also see their Japanese and South Korean allies' military power as staying about the same (66 percent and 64 percent, respectively). Notably, while few see Chinese military power decreasing (5 percent), 17 percent of Americans think US military power is declining.

Similarly, although Americans do not view Chinese economic power as a critical threat to the US, they tend to view China as an unfair trading partner. Results from the [2017 Chicago Council Survey](#) found that only one in four Americans (26 percent) say China practices fair trade with the US, while two-thirds (68 percent) say it practices unfair trade. Negative views of Chinese trade practices have

increased 17 percentage points since 2002, when a bare majority (51 percent) described Chinese trade practices as unfair.

This is not the first time Americans have described a rapidly-growing Asian economy as an unfair trading partner. Japan's economic boom led to fears of economic hegemony and similar rhetoric around unfair Japanese economic practices. But unlike their cool view of China, Americans maintained a consistently warm view of Japan, even during periods of serious economic competition. Then, trade differences were buffered by the importance of the US-Japan alliance and a view of Japan as an important US ally in the region. China may be a partner or a rival, but [few Americans see China as an ally](#).

Low confidence in China's global and regional role

China's rising influence around the world has hardly gone unnoticed by the US public, and Chicago Council Surveys have tracked a steady increase in US perceptions of Chinese influence. In 2017, the US public rated Chinese global influence at 6.8 out of 10, behind the US (8.3) but above all other countries in the survey. American views of Chinese global influence have been fairly consistent over the past 15 years, with the public consistently rating China as the second most influential country in the world.

In the vein of Robert Zoellick's 'responsible stakeholder' concept, and perhaps reflecting growing Chinese influence, Americans are not opposed to China taking on additional responsibilities in Asia. A plurality of Americans (42 percent) say China should take on greater responsibilities in the region, with similar pluralities supporting greater roles for Japan (46 percent) and South Korea (43 percent). But Americans themselves are not in a hurry to put more on their plate: only one in four (24 percent) say the US should have greater responsibilities; more (28 percent) say that the US should have less responsibility, and a plurality (47 percent) support keeping US responsibilities the same.

Despite supporting a larger role for China in Asia, Americans also don't have a lot of confidence in China to deal responsibly with world problems: only 41 percent have a great deal (5 percent) or a fair

amount (36 percent) of confidence. Americans are more likely to say they have not very much (40 percent) or no confidence at all (18 percent) in China. That extends to US evaluations of China's role in dealing with issues in Asia. Roughly 4 in 10 say that China is playing a negative role in promoting international maritime law on the freedom of the seas (40 percent), improving relations with neighboring countries (41 percent), resolving territorial disputes in East Asia (42 percent), and promoting stability between North and South Korea (39 percent). Few Americans give China positive marks on any of these items and are more likely to say that their allies South Korea and Japan play a positive role on these issues.

The trade war homefront

With the US and China now engaged in escalating rounds of tariff and counter-tariff, public attitudes toward the China-US relationship take on new importance. The public is clearly receptive to arguments that China is an unfair trade partner, but it's less clear that people are willing to suffer the costs of a trade fight against a country they don't see as an economic threat. And though it's possible that Americans may not link rising prices to a trade war on their own, candidates in the midterm congressional campaign will help voters make the connection, either by linking those costs to an unpopular Trump administration or by placing the blame on Chinese trade practices. Americans' less-than-favorable views of China also means there is little to cushion the blows of a US-China trade war. If Chinese retaliation imposes costs on Americans, it could also raise the perceived threat of Chinese economic power – and further fuel public mistrust of China.

The complexity of the public's views of China, and the potential for changes in those views, gives both China hawks and China doves ample opportunity to make their case to Americans. Will public attitudes provide for a more collaborative relationship than contemporary elite discussions would suggest? Or will the US public, like policymakers in Washington, take a more hawkish turn on the US-China relationship? At the moment, either is possible. Despite rising tension in the bilateral relationship, the public is still up for grabs.

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