



**DOES “AMERICA FIRST” MEAN
ABANDONING TAIWAN AND SOUTH
KOREA?**

BY TIMOTHY S. RICH

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In his first administration, Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine reshaped US foreign policy, emphasizing economic nationalism, skepticism of military alliances, and a focus on domestic priorities over international commitments. The Trump administration 2.0 further seeks to reevaluate military commitments abroad, reduce foreign aid, and pressure allies to contribute more to their defense, fueling the debate over the extent of US involvement overseas. I assess how the public's inward focus may challenge commitments to two of the country's longest-standing entanglements: Taiwan and South Korea.

There are several reasons to assume President Trump would be less supportive of these commitments. As a candidate in 2024, he stated he [would not defend Taiwan](#). In 2020, Trump demanded a [\\$5 billion increase](#) in what South Korea paid for the US military presence after rejecting a 14% proposed increase, with suggestions that he would pull out troops if this was not met. This month, reports suggest Trump intends to demand additional payments for the military presence in South Korea and Japan, leading one analyst to state the administration is [no longer interested in defending](#) these countries or Taiwan.

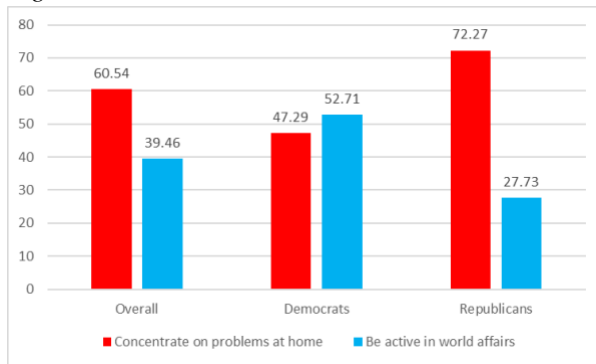
Assessing public sentiment is harder. [Pew surveys](#) from 2019 to 2023 find a decline, from 53% to 43%, of those stating the US should be active in world

affairs, with 71% of Republicans in 2023 saying the US should concentrate attention on problems at home, compared to only 39% of Democrats. Yet, existing evidence also suggests that the American public supports specific foreign policies. While support for Ukraine is increasingly [divided on party lines](#), the same does not seem to be true for Taiwan and South Korea. A [2021 Chicago Council survey](#) finds a slim majority (52%) supported US troops to defend Taiwan, while a [2022 survey](#) finds 61% of Americans surveyed supported defending Taiwan, with slightly higher support among Democrats than Republicans (67.04% vs. 60.15%). A 2023 YouGov poll found that most Democrats and Republicans support [taking a strong stand](#) to protect Taiwan from China. Likewise, a 2024 Chicago Council survey finds majorities of Democrats and Republicans support the [continuation of US military bases](#) in South Korea, although the majorities are slimmer when committing troops if North Korea invaded, while a 2022 IPOL survey finds little American support for [base closures](#) in South Korea, Japan, or Germany.

To identify how a more inward-looking American public would view these commitments, I commissioned a national web survey through Centiment Feb. 12-26 to address these concerns. We asked 522 respondents, “Which of the following best describes your views of the US role in world affairs?: We should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems at home, or It’s best for the future of the country to be active in world affairs”.

A clear majority favor focusing inward (60.54%) but with stark partisan differences, as a thin majority of Democrats prioritize world affairs (52.71%), nearly twice the rate of Republicans (27.73%). The inward focus is somewhat higher than a [2022 survey](#) that showed 54.44% preferred an inward focus, including 43.71% of Democrats and 67.34% of Republicans.

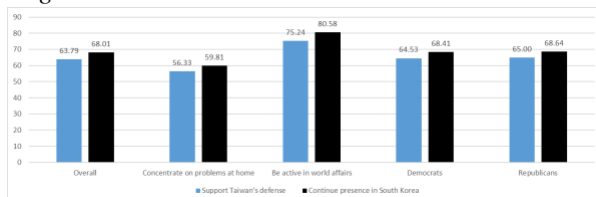
Fig. 1



From here, I asked two questions related to American commitments in East Asia: "Do you support or oppose the US defending Taiwan if it were attacked by China?" and later, "Currently, the US has approximately 24,000 active-duty military in South Korea to deter North Korean aggression. Do you support the continuation of this US presence in South Korea?"

Overall the public shows broad support for both countries, with over 60% of respondents supporting Taiwan's defense and the continued military presence in South Korea. Even among those who stated the US should concentrate on domestic issues, a majority favored these foreign policy commitments, whereas over three-quarters of respondents desiring the US to be active in world affairs did so as well. Moreover, no difference emerges between Democrats and Republicans on these commitments. Additional statistical tests find after controlling for age, gender, and income, as well as views of the country and its primary aggressor (Taiwan: China, South Korea: North Korea) there remains no partisan differences, while a majority of those preferring a focus on domestic policy still support these commitments.

Fig. 2



Despite the growing preference among Americans for an inward-focused foreign policy, the findings suggest

that this does not necessarily translate into opposition to commitments to Taiwan and South Korea. These results indicate that an "America First" mindset does not necessarily equate to a complete withdrawal from key alliances, particularly in East Asia. Instead, Americans may distinguish between broad foreign policy engagement and specific security commitments that align with perceived national interests. This prioritized selective engagement builds upon positive evaluations of the two countries as well as concerns about their perceived aggressors. However, such support in the abstract ignores how the public may reevaluate commitments in light of actual costs. If a crisis in East Asia were to escalate, factors such as economic costs, military casualties, and elite discourse could shape whether current bipartisan support endures or fractures along partisan lines, as seen with Ukraine. Future research should explore how Americans weigh the risks and trade-offs of these commitments in scenarios where direct US intervention becomes more likely.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.