



China Not Yet Seen as a Threat by the American Public

Karl Friedhoff, Fellow, Public Opinion and Asia Policy

Craig Kafura, Research Associate, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

October 2018

As the United States and China continue to engage in the tit-for-tat trade war that has unfolded throughout 2018, the Trump administration is raising alarms more broadly about the threat China poses to the United States. Administration critiques of Chinese behavior fit within an emerging consensus among the foreign policy establishment that a harder line on China is a necessity. The Trump administration's active efforts to portray China as a bad international actor will further heighten tensions between the two countries, but as of yet, the American public does not yet see China as an urgent threat to national security.

Key Findings

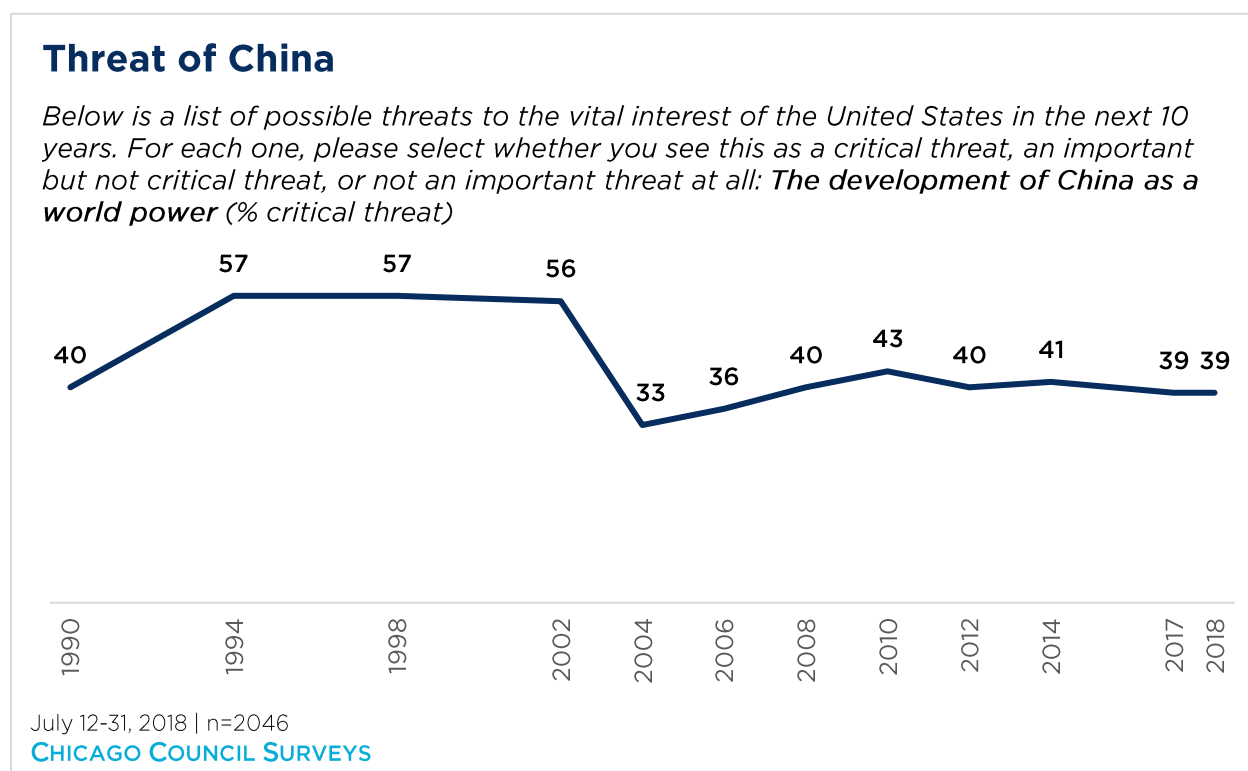
- The public does not see China's rise as a threat: only four in ten (39%) say that the development of China as a world power is a critical threat to US vital interests.
- Seven in ten Americans (72%) are either very concerned (31%) or somewhat concerned (41%) that a trade war with China would hurt their local economy.
- Minorities of Americans support the use of US troops in conflicts involving China, either in the case of a conflict with Japan over disputed islands (41%) or if China invaded Taiwan (35%).
- Two-thirds of Americans prefer to strengthen ties with traditional allies Japan and South Korea (66%) over developing a new partnership with China (26%).

Americans Don't See China's Rise as Critical Threat

Since taking office, the Trump administration has pursued a far harder line on US-China relations than previous administrations. The two nations are currently engaged in an escalating trade war, while [Vice President Pence](#) accuses China of using "covert actors, front groups and propaganda outlets to shift Americans' perception of Chinese policies." As Matt Pottinger, senior director for Asian affairs on the National

Security Council [told an audience in October](#), “we in the Trump administration have updated our China policy to bring the concept of competition to the forefront.”

Despite the increasing confrontational rhetoric and actions emanating from Washington, the American public does not yet see China as a danger. Four in 10 (39%) say that the development of China as a world power is a critical threat facing the United States, largely unchanged since 2004, placing it eighth out of 12 potential threats included in the survey.¹ This is well behind the perceived critical threat posed by international terrorism (66%), North Korea’s nuclear program (59%), and Iran’s nuclear program (52%). Attitudes on China’s potential threat are also highly consistent across party affiliation.

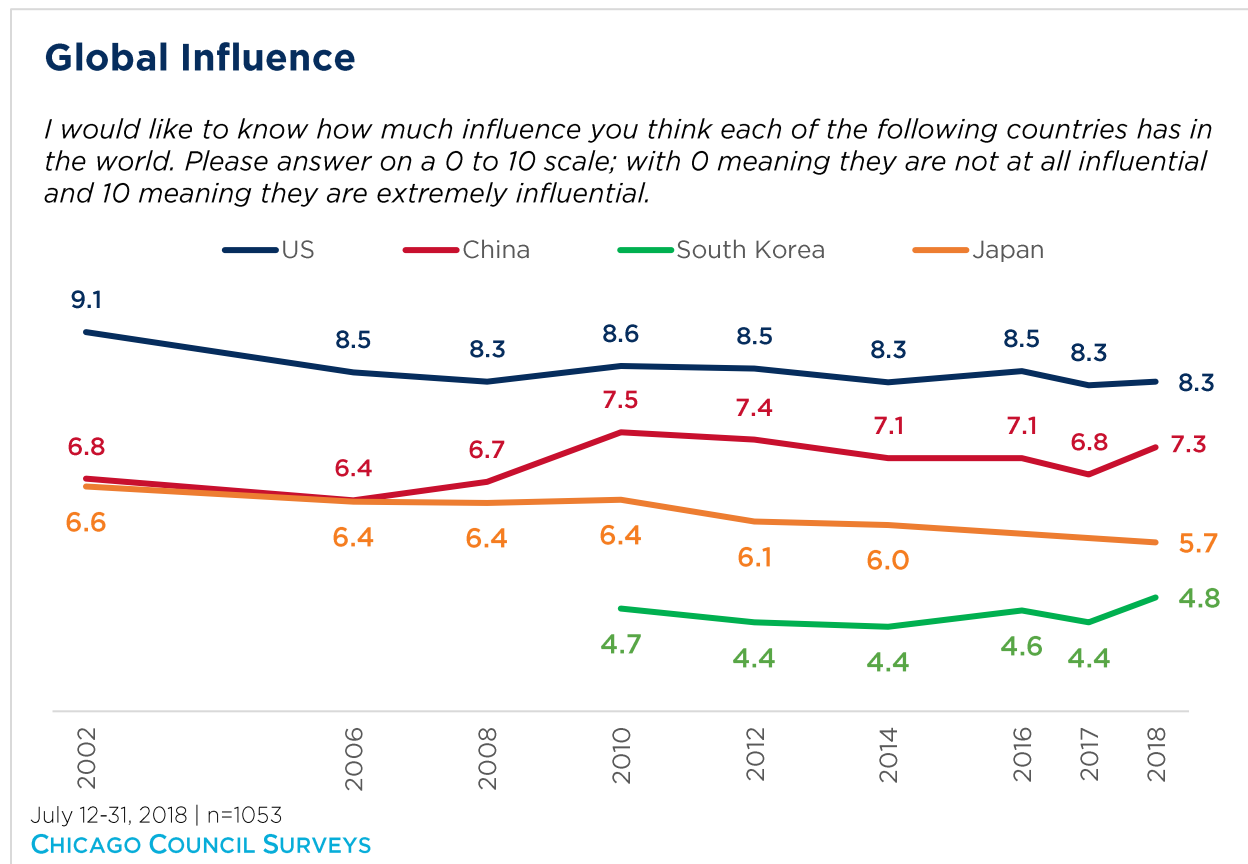


Though the [Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy](#) declared China a “strategic competitor,” Americans are far less united in a view of China as a rival to the United States. According to a February/March 2018 Chicago Council survey, the public is evenly split between whether the United States and China are mostly rivals (49%) or mostly partners (50%). This public division on the nature of the US-China relationship has existed since the Council first asked the question in 2006, when 49 percent of Americans saw China as a rival and 41 percent said China was a partner.

¹ A [February/March 2018 Chicago Council poll](#) found similar or lower concern among Americans when it comes to the development of China’s economic power (31% critical threat) or military power (39% critical threat).

China More Respected in the World than a Decade Ago

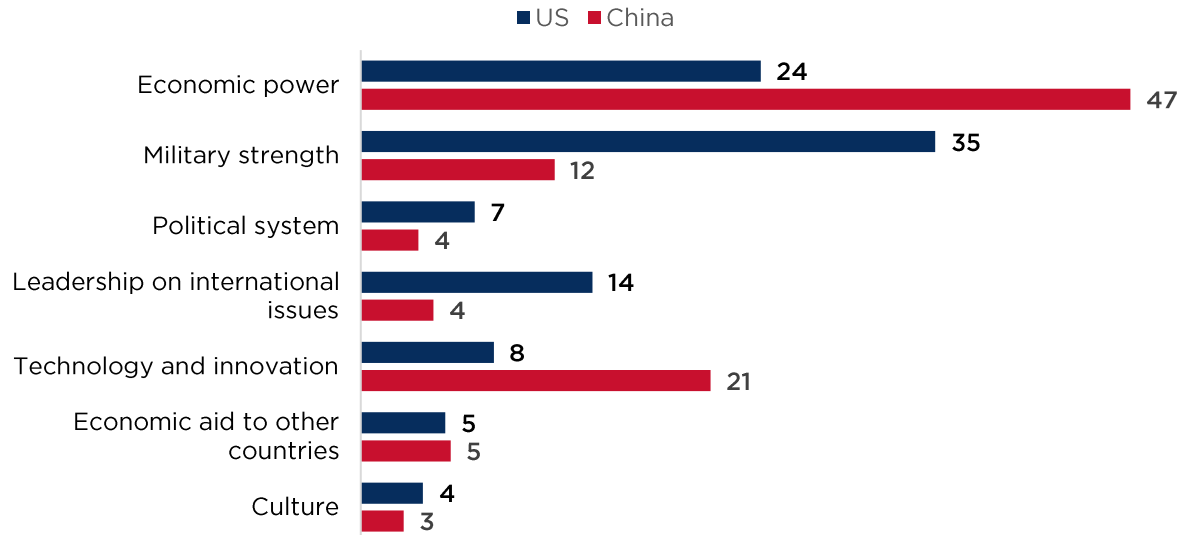
The American public sees China as a country with increasing influence on the world scene. Although Americans still see the United States as the more influential country, there is clear recognition of China's rise as a power. Over the past dozen years, the gap between perceived US and Chinese influence has narrowed from 2.1 points in 2006 to 1 point in 2018, with Chinese influence rising from a mean of 6.4 in 2006 to a mean of 7.3 in 2018. Over the same span, American views of US global influence declined slightly.



There are clear differences on perceptions of the sources of American and Chinese influence. For the United States, a plurality of Americans (35%) see military strength as the most important reason for US influence with one-quarter (24%) citing the economic power of the United States. In the case of China, nearly one-half of Americans (47%) say that China's economic power is the most important reason for Chinese influence, with only 12 percent citing its military strength.

Sources of Influence

Among the following, which do you think are the two most important in determining [the United States'/China's] influence in the world today? (% most important)



July 12-31, 2018 | n=2046

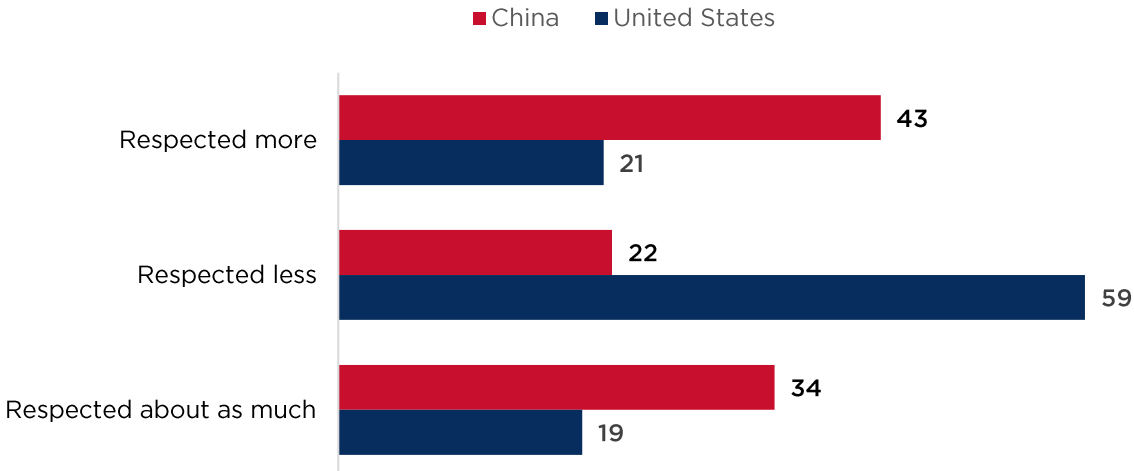
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Still, a plurality of Americans (43%), consistent across parties, think China is more respected in the world today than it was a decade ago, ahead of Canada (36% more respected), South Korea (34% more respected) and even the United States (21% more respected). A majority of Americans (59%) say the United States is less respected—the highest of any country included in the survey. Notably, there are sharp partisan differences on views of the United States. Republicans (38%) are much more likely than Democrats (11%) to say the United States is more respected, and Democrats (77%) are far more likely than Republicans (34%) to say the United States is less respected now.

Despite a perception among Americans that China is now more respected, around the world there remains a preference for American leadership. According to a [survey conducted by Pew](#), in every country included in the survey, except for Tunisia and Russia, there is a preference for the United States to remain the world's leading power.

Respect in the World

Do you think that the following countries are respected more in the world today than they were ten years ago, are respected less, or are respected about as much now as ten years ago? (%)



July 12-31, 2018 | n=1035
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Trade

When it comes to the US economy, the American public recognizes the importance of China. A majority of Americans (92%) say that China is important to the US economy, with a majority (57%) saying China is very important. But the possibility of a trade war with China is not seen as a critical threat facing the country. Just 42 percent identify it as such. However, there is concern that if the United States gets into a trade war with the United States it would hurt local economies. Seven in ten (72%) are either very concerned (31%) or somewhat concerned (41%) that a trade war with China would hurt the local economy. On this, there are significant partisan divides. Among Republicans, 56 percent were either very (13%) or somewhat concerned (43%) about the costs to the local economy. Among Democrats, 83 percent were either very (43%) or somewhat concerned. Independents were much closer to Democrats with 31 percent very concerned and 39 percent somewhat concerned.

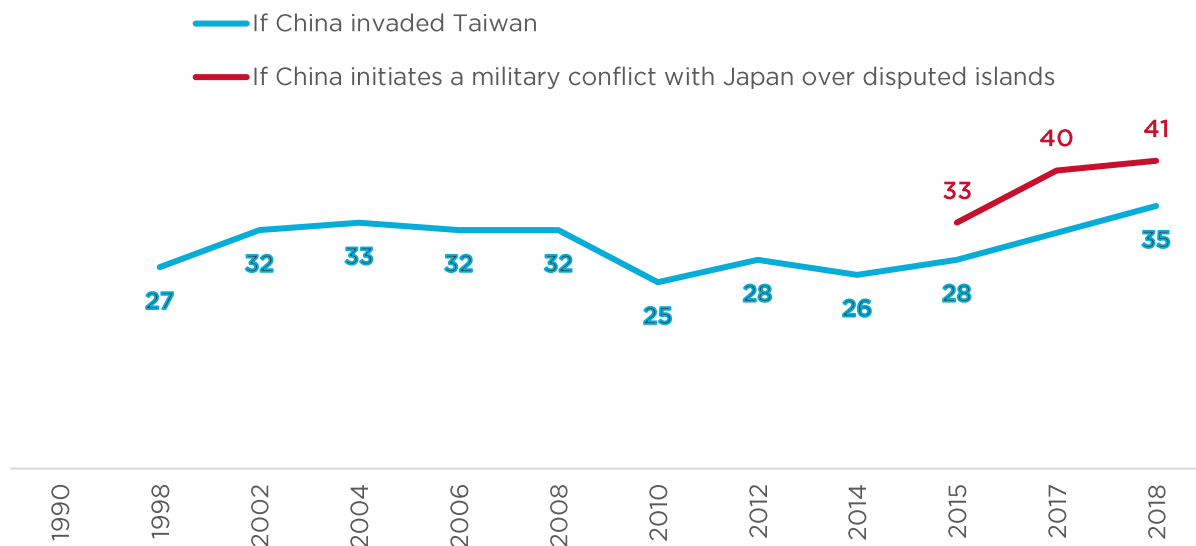
In addition to concerns about a trade war with China, Americans are also concerned by Chinese trade practices. The [2017 Chicago Council Survey](#) found that seven in ten Americans (68%) say China is an unfair trade partner, while one in four (26%) say China is a fair trader. Negative views of China's trade practices have increased seventeen percentage points since 2002, when half of Americans (51%) saw China as an unfair trader.

Americans Don't Want Military Confrontation With China

Even though China is not perceived as a threat, and its military strength is not seen as a major source of its influence, the American public is reticent to engage China in a military conflict. If China initiates a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands, 56 percent oppose using US troops in such a scenario while 41 percent are in favor. It should be noted, however, that this is record high support, up from 33 percent in 2015. By contrast, if Japan was attacked by North Korea, 64 percent of Americans support the use of US troops—also highly consistent across parties. Opposition is even higher when it comes to Taiwan. If China invaded Taiwan, 61 percent oppose using US troops with 35 percent in favor. Yet again, this is also a new high and up from 28 percent in 2015.

Use of US Troops

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: (%)



July 12-31, 2018 | n=1051

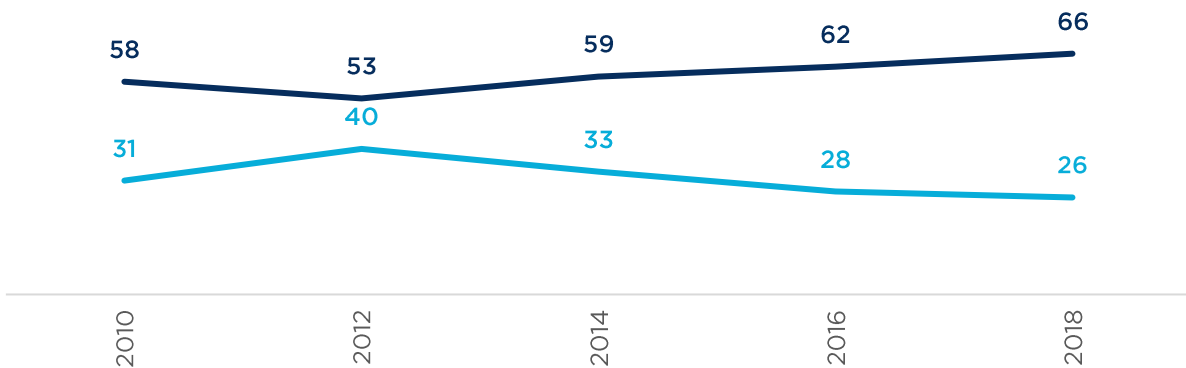
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Americans are reluctant to engage in a military conflict with China, but at the same time they want to keep their existing Korean and Japanese allies close rather than forming a new partnership with China. In fact, two-thirds of Americans (66%) say the United States should prioritize building up strong relations with those traditional allies, compared to one in four (26%) who say the United States should build a new partnership with China, even if it diminishes US relations with traditional allies.

US Policy in Asia

Now thinking about US foreign policy in Asia, do you think the United States should put a higher priority on:

- Building up our strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China
- Building a new partnership with China, even if this might diminish our relations with our traditional allies



July 12-31, 2018 | n=1011

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2018 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy. The 2018 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel between July 12 and July 31, 2018 among a representative national sample of 2,046 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 ± 2.37 , including a design effect of 1.1954. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

The 2018 Chicago Council Survey is a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, and is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Korea Foundation, the US-Japan Foundation, the generous support of the Crown family, and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

Appendix

Q5_NEW: 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:

5/3. The development of China as a world power

	Critical Threat (%)	Important but not Critical Threat (%)	Not an Important Threat (%)	Refused (%)
2018				
<u>Overall</u>	39	50	11	0
Republican	42	48	10	0
Democrat	40	49	10	1
Independent	35	52	12	0

5/41. The possibility of a trade war with China

	Critical Threat (%)	Important but not Critical Threat (%)	Not an Important Threat (%)	Refused (%)
2018				
<u>Overall</u>	42	48	9	0
Republican	28	59	12	0
Democrat	54	40	5	1
Independent	40	49	11	0

Q450B: How important are relationships with the countries listed below to the US economy?

450B/2. China

	Very important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Not very important (%)	Not at all important (%)	Refused (%)
2018					
<u>Overall</u>	57	35	5	2	1
Republican	51	41	6	1	0
Democrat	65	28	4	2	0
Independent	54	37	5	3	1

Q450c: How important are relationships with the countries listed below for US security?

450C/2. China

	Very important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Not very important (%)	Not at all important (%)	Refused (%)
2018					

<u>Overall</u>	48	37	10	3	1
Republican	45	41	10	3	2
Democrat	53	33	10	3	1
Independent	46	38	10	4	1

Q144: Do you think that the following countries are respected more in the world today than they were ten years ago, are respected less, or are respected about as much now as ten years ago?

144/1. China

	Respected More (%)	Respected Less (%)	Respected as much as ten years ago (%)	Refused (%)
2018				
<u>Overall</u>	43	22	34	1
Republican	40	26	33	1
Democrat	47	22	30	1
Independent	40	18	41	1

144/8. United States

	Respected More (%)	Respected Less (%)	Respected as much as ten years ago (%)	Refused (%)
2018				
<u>Overall</u>	21	59	19	1
Republican	38	34	27	1
Democrat	11	77	11	1
Independent	17	59	23	1

Q30: There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops:

30/2. If China invaded Taiwan

2018	Favor (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)
<u>Overall</u>	35	61	3
Republican	39	58	2
Democrat	36	62	2

Independent	33	64	3
-------------	----	----	---

30/14. If China initiates a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands

	Favor (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)
2018			
<u>Overall</u>	41	56	3
Republican	47	51	2
Democrat	42	56	2
Independent	37	60	3

Q223B: Among the following, which do you think are the two most important in determining China's influence in the world today?

223B. Most Important

	Economic power (%)	Military strength (%)	Political system (%)	Leadership on international issues (%)	Technology and innovation (%)	Economic assistance to other countries (%)	Culture (%)	Refused (%)
2018								
<u>Overall</u>	47	12	4	4	21	5	3	4
Republican	47	14	3	5	19	5	3	3
Democrat	46	8	3	5	25	7	3	3
Independent	49	15	4	3	19	5	2	4

223B. Second Most Important

	Economic power (%)	Military strength (%)	Political system (%)	Leadership on international issues (%)	Technology and innovation (%)	Economic assistance to other countries (%)	Culture (%)	Refused (%)
2018								
<u>Overall</u>	18	21	6	7	22	9	10	7
Republican	19	24	6	6	23	7	9	5
Democrat	17	17	7	8	22	11	10	7
Independent	18	22	6	7	23	9	11	5

QMONMOUTH: If the United States gets into a trade war with China, how concerned are you that this would hurt the local economy in your area?

2018	Very concerned (%)	Somewhat concerned (%)	Not very concerned (%)	Not concerned at all (%)	Refused (%)
<u>Overall</u>	31	41	21	6	2
Republican	13	43	32	10	3
Democrat	43	40	13	2	2
Independent	31	39	21	7	1

Q376: Now thinking about US foreign policy in Asia, do you think the US should put a higher priority on

2018	Building up our strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China (%)	Building a new partnership with China, even if this might diminish our relations with our traditional allies (%)	Refused (%)
<u>Overall</u>	66	26	8
Republican	68	26	6
Democrat	66	27	7
Independent	66	27	8

Q73: If the United States were to consider using military force to destroy North Korea's nuclear capability would it be necessary, preferable but not necessary, or neither preferable nor necessary to first get:

73/5. Approval of China

2018	Necessary (%)	Preferable but not necessary (%)	Neither preferable nor necessary (%)	Refused (%)
<u>Overall</u>	22	50	24	5
Republican	15	57	25	4

Democrat	28	48	19	5
Independent	21	47	28	3
