

Sovereignty, Security, & U.S.-China Relations: Chinese Public Opinion

by

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Introduction

This survey finds that, while Chinese public opinion tends to be unfavorable toward the United States, most Chinese people believe that peaceful and friendly relations with the United States are important for China's economic development. Although these results suggest potentially broad acceptance for constructive paths out of current bilateral tensions, this survey also finds majority support for alliances that would make such paths mutually difficult, most importantly Russia and Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, in several cases responses to country-specific questions across Asia indicate support for military [coercion](#) as an international relations tool, leaving open the risk that the metaphor of a new Cold War could become a reality.

A significant feature of the so-called new Cold War between the United States and China is the centrality of economic competition over [global networks](#). At the policy level, this is expressed in Washington through protectionist [policies](#) on strategic sectors and the bipartisan use of [tariffs](#) on Chinese imports to the United States. Meanwhile, Beijing [appears](#) committed to an export-oriented economy while implementing import substitution strategies domestically, continuing what Washington calls unfair trade practices.

At the level of public opinion, there is a shared perception that economic rivalry is at the heart of U.S.-China tensions. One recent poll [found](#) that 66% of Americans believe China has an outsized and negative impact on the U.S. economy. Another [found](#) that 56% of Americans believe U.S.-China trade weakens American national security and that maintaining America's high-tech advantage ranks second in popular goals for the U.S.-China relationship – just beneath avoiding armed conflict. Meanwhile, in China, the vast majority [believe](#) that the United States seeks to limit Chinese development and nearly half see U.S. international economic policy as a serious challenge to China's internal stability. Enough evidence exists to consider that the basic terms of the U.S.-China rivalry do not emerge from each country's *misperception* of the other but instead from a mutual understanding.

Where is the danger in economic competition? Another significant feature of the new Cold War is that it remains cold. However, China's economic rise and rivalry with the United States have fueled nationalist ambitions and territorial sovereignty claims over Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the South China Sea. New [research](#) shows that the Chinese public is equally open to forcing unification with Taiwan through war as it is to maintaining the ambiguity of the status quo. While reports of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Chinese media have slightly [increased](#) the Chinese public's support for use of military force in general



and for unification with Taiwan specifically, American opposition to Russia in Ukraine tempered this support.

The point is not that the Chinese public desires going to war to realize their government's foreign policy goals. Instead, as this survey shows, there is support in China for coercive military actions short of war that could escalate into proxy conflicts between China and the United States. For example, most Chinese people (79.7%) support maintaining the government's border claims with India even at the risk of conflict. Elsewhere, most Chinese people (72.2%) support sending a peacekeeping force into Myanmar to uphold ceasefire agreements while a plurality (36%) indicated they would support military intervention if Japan altered its constitution to allow for offensive military actions. (It is important to note in this final scenario that most responses were spread across diplomatic options.)

The results of this survey should be concerning but should not be taken to indicate there is no way back from the brink. The United States is certainly no stranger to coercive military actions as an international relations tool. Instead, the chance for mutual understanding among Americans and Chinese people that current tensions are primarily economic, coupled with the recognition in this survey that peaceful relations with the United States are ultimately in China's best interest, could serve as a path, however fraught, to a safer, more beneficial world for all.

Key Findings

- Less than a quarter of the Chinese public (23.5%) hold a favorable attitude toward the United States and its people.
- Most of the Chinese public (69.6%) agrees that friendly and peaceful relations between the United States and China are necessary for China's continued prosperity.
- More than half of those surveyed (55.1%) believe that force should not be used against Taiwan under any circumstances while 1 in 4 disagree. When asked how long China should wait before using force to unify with Taiwan, the most common response was within 5 years (33.5%).
- The majority of the Chinese public (66.1%) believes that China should continue to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine; a majority (80%) also believes that Vladimir Putin will respect China's sovereignty and national interests.
- Most Chinese people (81.1%) believe that Southeast Asian countries should respect China's sovereignty over the South China Sea.
- North Korea remains an important ally for the Chinese public, with 8 in 10 indicating that China should support North Korean stability and security.
- More than half of Chinese people (52.5%) believe the Taliban should be recognized as the rightful government of Afghanistan.
- Across multiple issues, the Chinese public approves of the use of China's military as a coercive tool in international relations. However, this should not be conflated with holding uniformly pro-war positions. The majority (72.2%) supports the People's Liberation Army sending a peace keeping mission to Myanmar to enforce a ceasefire. A plurality (36%) supports military intervention if Japan changes its constitution to allow for offensive military actions. When asked how China should respond if South Korea developed nuclear weapons, the most popular responses were diplomatic protest (26%), military intervention (25.9%) and pressure North Korea to denuclearize (21.9%).

The United States is a Necessary but Unpopular Partner

American views of China are at a historic low. Recent [polling](#) from the Pew Research Center indicates that 81% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of China, up from 35% in 2005. According to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the majority of Americans [view](#) China as a rival regardless of party affiliation. Nearly half of Americans [believe](#) that curbing China's power and influence should be a top foreign policy goal.

Public opinion in China reflects American views. Polling by Tsinghua University's Center for International Security and Strategy [found](#) that 87.6% of Chinese people agree that the United States is actively trying to limit China's development while 46.1% felt that the influence of U.S. international economic policy was the most serious threat to China's internal stability. Yet, 56.2% of respondents believed that trade and economic development was a common objective between both countries.

This tension between rivalry and cooperation is an important aspect of the Chinese public's views on the United States and the bilateral relationship. American attitudes toward China are much more severe than Chinese attitudes toward America. In China, there is no majority attitude toward America. The number of Chinese people who view the United States unfavorably (33.1%) is not that much larger than those who view it favorably (23.5%).

In keeping with the centrality of economic development to bilateral tensions, most of the Chinese public (69.6%) reported that good relations between the United States and China are necessary for continuing China's economic prosperity and development.

Figure1.1: Attitude Toward the United States

What is your attitude toward the United States and its people?

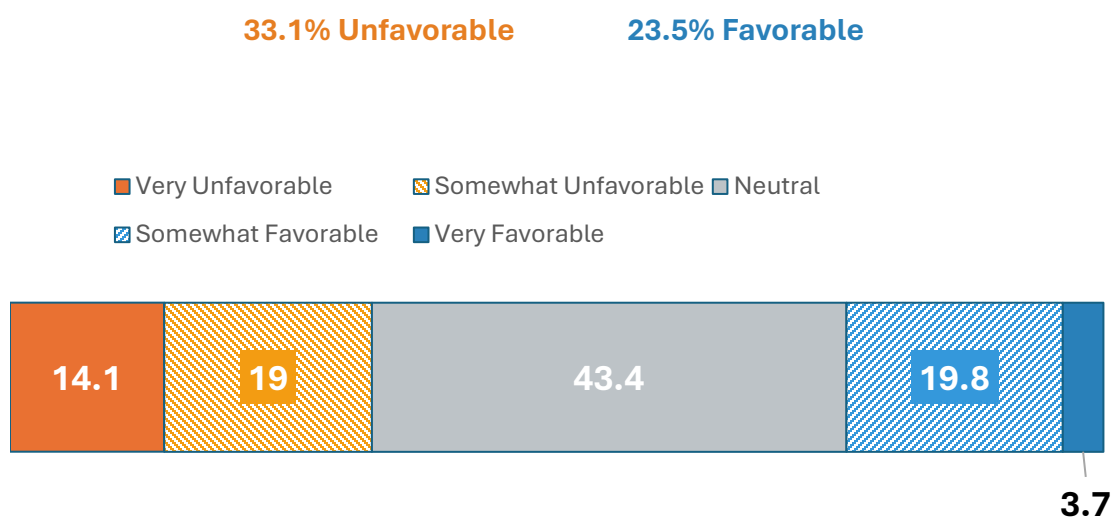


Figure1.2: Attitude Toward the United States (by Education)

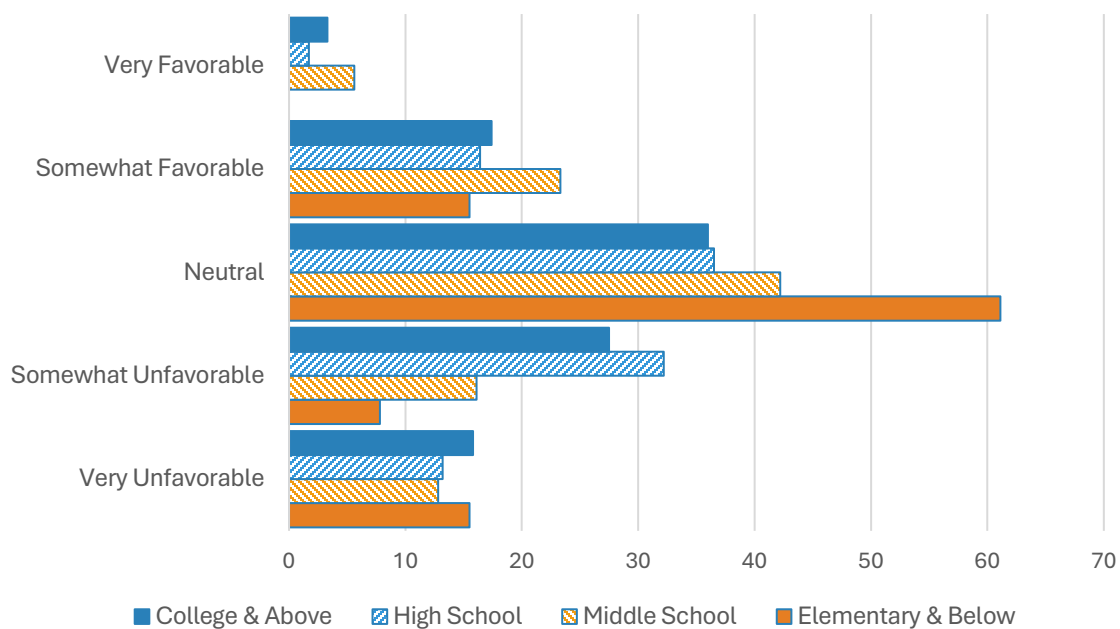


Figure 2.1: Eager for U.S.-China Economic Cooperation

What do you think of the following: "A friendly and peaceful relationship with the United States is necessary to continue China's prosperity and economic development".

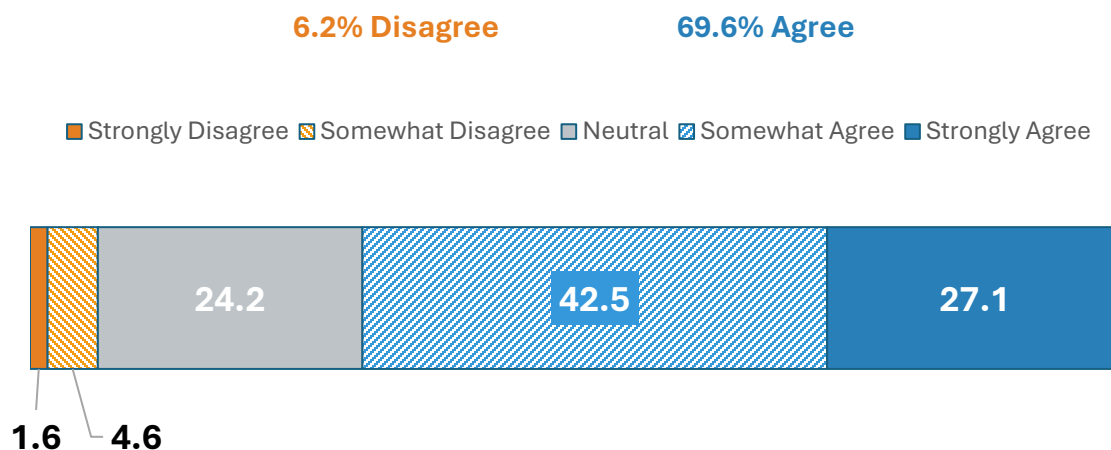
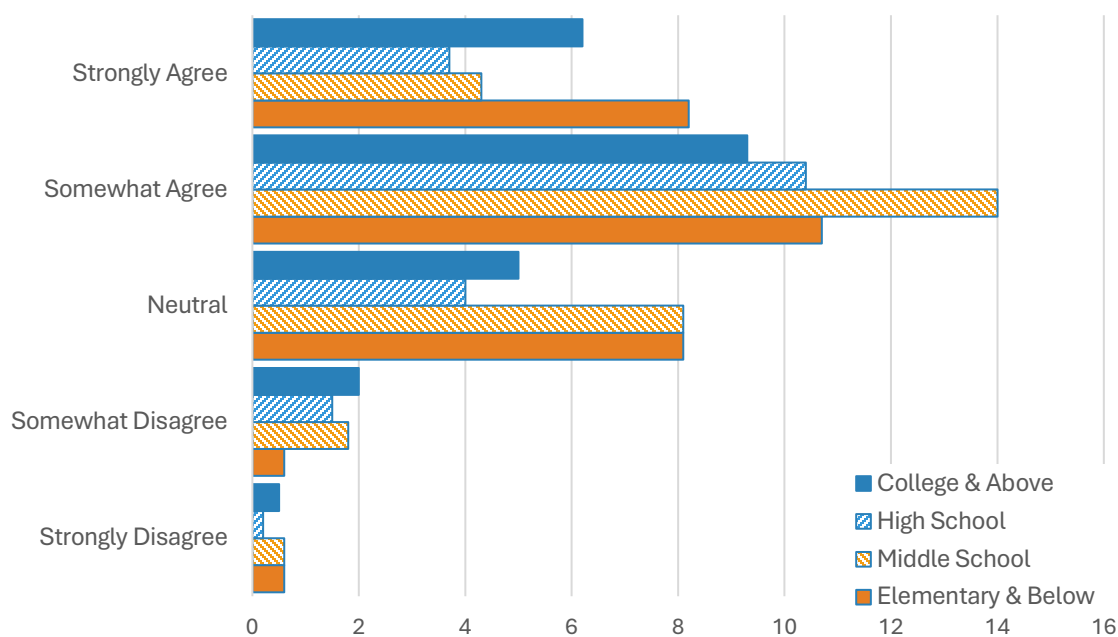


Figure 2.2: Eager for U.S.-China Economic Cooperation (by Education)



Contradictions in Views on the Use of Force Against Taiwan

Recent polls of Americans find broad support for aiding Taiwan in the event of an attack from China. The Global Taiwan Institute [reported](#) that 61% of Americans support defending Taiwan if it were attacked by China, with higher rates among Democrats (67%) than Republicans (60%). According to a 2023 [report](#) from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, if China were to attack Taiwan, most Americans would support airlifting non-military supplies (78%), initiating diplomatic and economic sanctions (75%), and sending military supplies to the Taiwanese government (62%). However, most Americans (56%) oppose sending troops to Taiwan. In short, American support for Taiwan's defense does not include going to war.

Little research has been conducted measuring Chinese public opinion on the use of force to achieve unification with Taiwan. A recent [study](#) in the *Journal of Contemporary China* found slim majority approval for full-scale war (55%) as a method of unification alongside military coercion short of war (58%), economic sanctions (57%), and maintaining the status quo (55%).

When asked whether force should ever be used to resolve the Taiwan problem in this survey, a majority of Chinese people said no. More than half (55.1%) agreed that force should never be used while a smaller group (24.5%) disagreed.

Despite the tendency to oppose the use of force, when asked how long China should wait before using force to resolve the Taiwan problem, the most common response (33.5%) was within five years. Further research is necessary to understand the discrepancy between this timeline and the tendency to oppose the use of force all together.

Figure 3.1: Unification with Taiwan Should Not be by Force Under Any Circumstances

How do you feel about the following statement? "The Taiwan problem should not be resolved using force under any circumstances."

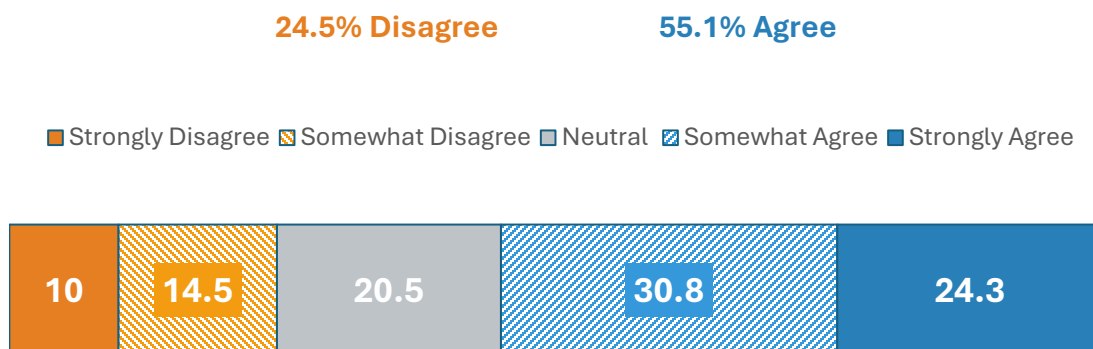


Figure 3.2: Unification with Taiwan Should Not be by Force (by Education)

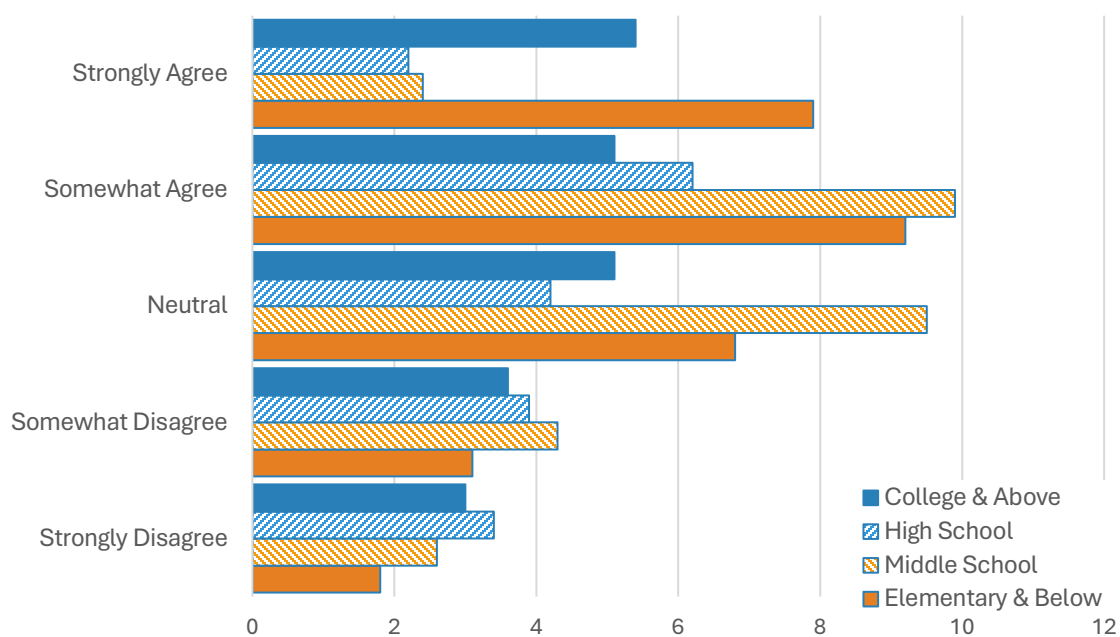
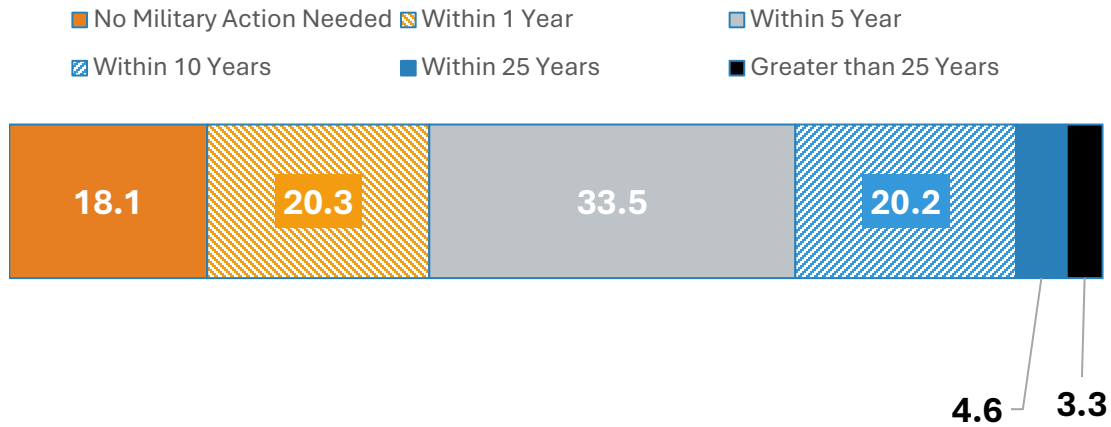


Figure 4: When Should China Use Force to Resolve the Taiwan Problem?

What amount of time should China be patient to resolve the Taiwan problem before choosing to use force?



Trust in Russia and Support for its Operation in Ukraine

Many in the West have [criticized](#) China for its “no limits” partnership with Russia, announced just prior to the latter’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In subsequent years, this partnership has expanded to [include](#) bilateral trade relations and military cooperation, as well as the [provision](#) of non-lethal military assistance to Russia. Although the Chinese state and state media have tended to blame the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization expansion for provoking the war, there are [recent](#) signs that Chinese leaders disapprove of escalation, namely, North Korean involvement in the ‘Ukraine Crisis’, and may be positioning themselves to participate in an initiative to end the war.

In February and March of 2022, The Carter Center collaborated with RIWI Corp., a leading Canadian survey company, to conduct a random online survey of Chinese public opinion on the war in Ukraine. In this survey, most respondents (75%) indicated that it was in China’s national interest to support Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. With no neutral option provided in the survey question, the remaining respondents (25%) indicated supporting Russia’s operation in Ukraine was not in China’s best interest. When given five options on China’s best course of action, a majority (58%) supported a negotiated end to the conflict. A minority (21%) preferred offering moral support to Russia while even fewer (8%) supported supplying Russia with weapons. This figure was roughly equal to those who supported supplying Ukraine with weapons (7%). The least popular option (5%) was public condemnation of the war.

Two years later, a smaller majority of the Chinese public (66.1%) still believe it is in China’s best interest to continue supporting Russia’s operation in Ukraine. Given a neutral option, those who indicated that it was not in China’s interest to support Russia’s operation in Ukraine also decreased (5.8%) [Figure 5]. Additionally, a large majority (80%) indicated that Vladimir Putin could be trusted to respect China’s sovereignty and national interest, with a very small proportion (4.7%) in disagreement [see Figure 6].

Figure 5: Continued Support for Russia's Operation in Ukraine

How do you feel about the following statement? "It remains in China's national interest to support Russia's operation in Ukraine."

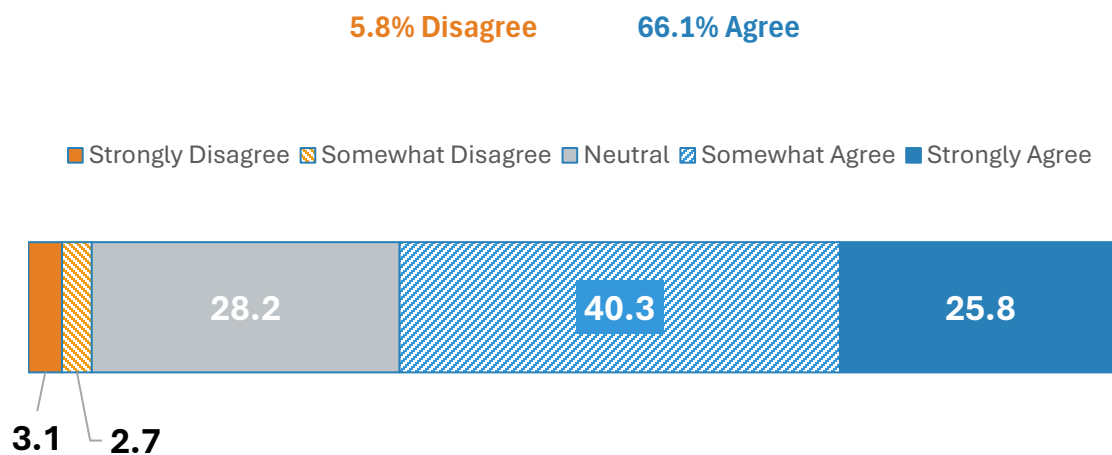
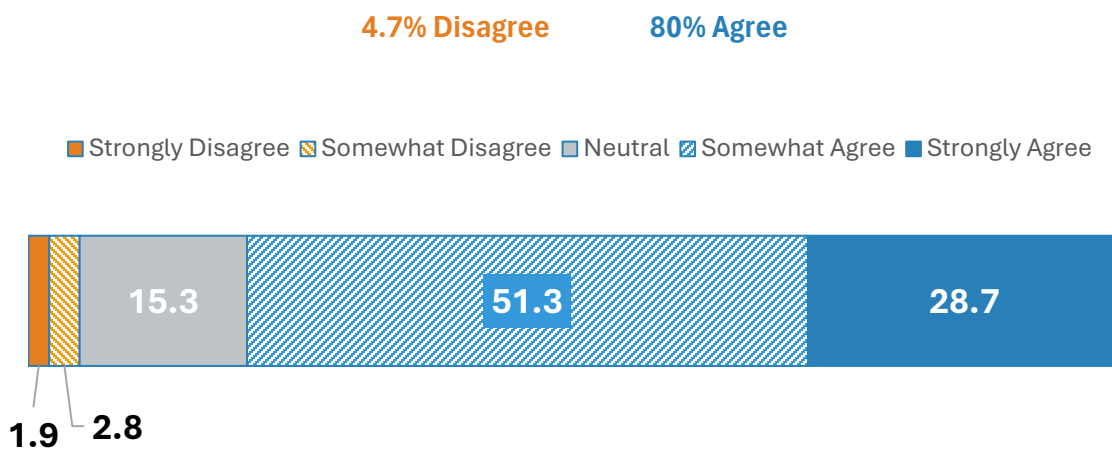


Figure 6: Trust in Vladimir Putin to Respect China's Interests

How do you feel about the following statement? "I trust Russian leader Vladimir Putin to respect China's sovereignty and national interests."



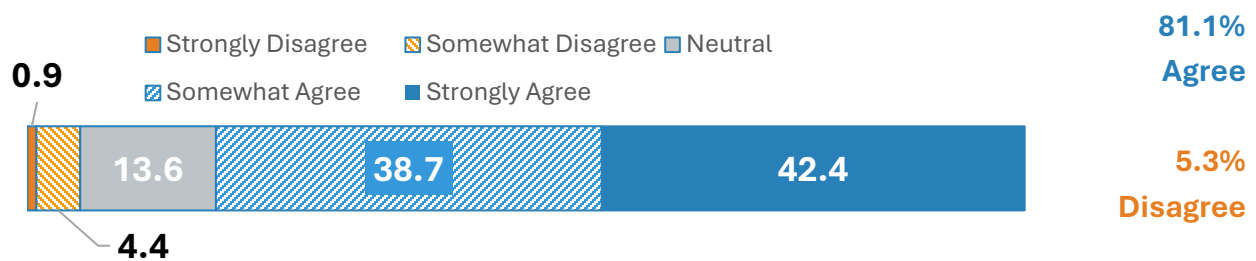
The Military as an International Relations Tool Across Asia

South China Sea

China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have been a regular point of tension with Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines and Vietnam. Most Chinese people (81.1%) believe that the Philippines and Vietnam should end their protests and respect China's claims to sovereignty.

Figure 7: Support for South China Sea Claims

How do you feel about the following statement? "Regardless of what international law says, the Philippines and Vietnam should stop protesting and respect China's sovereignty over the South China Sea."

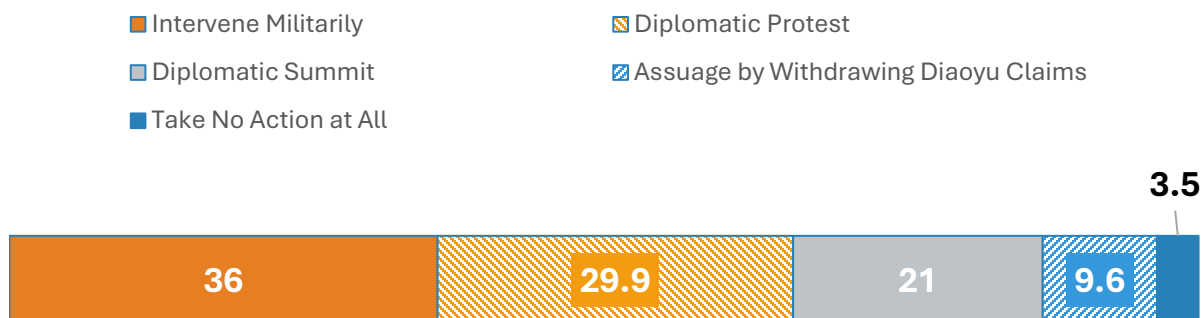


Japan

If Japan were to change its constitution to allow for offensive military action, a large minority of the Chinese public (36%) believe would support military intervention. Diplomatic protest (29.9%) and a diplomatic summit (21%) are the next most preferred responses.

Figure 8: Response to Japanese Militarization

Due to concerns about China, certain politicians in Japan have proposed changing the country's post-World War II 'pacifist' constitution to allow for offensive military actions. How should China respond to the current situation?

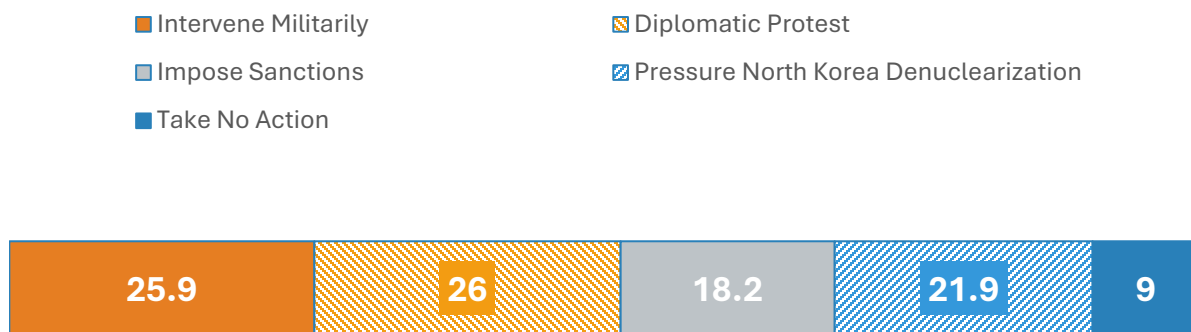


South Korea

Members of the South Korea government have recently [stated](#) that acquiring nuclear weapons is within the range of acceptable options for responding to a growing nuclear threat from North Korea. There is no clear majority opinion on what China should do if South Korea acquired nuclear weapons. About 1 in 4 supporting military intervention.

Figure 9: Response to South Korean Nuclearization

Following North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, recent polls show a majority of South Korean citizens believe South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons. How should China respond?

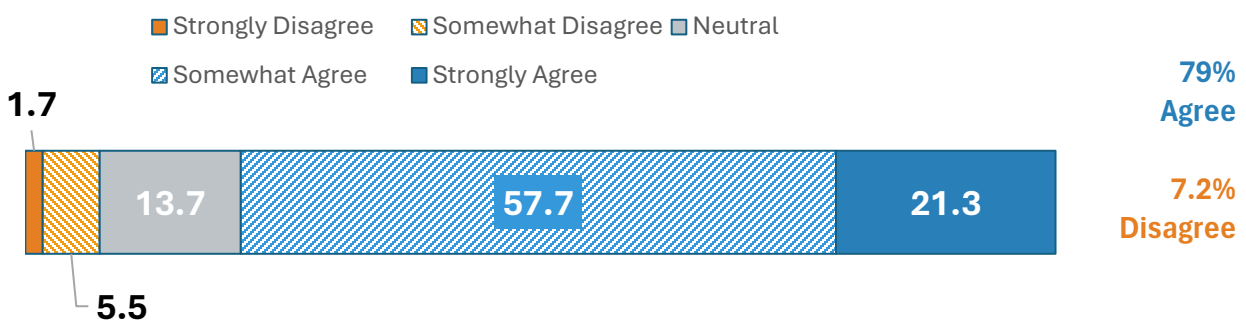


North Korea

Despite widespread assumptions that China's leaders are unhappy with North Korea's decision to support Russia's operation in Ukraine militarily, most Chinese people (79%) believe it is in China's best interest to support North Korea's stability and security.

Figure 10: Support for North Korea's Stability and Security

How do you feel about the following statement? "It is in China's national interest to support North Korea's stability and security."

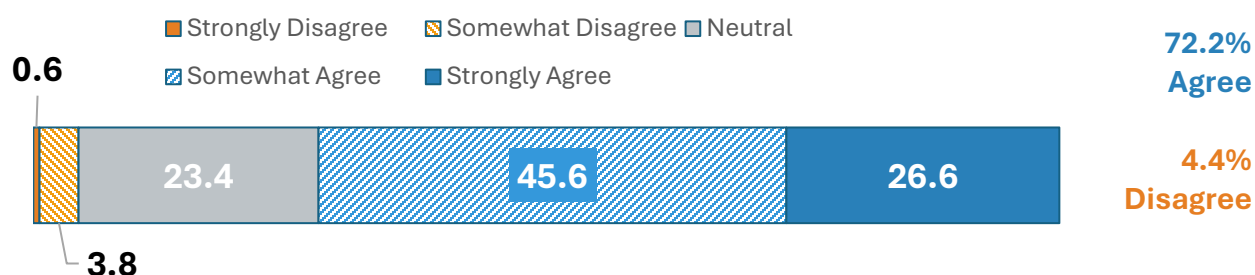


Myanmar

In January 2024, the Chinese government helped [broker](#) a ceasefire between the military junta in Myanmar and ethnic opposition forces, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army, that lasted for six months. China has allowed some opposition force operations in Myanmar near its border but is generally seen as favoring the junta as a force for stability. Although it would be a major departure for China's approach to influencing Myanmar's domestic conflicts, most of the Chinese public (72.2%) support sending a People's Liberation Army peacekeeping force into Myanmar if a ceasefire cannot be upheld.

Figure 11: Support for a Peacekeeping Force in Myanmar

How do you feel about the following statement? "The People's Liberation Army should send peacekeeping troops to Myanmar to uphold the ceasefire agreement negotiated earlier this year."

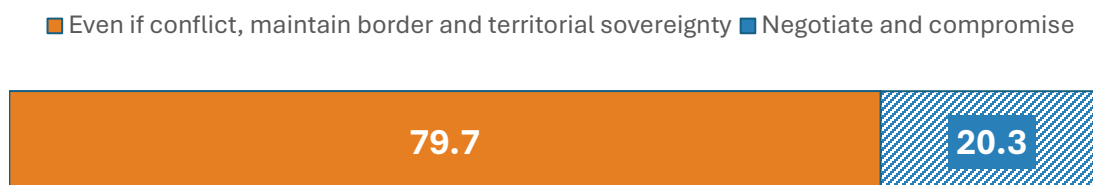


India

The border between China and India has been a point of contention between the two countries for a long time. In October 2024, Beijing and New Delhi came to an agreement to de-escalate tensions that have been high since a clash between border troops in 2020. For most Chinese people (79.7%) a military conflict to maintain sovereignty over China's claimed territorial borders is preferable to negotiation and compromise.

Figure 12: Maintain Territorial Sovereignty on the China-India Border

Which of the following is closer to your view about China's best course of action with regard to India in disputed territories in the Himalayas?



Methods

The survey questions were collaboratively designed in June 2024 by The Carter Center and the Department of Political Science at Emory University, with contributions from Renard Sexton, Michael Cerny, Yawei Liu, and Nick Zeller. The survey was conducted online by Dynata (Hong Kong), a reputable survey company with extensive experience in China, from September 1, 2024, to September 25, 2024.

The sample consisted of 2,465 respondents, of whom 2,211 provided complete responses. All respondents were Chinese citizens between the ages of 18 and 54, representing the internet-using population in China. To ensure representativeness, quota sampling was applied based on geographic distribution across tier 1 to tier 4 provinces¹, gender, and age. Respondents who fell into quota categories that were already saturated exited the questionnaire, ensuring that the sample reflected the distribution of the internet census in China. To reduce response bias, the answer options for all non-demographic multiple-choice and rank-order questions were randomized. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

About the Authors

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¹ Tier 1 provinces: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Shandong, Tianjin, Fujian, Zhejiang
Tier 2 provinces: Henan, Sichuan, Hubei, Hebei, Liaoning, Hunan, Chongqing, Anhui
Tier 3 provinces: Shanxi, Shaanxi, Heilongjiang, Jiangxi, Jilin, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Hainan
Tier 4 provinces: Guangxi, Guizhou, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Tibet

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The intellectual mission of the Department of Political Science is twofold. First, we seek to engage in knowledge-building through rigorous theoretical and empirical research that enables us to address urgent contemporary political challenges related to democratic institutions and governance, identity and difference, inequality, and political violence. Second, we aim to train students who will become the next generation of scholars and practitioners through the skills we impart to them both in and outside of our classrooms. The rise of political polarization and populism in the United States and other countries make clear that democratic governance cannot be taken for granted. Global crises such as the COVID pandemic and climate change also demonstrate the need for solutions that are not only scientifically correct, but also politically feasible. More than ever, a greater understanding of the incentives and behavior shaping political life is necessary.

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