

# For First Time, Half of Americans Favor Defending Taiwan If China Invades

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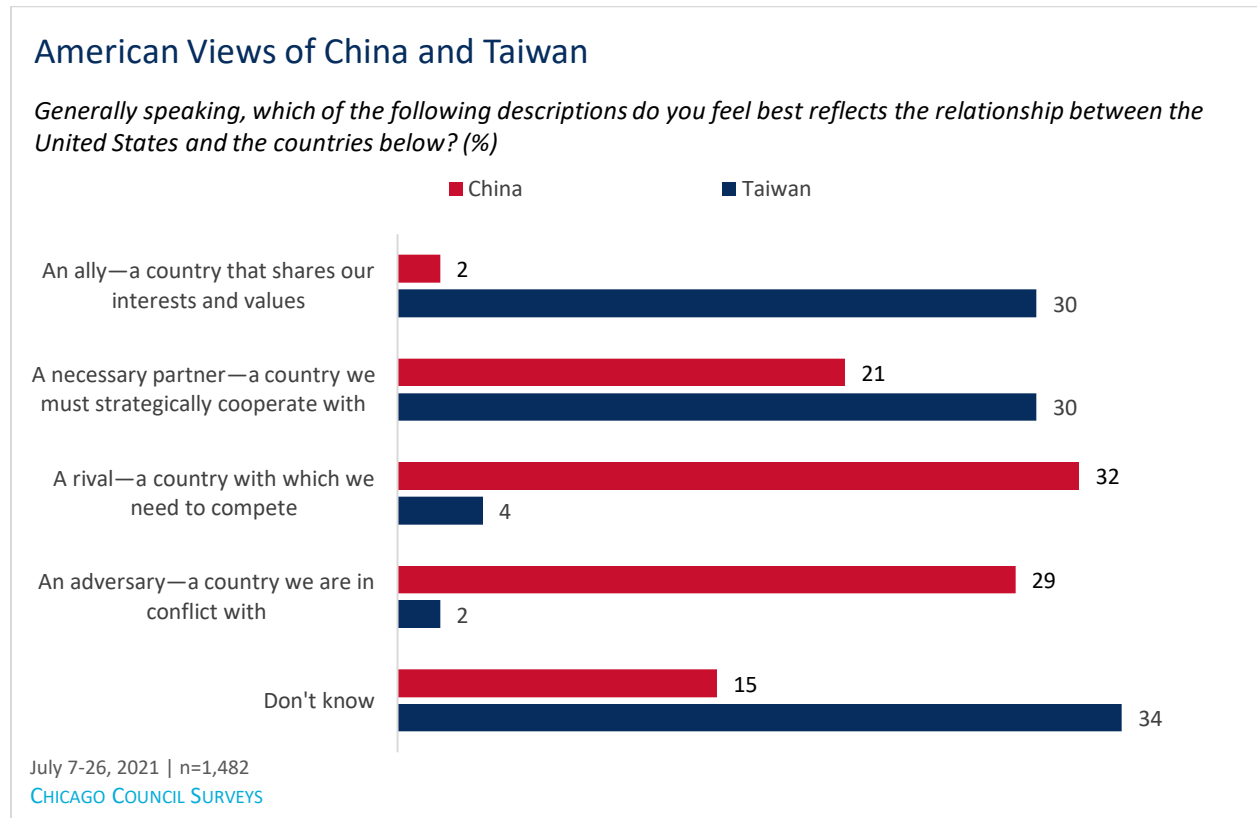
Tensions between Beijing and Taipei are running high. Chinese intimidation of Taiwan has increased since 2016, demonstrated by [naval drills in the Taiwan Strait](#), [incursions into Taiwanese airspace](#), and [economic coercion](#) targeted at Taiwanese industries. In turn, the United States has sold [advanced weapons to Taiwan and normalized US warship transits nearby](#). While past administrations have not made formal commitments to defend Taiwan, the just-completed 2021 Chicago Council Survey finds that for the first time, a slim majority of Americans now favor sending US troops to defend Taiwan if China invades.

## Key Findings

- The American public supports a range of US policies in support of Taiwan. Majorities favor US recognition of Taiwan as an independent country (69%), supporting its inclusion in international organizations (65%), and signing a US-Taiwan free trade agreement (57%).
- A slimmer majority (53%) support the United States' signing a formal alliance with Taiwan, and a plurality (46%) favor explicitly committing to defend Taiwan if China invades.
- When asked about a range of potential scenarios, just over half of Americans (52%) favor using US troops to defend if China were to invade the island. This is the highest level ever recorded in the Council's surveys dating back to 1982, when the question was first asked.
  - Republicans (60%) are more likely to support sending US troops to Taiwan's defense than Democrats (50%) or Independents (49%) – see appendix for more information on partisan divides and Taiwan.
- At the same time, Americans are divided over whether the United States should (50%) or should not (47%) sell arms and military equipment to Taiwan.
- Distrust of China is a significant factor in US public support for Taiwan: while most Americans see Taiwan as an ally (30%) or necessary partner (30%), most see China as a rival (32%) or an adversary (29%).

## Majority View Taiwan As an Ally or Necessary Partner

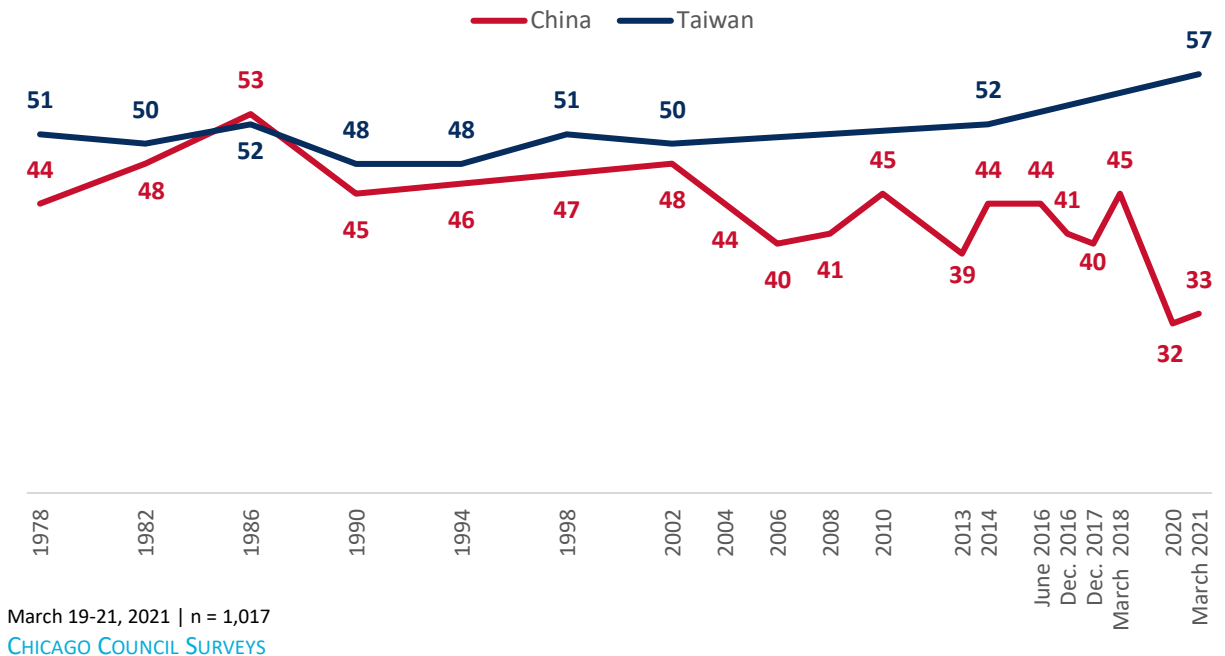
Though the United States and Taiwan are not formal treaty allies, US officials often refer to Taiwan as a valued partner in the region. The public's views are broadly similar. A combined 6 in 10 Americans consider Taiwan an ally that shares US interests and values (30%) or a necessary partner that the United States must strategically cooperate with (30%). One-third (34%) say they do not know enough to describe Taiwan's relationship to the United States. By contrast, Americans view China as more of a rival, a country with which the United States needs to compete (32%) or an adversary that the United States is in conflict with (29%). Two in 10 consider China a necessary partner (21%); few see it as an ally (2%).



Just as Americans have distinctly different views of the US relationship with China and Taiwan, the public feels very differently about Beijing and Taipei. That division has grown in recent years: American feelings toward Taiwan have warmed notably, while views of China have taken a sharp negative turn. On the Council's 0–100 feeling thermometer scale, where 100 represents a very warm, favorable feeling and 0 a very cold, unfavorable feeling, Americans give Taiwan an average of 57 and China a chilly 33 in a March 2021 Chicago Council survey. This is the highest rating for Taiwan since the Council first asked the question in 1978, and the second-lowest recorded result for China over the same period.

## Feeling Thermometer: China and Taiwan

Please rate your feelings toward some countries, 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. (mean)



### Americans Favor Recognizing Taiwan as an Independent Country

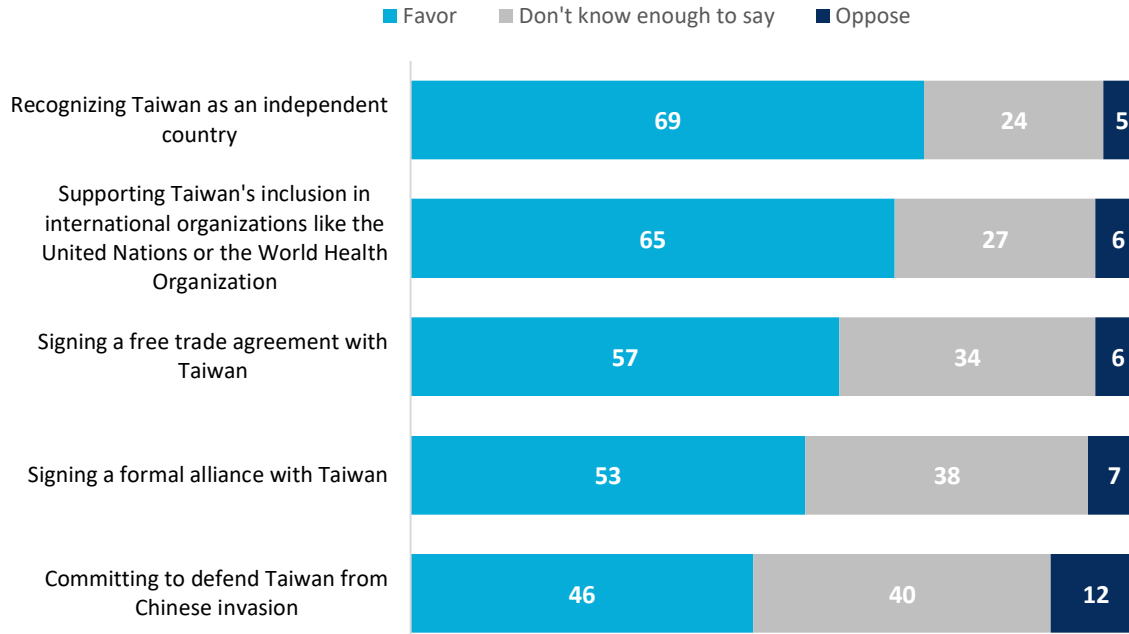
Americans' sentiment toward Taiwan as more of an ally and China as more of a rival factor into their preferences for US policies toward Taiwan.

Most popular among Americans—though also the most controversial—is recognition of Taiwan as an independent country. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans (69%) favor US recognition of Taiwan, though this is not a policy US officials support. As Kurt Campbell, President Joseph Biden's point person for the Indo-Pacific, [succinctly put it](#) In a recent speech, "We support a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan. We do not support Taiwan independence."

But the American public is less reluctant to recognize Taiwan (and is also likely less informed of the potential consequences for doing so). Seven in 10 Americans (69%) favor recognizing Taiwan as an independent country. Majorities also favor a range of policies aimed at bolstering Taiwan's position in the world. Two-thirds (65%) favor the United States' supporting Taiwan's inclusion in international organizations like the United Nations or the World Health Organization, and 57 percent favor signing a free trade agreement with Taiwan. Just over half would be willing to support signing a formal alliance agreement with Taiwan (53%).

## US Policies toward Taiwan

Taiwan has been self-governed since 1949, but China claims it as part of its territory. The United States supports Taiwan's right to self-government and does not recognize China's territorial claims on Taiwan. Would you favor or oppose the following US policies toward Taiwan? (%)



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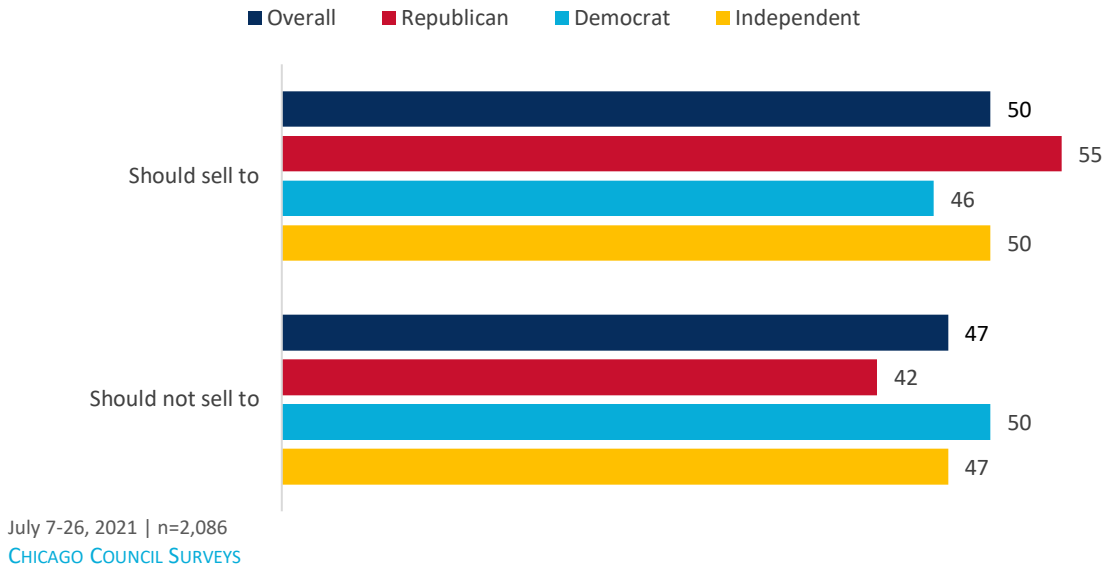
Arms sales to Taiwan have been a [central and long-standing](#) feature in the US-Taiwan relationship, and an aspect the United States has [stepped up in recent years](#). But Americans are divided over the policy. Half (50%) say the United States should sell arms and military equipment to Taiwan, while nearly as many (47%) say it should not. Republicans are somewhat more likely to favor selling arms to Taiwan (55% favor), while Democrats and Independents are divided over the question.

These conflicted views about arms sales to Taiwan are not new. In 2019, the Council asked Americans whether the United States should sell arms to Taiwan “contrary to China’s demands.” In that survey, a majority of Americans (61%) opposed selling arms to Taiwan (34% favored). Nor are they specific to the case of Taiwan: in the same 2019 survey, a majority of Americans (70%) said that the United States’ selling weapons to other countries made it less safe.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dina Smeltz, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Brendan Helm, “[Americans Consider US Arms Sales a Hazard to US Security](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-consider-us-arms-sales-hazard-us-security),” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 1, 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-consider-us-arms-sales-hazard-us-security>.

## Arms Sales to Taiwan

The US sells arms and military equipment to a number of countries around the world. Should the US sell arms and military equipment to: **Taiwan** (%)



### Americans More Likely to Support Coming to Taiwan’s Defense

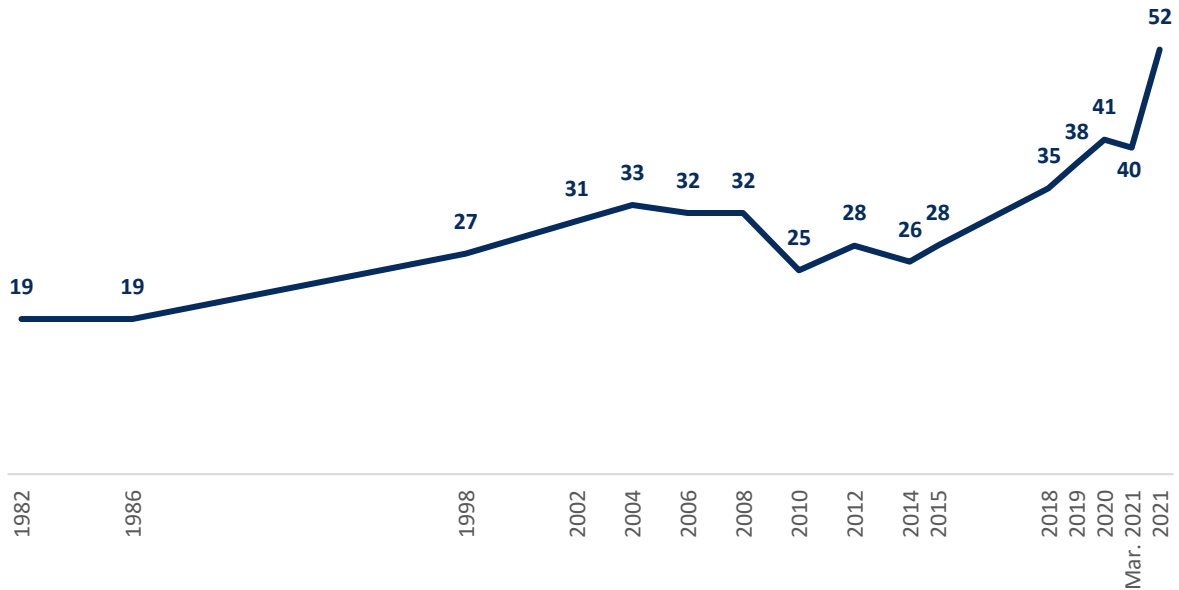
Growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait have led [policymakers](#) and [policy experts](#) in the United States to debate whether to make a more formal defense commitment to Taiwan—a shift from the current policy of “strategic ambiguity” to one of “strategic clarity.” When asked whether they would favor or oppose committing to defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion, a plurality of Americans (46%) say they favor it. But nearly as many decline to give a response (42%), and 12 percent outright oppose doing so.

Instead—and somewhat mirroring the structure of “strategic ambiguity”—Americans are more likely to support using US troops to respond to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan than they are to commit to Taiwan’s defense ahead of time. As the 2021 Chicago Council Survey finds, a narrow majority of Americans (52%) favor using US troops to defend Taiwan if it was invaded by China. This is the first time a majority of Americans have said they would favor sending US troops to defend Taiwan, and the highest level of support recorded in Council surveys dating back to 1982, when the Council first asked the question.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Whether they are asked if China “attacked” or “invaded” Taiwan does not seem to affect Americans’ support for sending US troops to Taiwan’s defense. In an effort to gauge whether “invaded” versus “attack” would alter responses, half the sample was presented with this wording (and 52% favor) and the other half was asked whether they favor or oppose the use of US troops if China attacked Taiwan (51% favor in this case).

## Use of US Troops if China Invaded Taiwan

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: **If China invaded Taiwan** (% favor)



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## Fears of China a Motivating Force in American Support for Taiwan

US policies toward Taiwan are often framed primarily in the context of US-China relations. And analysis of the data shows that at least part of the motivation for Americans who support increasing the US commitment to Taiwan is related to their views of China. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey finds that those Americans who see limiting China's influence as a very important foreign policy goal (50% overall) are more likely than others to support a formal alliance with Taiwan and a formal defense commitment. They are also more likely to support sending US troops to the defense of Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. But they are no more likely to support other policies toward Taiwan, such as signing a free trade agreement or supporting Taiwanese inclusion in international organizations.

## Conclusion

While a significant portion of Americans appear unfamiliar with Taiwan, a majority of Americans seem prepared to recognize independence for Taiwan should the US government change its existing policy toward Taipei. And short of independence, Americans back a range of policies aimed at strengthening Taiwan's international position and integration into the existing global order. Moreover, support has increased considerably for defending Taiwan in case of attack, which may itself bolster US credibility in a crisis scenario. However, it is unclear how the public would react to a serious crisis in the Taiwan Strait involving the US military given the public's relative unfamiliarity with the issues at hand.

## 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 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. This survey was made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Korea Foundation, and the Nakasone Peace Institute.

For more information about the results, please contact the authors:

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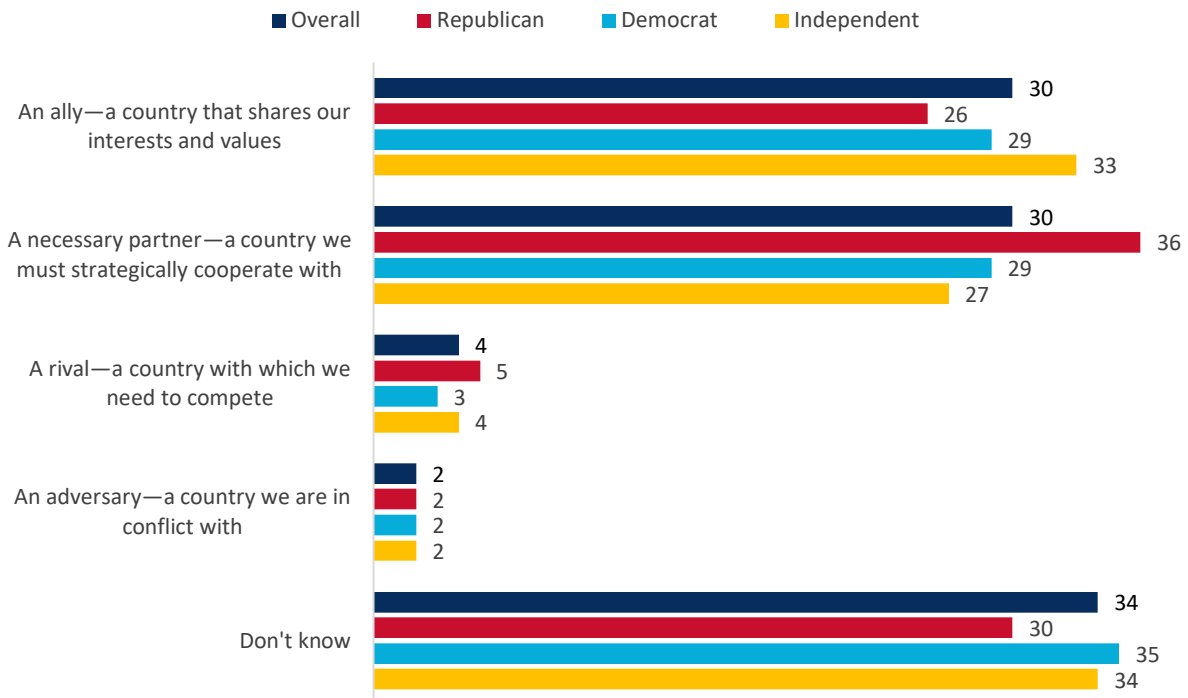
### About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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](https://thechicagocouncil.org) and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

## Appendix

### American Views of Taiwan

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

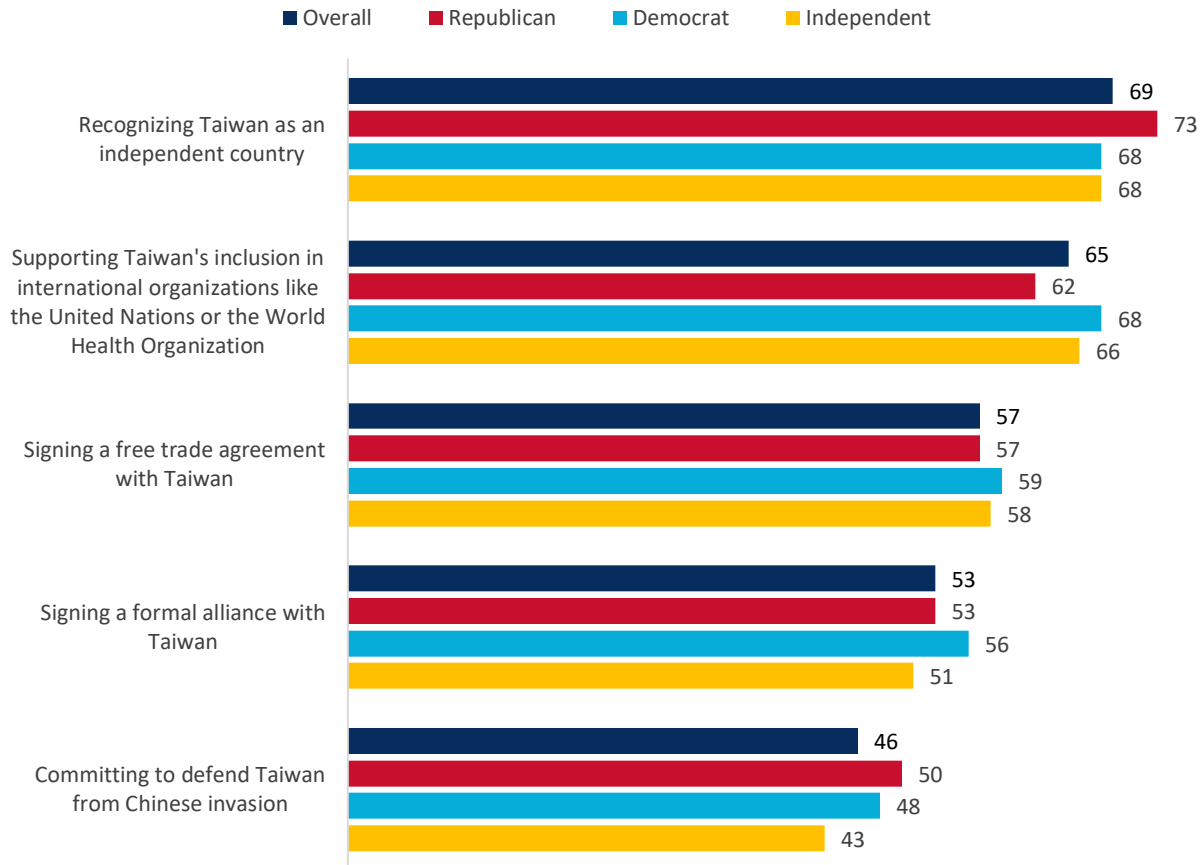


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## US Policy toward Taiwan

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