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Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?

American Views of China Plummet; Public Split on Containment or Cooperation

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For the first time in nearly two decades, a majority of Americans describe the development of China as a world power as a critical threat to the United States, according to the 2020 Chicago Council Survey. At the same time, American feelings towards China have fallen to their lowest point in Council polling history, dating back to 1978. Reflecting these changing attitudes, Americans are now split on whether the US should cooperate and engage with China or actively seek to limit its influence.

This is a significant change. Over the past four years, US-China relations have lurched from one crisis to another. Despite the sharp downturn in relations, and the growing consensus in Washington on pursuing a more confrontational approach to China, Chicago Council Survey data through January 2020 showed that this consensus and the growing US-China rivalry had yet to make a deep impact on American views of China.

Key Findings

- A majority of Americans (55%) say the development of China as a world power is a critical threat to the United States, as do majorities of Republicans (67%) and Independents (53%) and a plurality of Democrats (47%).
- American views of China, measured on a 0-100 where 0 is very unfavorable and 100 is very favorable, have hit an all-time low of 32—lower than any point in Council polling dating back to 1978.
- Americans are now divided over whether to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China (47%) or actively work to limit the growth of China's power (49%). From 2006 through 2019, two-thirds had preferred a policy of cooperation and engagement.

- A majority of Republicans (64%) say the US should actively work to limit the growth of China's power, while a majority of Democrats (60%) favor friendly cooperation and engagement with China.
- A growing majority of Americans say that it is more important to build up our strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China (77%, up from 66% in 2018).

Introduction: Crisis in US-China Relations Spills Into the Public Arena

Under the Trump administration, US-China relations have steadily deteriorated. The administration's 2017 National Security Strategy foreshadowed that strained relations were in the offing, arguing that "China...want[s] to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." Its National Defense Strategy similarly called China a "strategic competitor." These were clear signs that Washington was moving to a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Beijing, a stance that has expanded to touch on nearly every aspect of bilateral relations.

Beginning in the spring of 2018, the two nations spent well [over a year](#) in an escalating trade war, before reaching a temporary détente with this January's '[Phase One](#)' trade agreement. Human rights concerns have returned as an issue in the relationship, with coverage of the [mass internment](#) of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang and the repression of protests in [Hong Kong](#) leading to [Congressional sanctions](#) on [Chinese officials](#).

In recent months the two nations have also traded [tit-for-tat consulate closures](#), with the United States shuttering the Chinese consulate in Houston and China closing the American consulate in Chengdu. The growing hostility between the US and China has led to closer US-Taiwan ties, sparking [fiery denunciations from Beijing](#), [military drills](#), and [missile tests](#). Beijing and Washington have also traded barbs over the COVID-19 pandemic, with President Trump calling it the "[Chinese virus](#)" and Chinese officials [lending credence](#) to [conspiracy theories](#) that disease originated in the US.

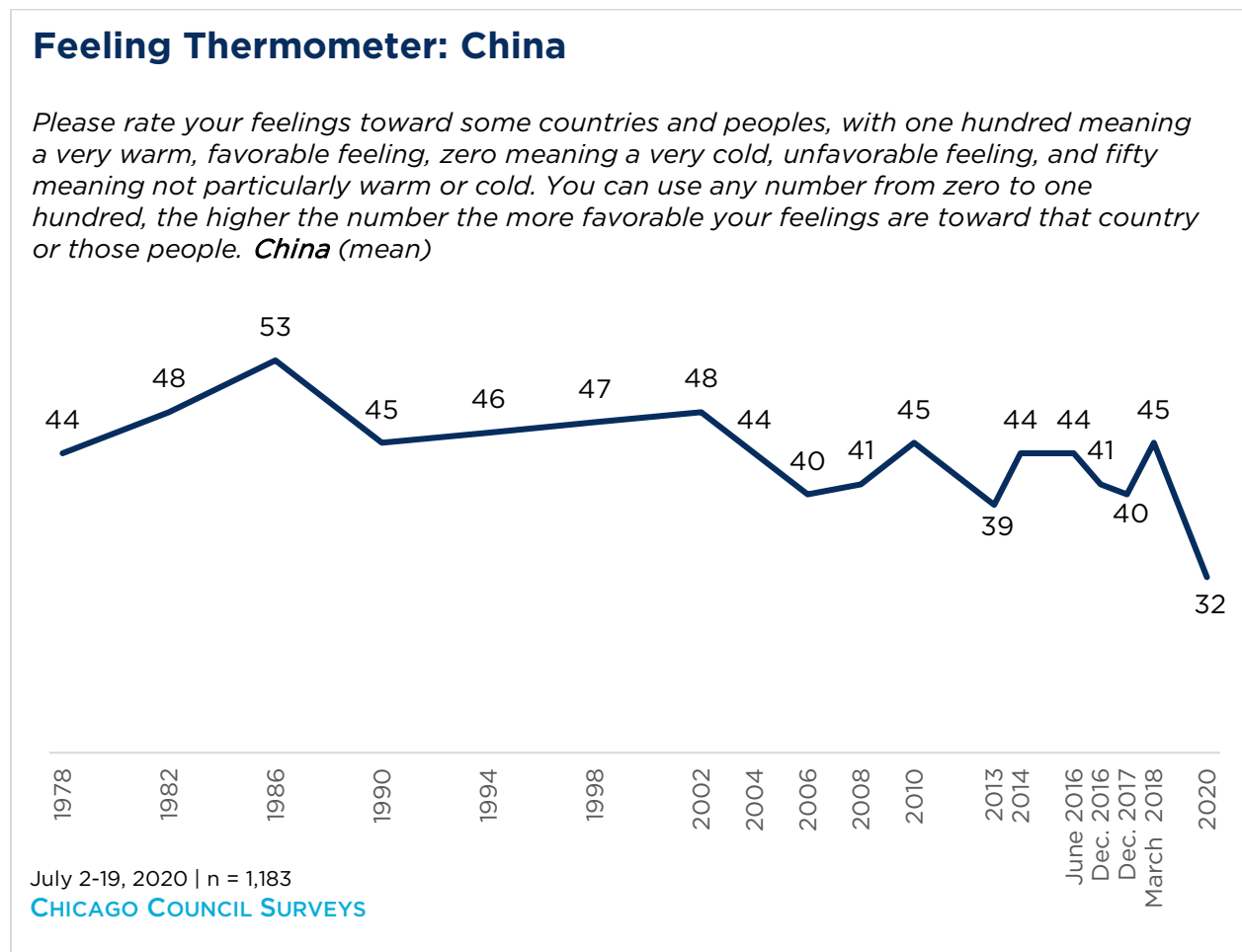
China and the United States are now at an important juncture in their relationship. The extensive economic and person-to-person ties between the two countries are being reconsidered in light of growing security concerns, and political relations are reaching new lows. As this crisis in US-China relations has unfolded, a debate has emerged about the future of the relationship and how to best handle it. Some commentators argue that the United States and China are now engaged in a new cold war, while others see this as an overstatement of current tensions—or worse, as a dangerous escalation.

How the Trump administration has handled relations with China has also been an issue on the campaign trail as President Trump seeks reelection. Democrats criticize Trump's handling of the relationship, but [they largely agree](#) that the US should pursue a harder line on China, albeit in different ways. These divisions are reflected among the public as well. While views of China have fallen among both Republicans and Democrats, Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to name China as a critical threat. Republicans are also more likely to favor attempting to limit the

growth of China’s power, while Democrats continue to prefer a policy of engagement and cooperation.

American Views of China Fall to Lowest Point on Record

American views of China have plummeted in recent years. When asked to rate China on a “feeling thermometer” from 0 to 100, where 0 represents a very negative feeling and 100 represents a very favorable feeling, Americans overall rate China an average of 32 degrees. This is a plunge of 13 degrees since February 2018 and is the lowest rating Americans have given China in the history of Chicago Council Surveys, dating back to 1978. This rating is even lower among Republicans who on average rate China a 25, compared to 37 among Democrats and 33 among Independents. (See Appendix Figure 1). Regardless of partisan affiliation, American feelings toward China have dropped to their lowest levels ever. These ratings are as low today they were for the Soviet Union in the Council’s Cold War-era polls.¹



¹ In prior Chicago Council Surveys conducted prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans gave the Soviet Union average ratings of 34 (1978), 25 (1982), and 31 (1986). Today, Americans rate Russia an average of 29 degrees. Republicans give China lower ratings than Russia (25, vs. 34 for Russia), while Democrats give Russia lower ratings today (24, vs. 37 for China).

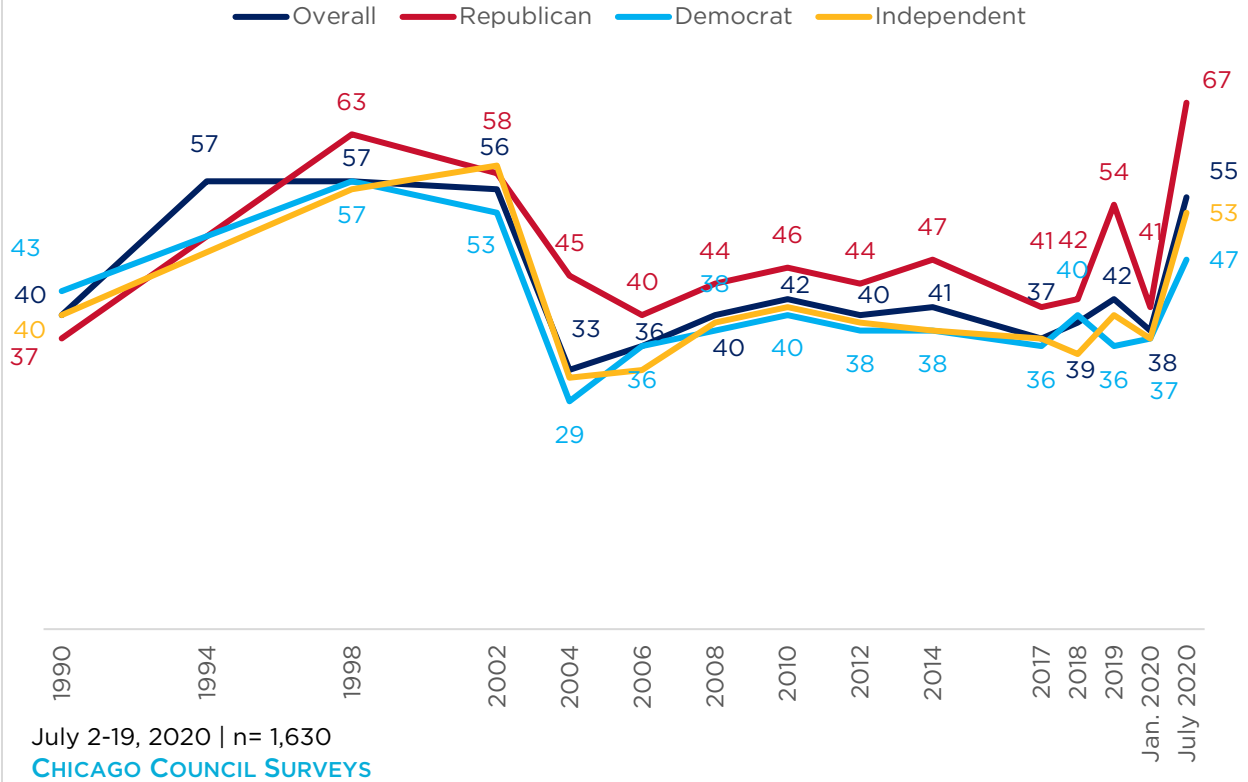
Majority Perceive China to Be A Rival and a Threat

In addition to expressing cool feelings, a majority of Americans (55%) see the development of China as a world power to be a critical threat to US vital interests. This on par with American views of China in the 1994-2002 period, and is a sharp rise from this past January, when 38 percent of Americans considered China's rise a critical threat. Self-identified Republicans and Democrats also differ substantially on the threat posed by the rise of China. Two-thirds of Republicans (67%) name China as a critical threat to the US, putting it at the top of their concerns. That was not the case for Democrats (47%) or Independents (53%), though these numbers represent notable increases from recent years' results.

Republican attitudes, in particular, have tracked the official state of US-China relations closely over the past year. In the summer of 2019, with the US-China trade war in full swing, a majority of Republicans (54%) saw China's rise as a critical threat. By January 2020, days before the signing of the Phase One trade agreement between the two nations, those concerns had largely subsided. But events since then have brought concerns about China roaring back. The two-thirds of Republicans who see China's development as a critical threat is the largest proportion of Republicans since the Council first asked the question in 1990.

Threat of China

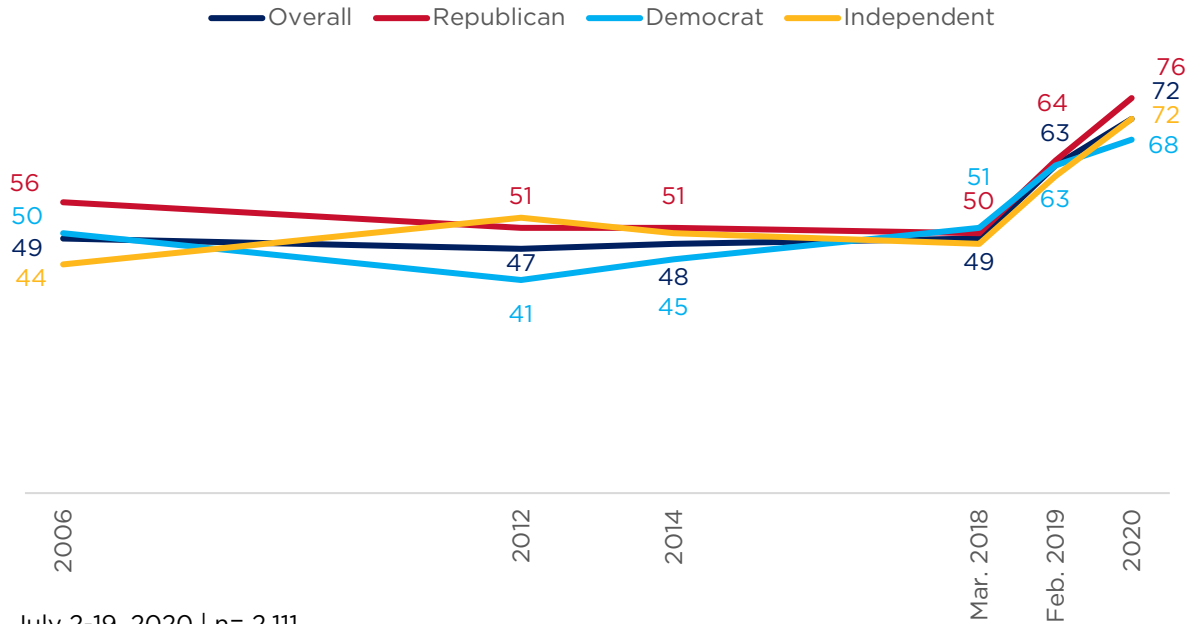
Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: The development of China as a world power (% critical threat)



In addition to seeing China's rise as a threat to the United States, larger numbers of Americans now see the United States and China as rivals. Seven in ten Americans say the two countries are mostly rivals (72%, up from 63% in 2019) rather than mostly partners (24%, down from 33% in 2019). And a larger proportion of Americans today say that China is actively working to undermine US international power and influence (77%, up from 66% in 2016).

US and China: Mostly Rivals

At present, are the following countries mostly rivals or mostly partners? **US and China**
(% mostly rivals)



July 2-19, 2020 | n= 2,111
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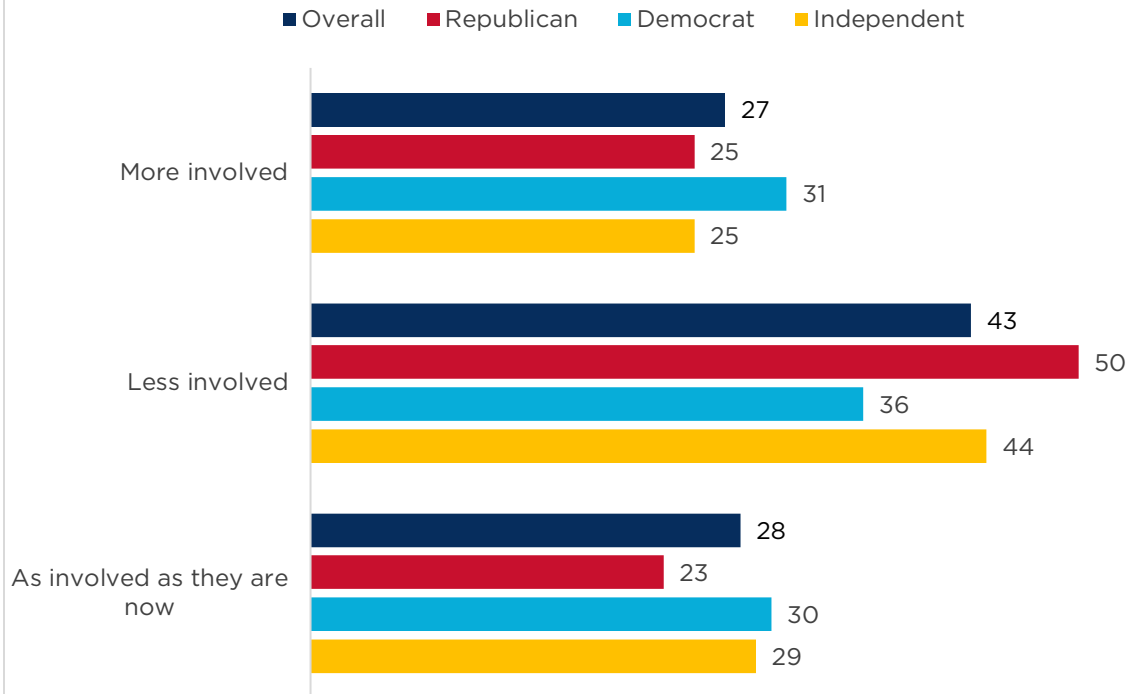
While these are the most negative views of China recorded in Chicago Council Surveys to date, it's important not to overstate the degree to which the American public views the US-China relationship as an antagonistic one. Americans clearly see that the US and China are engaging in an international competition for power—a rivalry—but that does not mean that rivalry is necessarily the desired state of US-China relations. To this point, recent [Pew data](#) show only about a quarter of Americans (26%) describe China as an enemy, while a majority (57%) say it is a competitor.²

With Americans holding negative views of China, and seeing it as a threat to the United States, it should be little surprise that a plurality of Americans (43%) want China to be less involved in addressing the world's problems. Still, some Americans would like to have China involved, either as much as it is now (28%), or more (27%).

² Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, Christine Huang. "Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19." Pew Research Center. July 30, 2020. Survey conducted June 16 to July 14, 2020.

China's Involvement in Addressing World Problems

Should the following countries and international organizations be more involved, less involved, or as involved as they are now in addressing the world's problems? *China* (%)



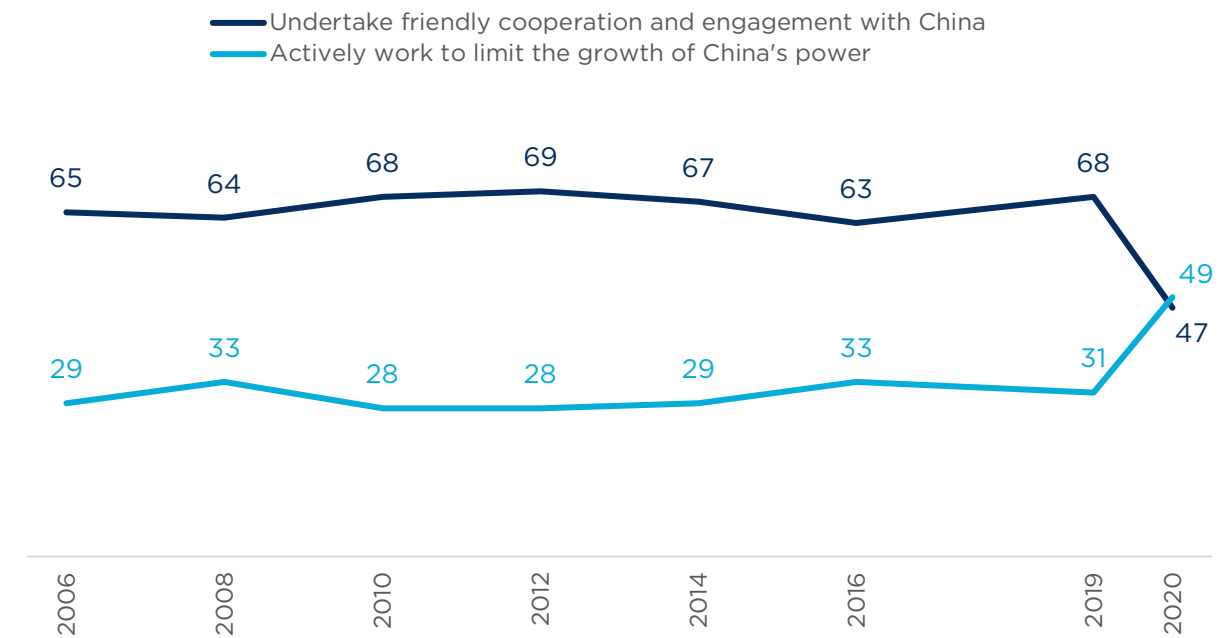
July 2-19, 2020 | n=2,111
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Americans Split over Engagement vs. Containment

With a more negative view of China, and a greater sense that China's rise is a threat to the United States, Americans are reconsidering the past US policy of engagement with China. Since the Council first asked the question in 2006, Americans have consistently favored pursuing a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement. Now, Americans split down the middle on the best US approach to take towards China: 47 percent favor cooperation and engagement, while 49 percent say the United States should focus on limiting the growth of China's power.

Dealing with China's Rise

In dealing with the rise of China's power, do you think the US should: (%)



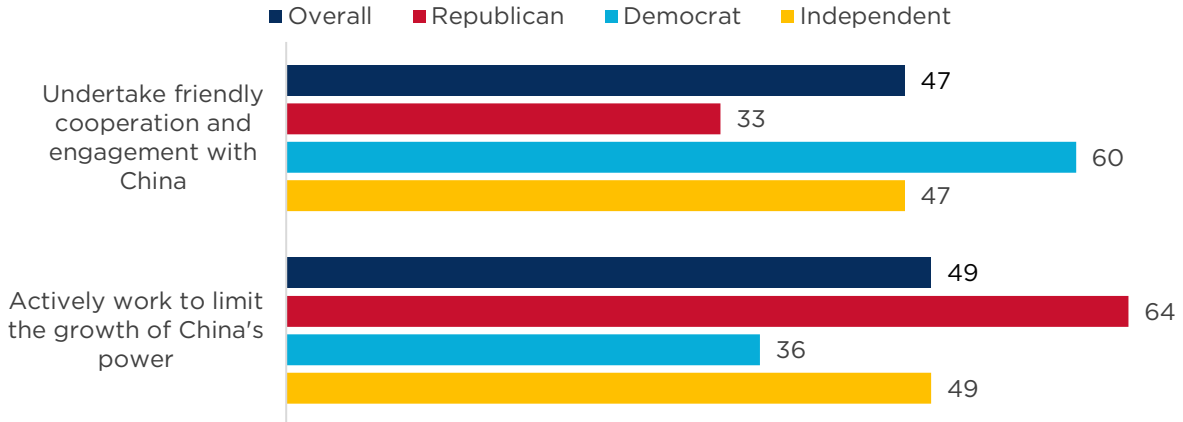
July 2-19, 2020 | n = 2,111

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In line with their sense of China as a threat, Republicans now prefer attempting to limit the growth of China's power (64%) to friendly cooperation and engagement (33%). This is a shift from past attitudes: in 2019, a majority of Republicans preferred cooperation (58%) over containment (40%). And though Republicans have long held more negative views of China than Democrats or Independents, from 2006 through 2019 they preferred an approach of friendly cooperation and engagement with China. Democrats, though more concerned about China than in past years, continue to prefer an approach of friendly cooperation and engagement (60%) over actively working to limit China's growth. And Independents, like Americans overall, are split, with 47 percent preferring cooperation and 49 preferring to limit China's growth.

Partisan Divides on Dealing with the Rise of China

In dealing with the rise of China's power, do you think the US should: (%)



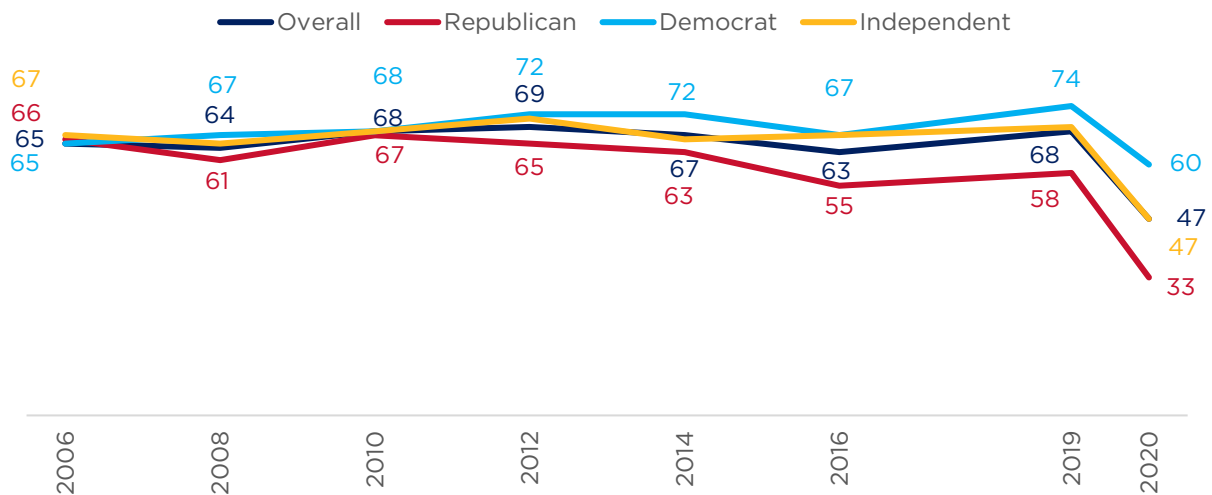
July 2-19, 2020 | n=2,111

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Of course, China was not the only rival power identified in the National Security Strategy as a strategic competitor; it shared the spotlight with Russia. And while Americans are clearly growing more concerned about China, the public seems to feel less alarmed about China's intentions than Russia's. When [last asked in 2019](#), 55 percent of Americans said the United States should actively work to limit Russia's power compared to 41 percent who preferred to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement.

Cooperation with China

In dealing with the rise of China's power, do you think the US should: (% undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China)



July 2-19, 2020 | n= 2,111

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A Conscious Decoupling? Republicans Favor Range of Restrictions

While mistrust of China crosses party lines, Republicans are much more likely to favor hardline policies in response. In particular, solid majorities of Republicans—but only minorities of Democrats—favor increasing tariffs on products imported from China, restricting the exchange of scientific research between the U.S. and China, and limiting the number of Chinese students studying in the United States. A majority of Republicans and Independents also support significantly reducing trade between the United States and China, even if this leads to greater costs for American consumers, while Democrats are opposed.

This set of policies on trade, technology, and migration would significantly limit the economic, technological, and personal exchanges between the United States and China. Some officials in the [Trump administration](#) have called for just such a “[decoupling](#)” of the United States and China, while other analysts have argued such a move is either [self-defeating](#) for the United States or [impossible](#) given the size and scope of US-China integration.

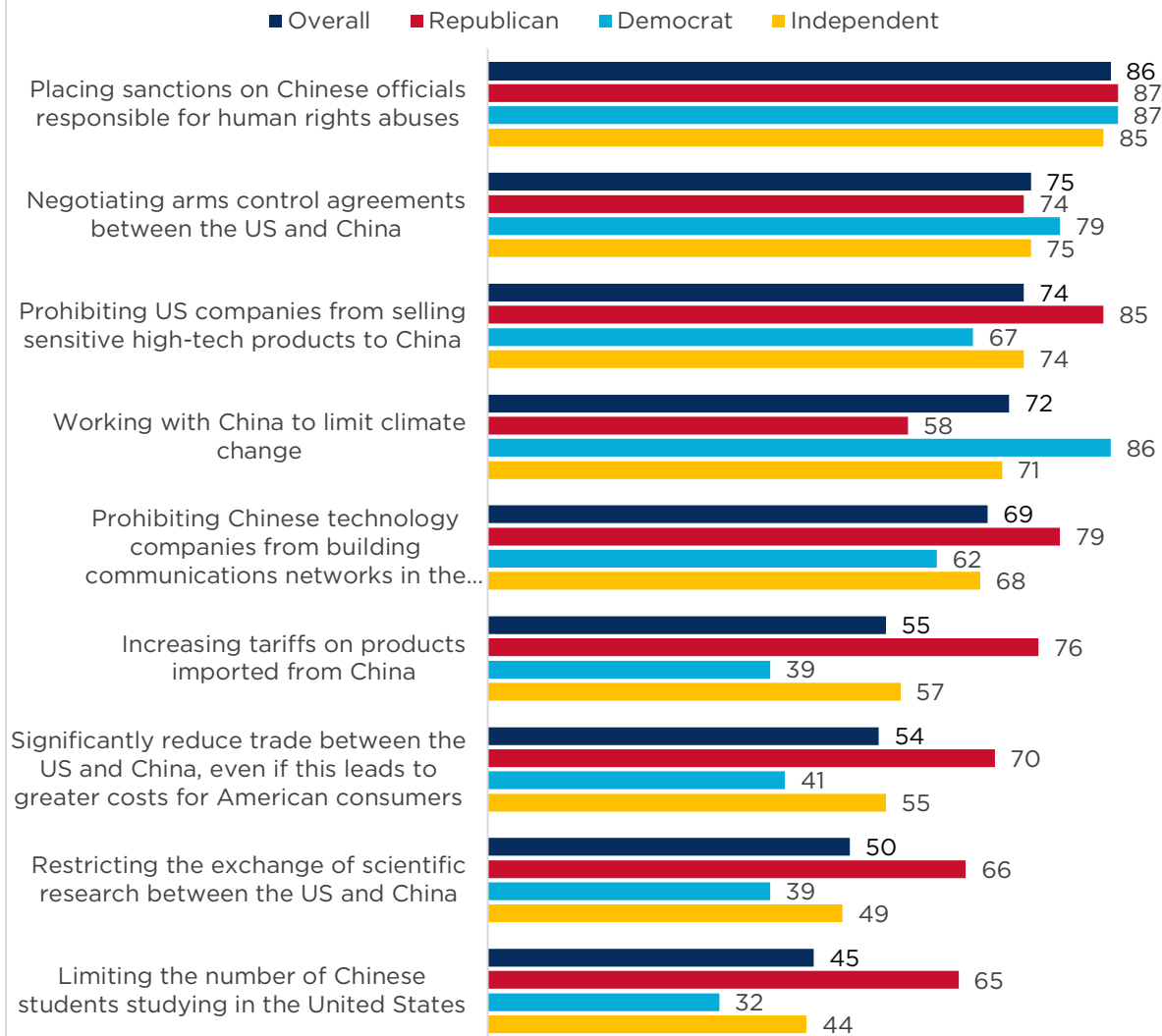
However, not all actions limiting US-China exchanges are split by partisan affiliation. Some receive bipartisan support, such as restrictions on US-China technology exchanges. The involvement of Chinese firms such as Huawei or ZTE in telecommunication networks has been a hot topic in China’s relations with other countries in recent years. While Beijing has [sought to assure](#) foreign governments that Chinese providers are independent organizations, the US intelligence community has argued their involvement is a [threat to national security](#), and the US Federal Communications Commission has designated both as [national security risks](#). Such restrictions are supported by most Americans. Majorities across party lines favor prohibiting Chinese tech companies from building communications networks in the United States, as well as prohibiting US companies from selling sensitive high-tech products to China.

Large majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents also favor placing sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses. The US government [recently announced sanctions](#) on several Chinese officials accused of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, as well as [sanctions on Hong Kong officials](#) involved in the repression of protests. Beijing has responded by [sanctioning several Americans](#), including six members of Congress, for their statements on Hong Kong.

Despite American support for a wide range of coercive measures they are interested in and supportive of cooperation with China. Majorities across party lines support working with China to limit climate change, as well as negotiating arms control agreements between the United States and China.

US Policies Towards China

Would you support or oppose the following US policies towards China? (% support)



July 2-19, 2020 | n= variable (1390 to 1435)

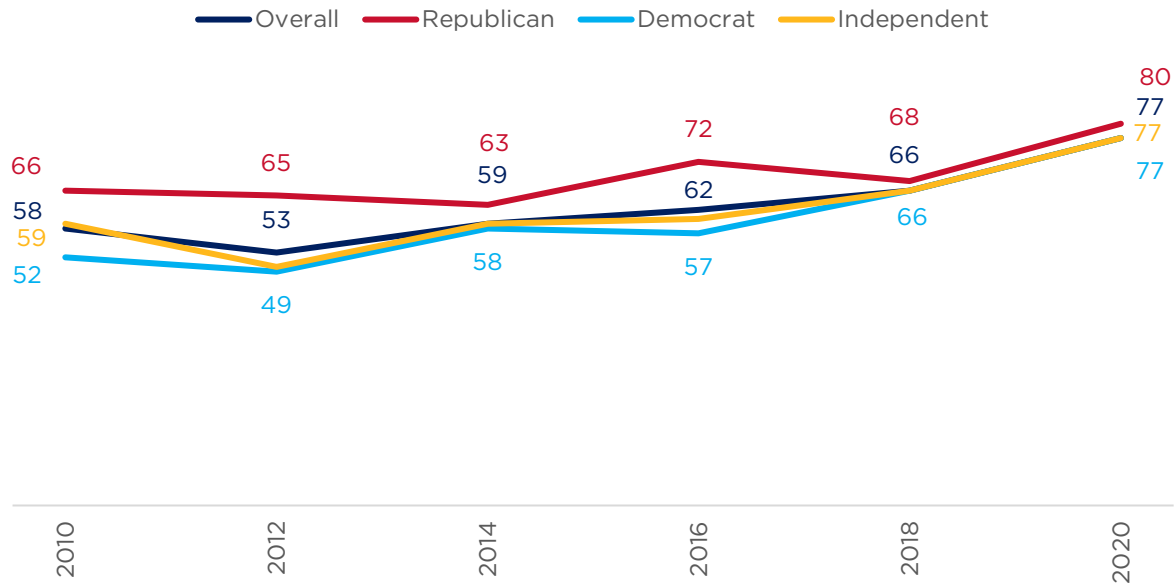
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Current Tensions Increase Appreciation for Asian Allies

The current diplomatic and economic challenges in the Sino-American relationship has convinced a greater majority of Americans that the United States should invest more in ties to allies South Korea and Japan than to pivot to a new partnership with China. An increased majority (77%, up from 66% in 2018) now say that it is more important to build up our strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish our relations with China. This growing support for building strong relations with regional allies has occurred across all partisan groupings, with majorities of Republicans (80%), Democrats (77%), and Independents (77%) in agreement.

US Foreign Policy in Asia

Now thinking about US foreign policy in Asia, do you think the US 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)



July 2-19, 2020 | n= 2,111
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

In addition to the American public's concerns about China, they are also more likely to see benefits from East Asian allies and alliances. Six in ten Americans say that US alliances in East Asia benefit both the United States and its Asian allies (52%) or the United States alone (7%). Americans also continue to give warm, favorable ratings to Japan (an average of 65 degrees) and South Korea (60 degrees) on the feeling thermometer, even as views of China have plunged in recent years.

Taiwan, though not a US ally, is also on the minds of Americans. An increasing minority of Americans say they would support sending US troops to defend Taiwan if it were invaded by China (41%). The proportion of Americans supporting the use of American troops in Taiwan's defense has been on a steady rise since 2014, when only a quarter of Americans (26%) supported defending Taiwan with US troops. (See Appendix Figure 2). However, there are limits to American support for Taiwan: the 2019 Chicago Council Survey found that a majority of Americans opposed selling arms to Taiwan (61%, vs. 34% support), a key aspect of US-Taiwan relations.

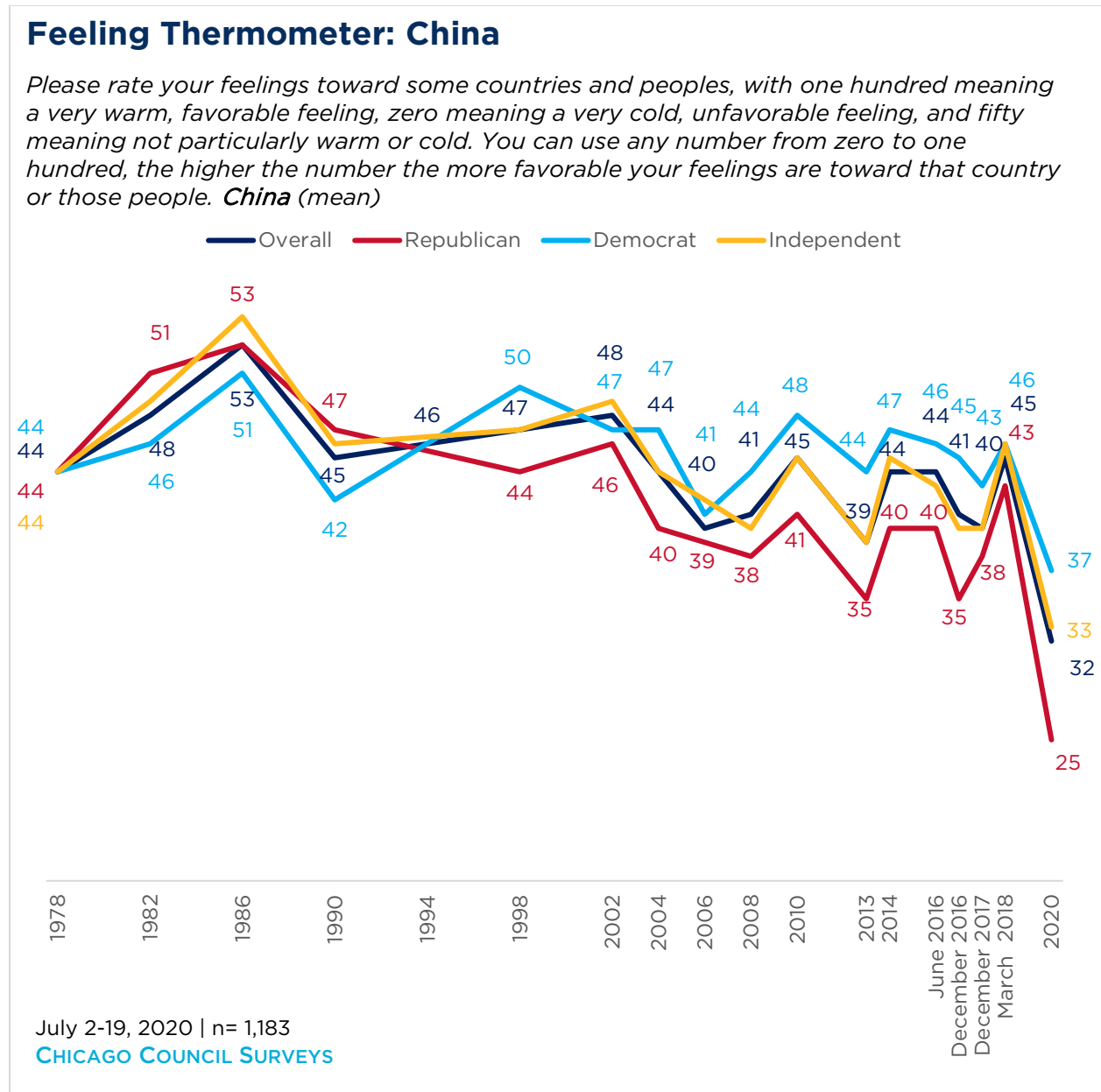
Conclusion

The downward spiral in US-China relations has pulled American public opinion on China, and of US-China cooperation, down with it. But that decline in views has not affected Republicans and Democrats equally. While Democrats have more recently grown more negative on China, they still endorse a policy of cooperation and engagement with Beijing and oppose a broader decoupling of the American and Chinese economies. Republicans, on the other hand, are more closely aligned with the Trump Administration's hardline stances on China, seeing China as a critical threat to the country and favoring a range of policies aimed at limiting the economic, technological, and personal exchanges between the two countries.

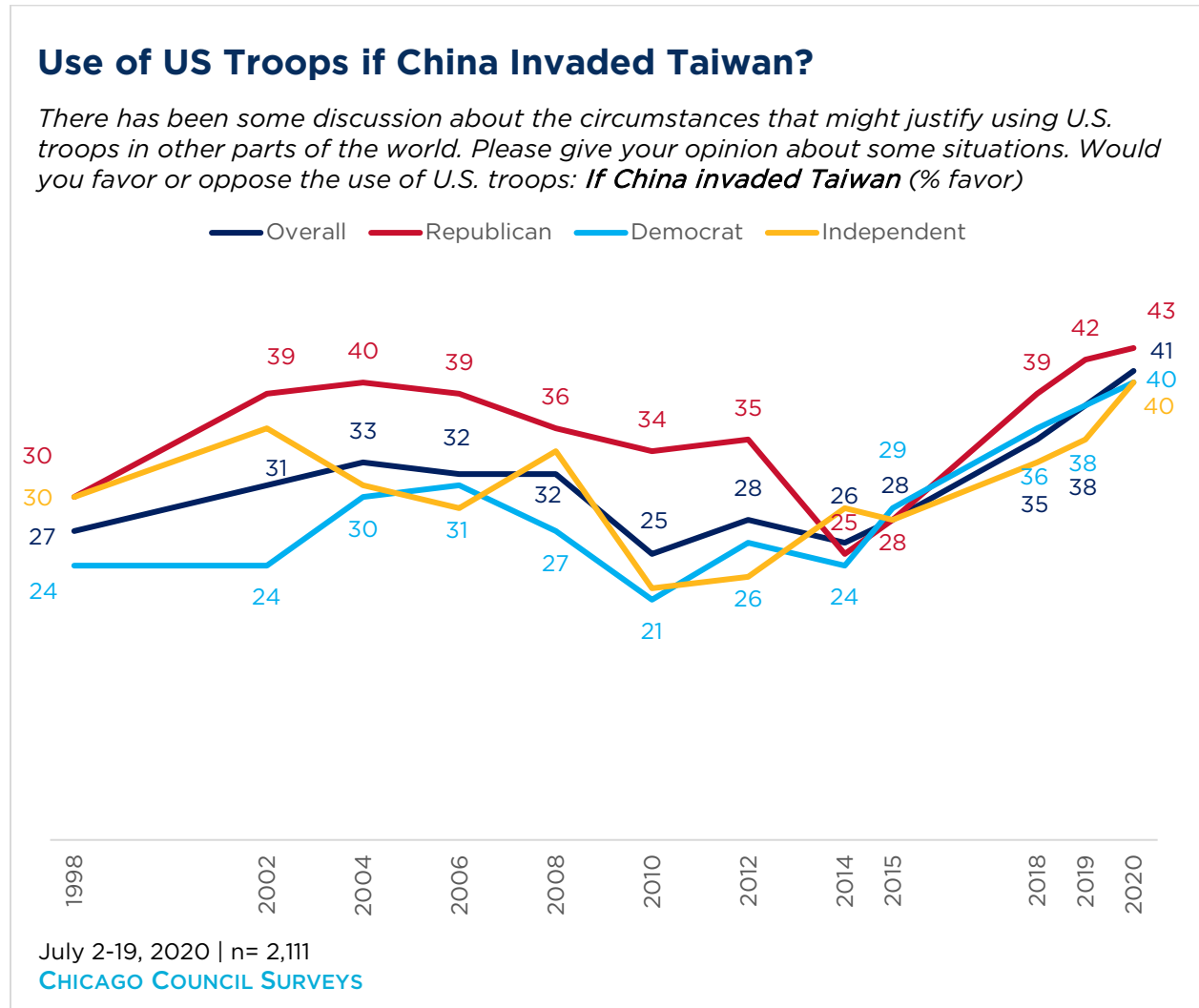
With President Trump and former Vice President Biden offering competing visions of US-China relations, and their supportive publics backing different approaches to America's most important bilateral relationship, the 2020 election promises to be a deeply consequential one for the future of US policy in Asia.

Appendix

Appendix Figure 1



Appendix Figure 2



Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2020 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2020 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 2-19, 2020 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,111 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 ± 2.3 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.2056. 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?"

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