



# Public Opinion and the US-Japan Alliance at the Outset of the Trump Administration

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Japan holds a central role in the US alliance structure in the Asia-Pacific. But that does not mean the relationship has always been smooth. At times in the past, political winds have blown against the partnership. Today, the US-Japan relationship is again sailing into a stormy sea. It faces significant challenges in the rise of China and the inauguration of a potentially hostile Trump administration. However, as decades of polling by the Council on Global Affairs shows, the bilateral alliance also has deep roots of public support.

## Key Findings

- Though the Japanese public believes the Trump administration will have negative impacts on Japan's economy and security, they still support the US-Japan alliance, albeit with a shaken confidence in the United States
- Americans continue to view Japan warmly, rating the country at 60° on a 0-100 thermometer scale, and a majority (60%) support US bases in Japan
- Americans and Japanese share common views on the top threats facing their countries: international terrorism and North Korea's nuclear program
- Both Americans and Japanese prefer pursuing a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than actively working to limit its growth

## Japanese Feel Close to US; Name US Most Important Country for Japan

Japanese opinion of the United States has long been favorable. In the annual polling conducted by the Cabinet Office, a majority of Japanese dating back to 1978 have reported 'feeling close' to the United States, and that holds today: in the latest Cabinet Office poll, conducted October 27-November 6, 84 percent of Japanese report feeling close to the US.<sup>1</sup> The same poll finds that the overwhelming majority of Japanese say the US-Japan relationship is good (87%), and nearly all Japanese (95%) say that the future development of US-Japan relations is important for the region.

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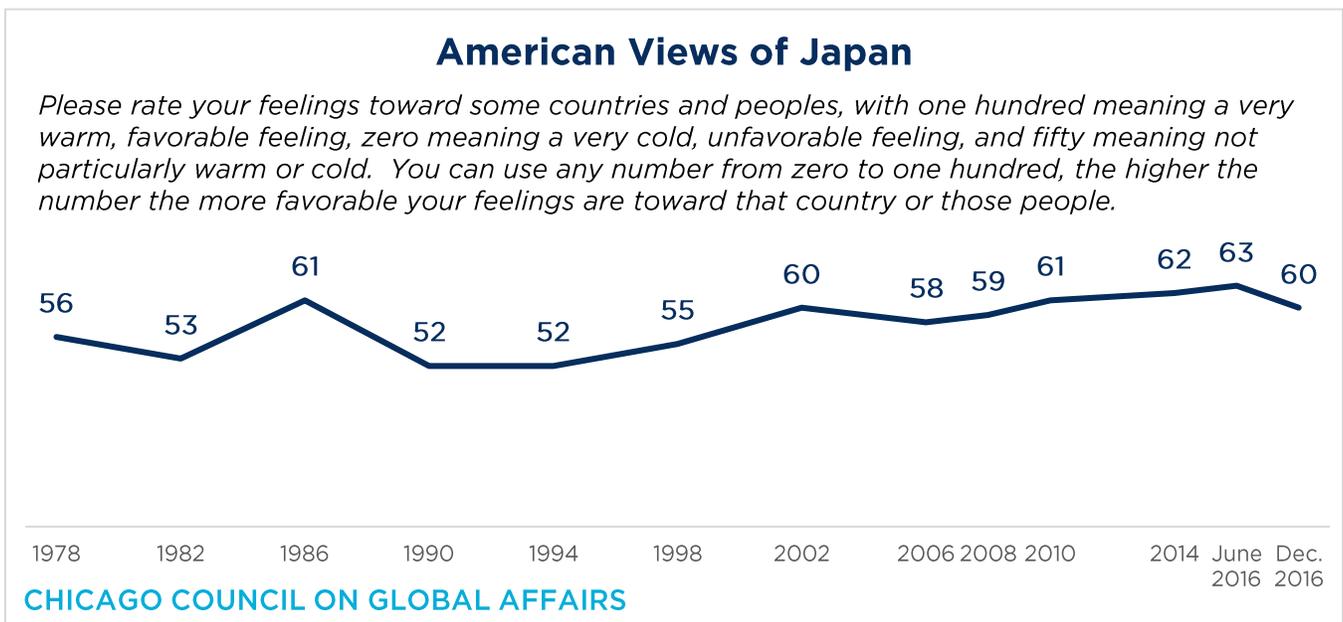
<sup>1</sup> [Government of Japan Cabinet Office Poll](#), October 27-November 6, 2016.

And according to polling from the Genron-NPO, nearly two in three Japanese (63%) say that the US is the most important country for the future of Japan.<sup>2</sup>

### Americans View Japan Warmly; Support US Bases

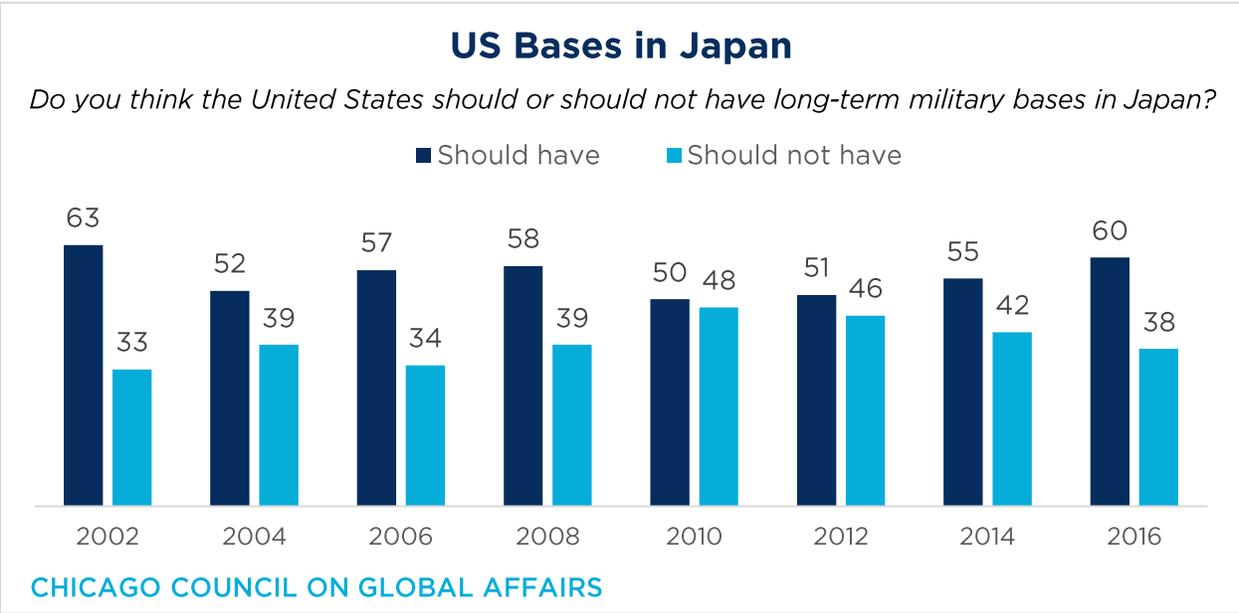
The 2016 Chicago Council Survey, fielded June 10-27, 2016, found that American feelings towards Japan remain warm and favorable. On a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being a very cold, unfavorable feeling and 100 being a very warm, favorable feeling, Americans rated Japan an average of 63°. That marked the highest recorded favorable feeling toward Japan in nearly forty years of Chicago Council Surveys.

In the wake of the US election, some have speculated that the rancorous debate of the fall may have shifted American opinion towards Japan. But the evidence for this is lacking: in a special Chicago Council survey conducted December 16-18, 2016, American feelings towards Japan remained warm, with the public giving Japan an average rating of 60°. That warmth is, and has historically been, bipartisan, with Republicans (58°), Democrats (62°), and Independents (61°) all rating Japan warmly.



Perhaps an even stronger signal of American feeling towards Japan is the continued popular support for the basing of US troops in Japan, despite then-candidate Trump's criticism of US defense commitments to Japan and the basing of US troops in the country. In the 2016 Chicago Council Survey, six in ten Americans (60%) said that the US should have long-term military bases in Japan. This was the highest level of support recorded in Chicago Council Surveys since 2002 and marked a significant increase in support from 2010, when opinion was more closely divided.

<sup>2</sup> [12<sup>th</sup> Japan-China Joint Opinion Poll. The Genron-NPO, Dataway Horizon. September 2016.](#)



Additionally, though the rise of China is reshaping the region, Americans prefer to emphasize their existing alliances with key regional partners. When given a tradeoff, six in ten (62%) Americans say they favor building strong relations with countries like Japan and South Korea as opposed to pursuing a new partnership with China (28%).

Results from previous Chicago Council Surveys underscore the domestic support enjoyed by the US-Japan alliance. In the 2015 Chicago Council Survey, nearly eight in ten Americans (78%) saw Japan as a reliable partner for the United States, primarily due to the economic and trade ties between the two nations (42%), as well as the security alliance (30%).

American support for Japan extends beyond just bilateral ties, however. The 2015 Chicago Council Survey also found that three in four Americans (73%) saw strong Japanese leadership in world affairs as desirable. Matching their comfort with Japanese leadership, a majority of Americans (58%) expressed confidence that Japan will deal responsibly with world problems. And in Asia, Americans are even more comfortable with Japan: two in three Americans (66%) said that Japan plays a positive role in resolving key problems in Asia, second only to the US (74%) and just above South Korea (58%).

### Shared Priorities in the US-Japan Relationship

One factor contributing to that close relationship are common priorities between the two nations: as joint polling by the Council on Global Affairs and the Genron-NPO show, the US and Japanese publics have a shared view of major threats facing the region.<sup>3</sup> Though Japanese are generally less likely to name issues as critical threats to the vital interest of Japan, the American and Japanese publics have a shared concern over international terrorism, which is the issue most commonly labeled by respondents in both countries as a critical threat. Also of shared concern is North Korea's

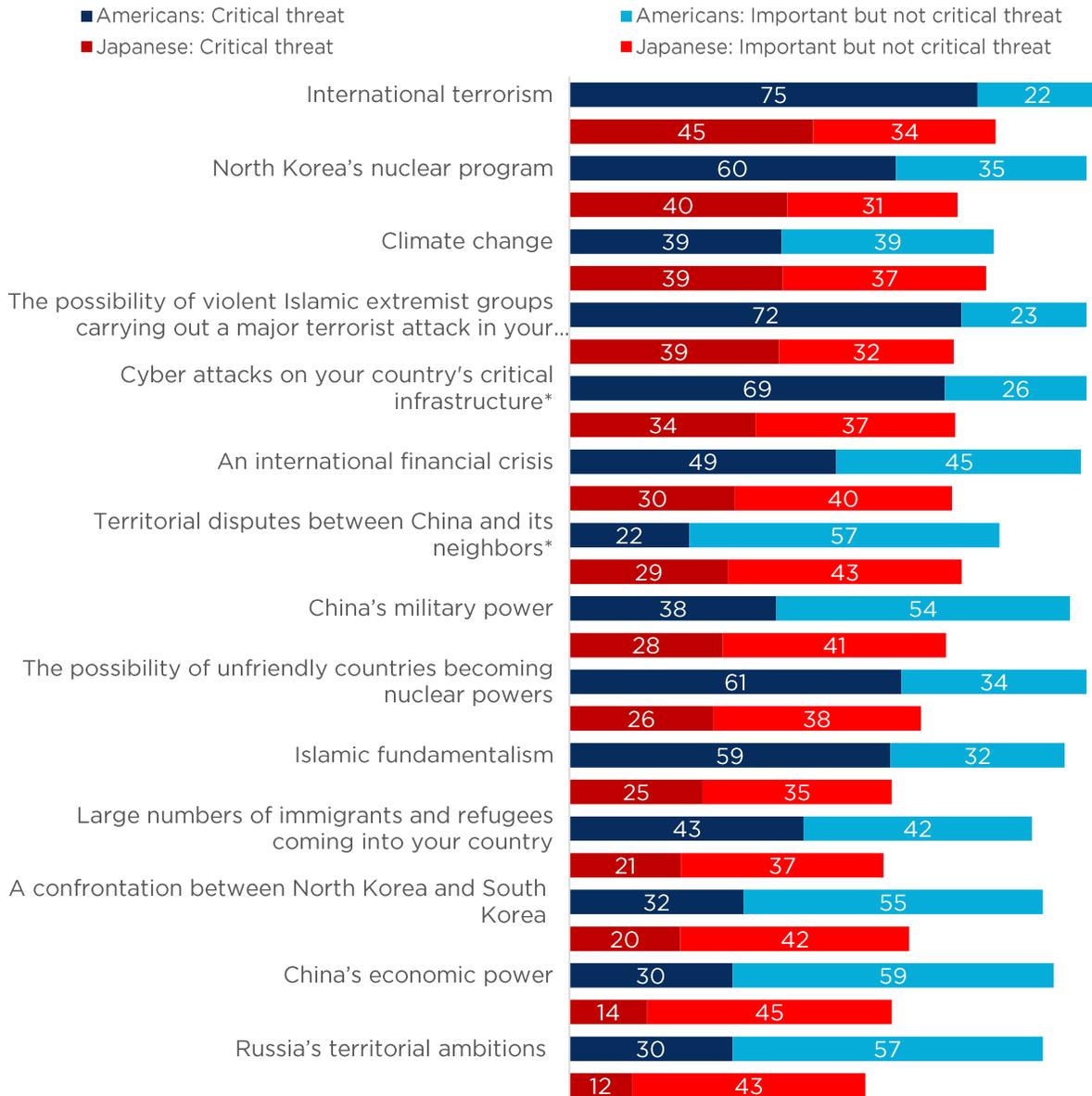
<sup>3</sup> "Asia in the Age of Uncertainty." The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, with the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, Dataway Horizon, East Asia Institute, Genron-NPO, and Lowy Institute. February 1, 2017.

nuclear program, coming in second for Japanese and third for Americans—just behind the possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers.

Though tensions in the South China Sea between China and its neighbors have risen in recent years, neither Americans nor Japanese name the issue a critical threat. Nor do Americans or Japanese see China's military and economic power as a critical threat, though majorities of Americans and pluralities of Japanese name both issues as important, but not critical, threats. Similarly, though tensions on the Korean Peninsula are a consistent source of friction in the region, only one in three Americans (32%) and one in five Japanese (20%) name a confrontation between North Korea and South Korea as a critical threat.

## Threats to the United States and Japan

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of [the United States/Japan] 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:

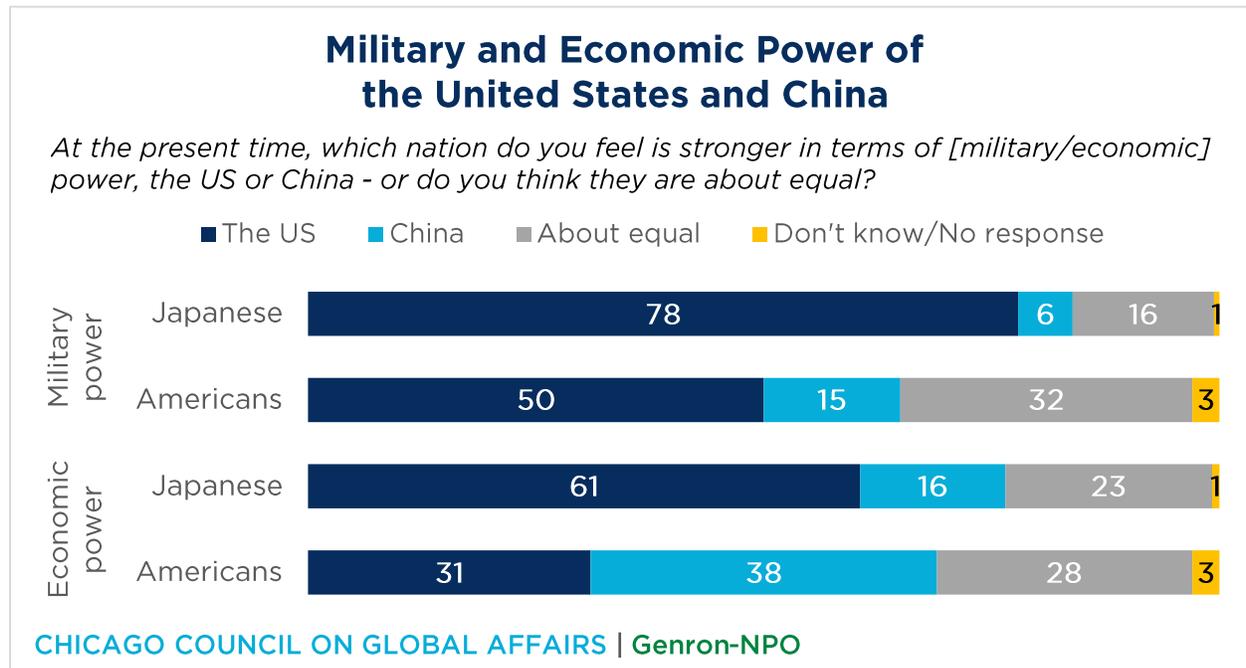


\*US result from 2015 Chicago Council Survey

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Another factor influencing Japanese threat perceptions is likely Japanese perceptions of American strength, both military and economic. When asked whether the United States or China is the stronger military power, eight in ten Japanese (78%) named the US, with only six percent choosing China. This is a notably greater percentage than among Americans, of whom a bare majority (50%) named the US as the stronger military power. Perceptions of economic power follow a similar pattern: six in ten Japanese (61%), but a minority of Americans (31%), say that the US is a stronger

economic power than China. In fact, more Americans see China as the stronger economic power (38%), a view held by few Japanese.



### Alliance Forecast: Trump on the Horizon

The advent of the Trump administration, however, raises a number of serious questions for the US-Japan relationship, and for public opinion towards the alliance. In a Yomiuri Shimbun poll conducted November 12-13, 2016, a majority of Japanese (58%) said that the US-Japan relationship would change for the worse.<sup>4</sup> And they predicted that those changes would have wide-ranging effects, with negative impacts on Japan's economy and security (58% each) as well as overall global stability (57%). However, despite a similar prediction of worsening relations, a joint Yomiuri Shimbun / Gallup poll (Nov. 28-Dec. 4) found that a majority of Japanese (57%) said US-Japan relations remained good, essentially unchanged from results a year prior.<sup>5</sup>

But Japanese confidence in the United States has clearly been shaken: the same survey finds that Japanese are divided on whether to trust (42%) or not trust (43%) the United States.<sup>6</sup> Across the Pacific, Americans remain trusting, with seven in ten (68%) saying that they have confidence in Japan.

Despite this division on trust in the United States, the Japanese public still think the US will continue to play its role as a leader of the international community (72% will, 23% will not).<sup>7</sup> Nor has the Japanese public turned away from the alliance: in a January Yomiuri Shimbun poll, six in ten

<sup>4</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun poll, November 12-13.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun / Gallup poll, November 28-December 4, 2016.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun / Gallup poll, November 28-December 4, 2016.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun poll, November 12-13, 2016.](#)

Japanese (60%) say Japan should maintain its existing emphasis on the alliance relationship with the US, while one-third (34%) say Japan should re-examine that emphasis.<sup>8</sup>

The stationing of US troops in Japan is likely to remain a central part of that relationship, and despite campaign attacks from Trump over basing costs, Japan already contributes significantly to the cost of basing US troops in Japan. According to the latest report from the Japanese Ministry of Defense, Japan paid ¥191 billion (roughly \$1.7 billion) in host-nation support in 2015, representing 86 percent of the total costs.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, attempts by the Trump administration to push Japan on host-nation support may only increase public opposition. In November, two-thirds (68%) of Japanese said the current level of host-nation support should be maintained, while one in four (24%) supported a decrease in support levels.<sup>10</sup> Two months later, support for existing levels of host-nation support have fallen somewhat (57%), while more Japanese say that Japan is spending too much on host-nation support (30%).<sup>11</sup> Nor is Japanese public is interested in acquiring nuclear weapons, per Mr. Trump's suggestion during the campaign: close to nine in ten (86%) oppose doing so.<sup>12</sup>

### **China: A Complicating Factor**

The potential wrench a Trump administration could throw into the gears of the US-Japan relationship comes at an inopportune time, as the alliance already has a significant complication to deal with: the rise and accompanying regional assertiveness of China.

Public attitudes in both China and Japan could inflame that complication further. Chinese views of Japan are deeply unfavorable, as are Japanese views of China. The latest polls by the Genron-NPO and Dataway Horizon show that nine in ten Japanese (92%) and three in four Chinese (77%) hold unfavorable views of the other country, and publics on both sides think that Sino-Japanese relations are poor (78% of Chinese; 72% of Japanese).<sup>13</sup> Though Japanese don't see China's military power as a *critical* threat to Japanese interests, they do see it as a threat: 67% of Japanese see China as a military threat, and 76% of Chinese say the same about Japan.<sup>14</sup>

However, Japanese are not spoiling for a confrontation with China. Instead, a plurality of Japanese (39%) prefer pursuing a policy of friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than actively working to limit its growth (23%).<sup>15</sup> That matches American views as well. Since the Council on Global Affairs first asked the question in 2006, a majority of Americans have preferred the pursuit of cooperation and engagement to a policy of containment.

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<sup>8</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun poll, January 27-29, 2016.](#)

<sup>9</sup> "How much does Japan pay to host US forces? Depends on who you ask." Ayako Mie, The Japan Times, January 31, 2017. As the article notes, the percentage of costs covered varies by source, as different agencies on both sides of the alliance calculate costs differently.

<sup>10</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun poll, November 12-13, 2016.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Nikkei poll, January 27-29, 2017.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Yomiuri Shimbun poll, November 12-13, 2016.](#)

<sup>13</sup> [12<sup>th</sup> Japan-China Joint Opinion Poll. The Genron-NPO, Dataway Horizon. September 2016.](#)

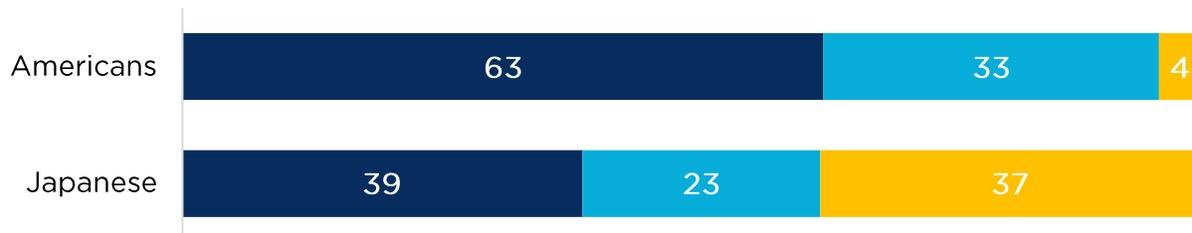
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## Dealing with the Rise of China

*In dealing with the rise of China, do you think [the US/Japan] should:*

- Undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China
- Actively work to limit the growth of China's power
- Not sure / decline



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### Conclusion

Despite President Trump's criticisms of Japan, and the potential for a more conflictual relationship, the US-Japan alliance has a deep well of public support. Americans and Japanese have mutually favorable views of one another, share common views of threats in the region, and support one another's leadership efforts in the region. That public reservoir of support may help buoy the US-Japan alliance through the squalls a Trump administration is likely to create.

As disruptive as the Trump administration could be for the alliance, it has a finite ending. China, by contrast, is here to stay, and publics around the region know it. As results of previous polls by the Council on Global Affairs and the Genron-NPO show, majorities of both Americans and Japanese (as well Koreans and Chinese) say that of the four nations, China's influence is the one that will increase in the Asia-Pacific over the next decade.<sup>16</sup> As a result, tensions between China and the US-Japan alliance—and other US allies in the region—may prove the more lasting issue for the alliance.

### About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan organization that provides insight – and influences the public discourse – on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices and conduct independent research to bring clarity and offer solutions to challenges and opportunities across the globe. Ranked [No. 1 Think Tank to Watch](#) worldwide, the Council on Global Affairs is committed to engaging the public and raising global awareness of issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business and governments engage the world. Learn more at [thechicagocouncil.org](http://thechicagocouncil.org) and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

### About the Chicago Council Survey

The 2016 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel between June 10-27, 2016, among a national sample of 2,061 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of

<sup>16</sup> ["Strong Alliances, Divided Publics."](#) Karl Friedhoff, Dina Smeltz. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs. October 19, 2015.

sampling error for the full sample is  $\pm 2.38$ , including a design effect of 1.2149. The margin of error is higher for questions administered to a partial sample.

This report also includes data from an omnibus survey conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research panel December 16-18, 2016, among a national sample of 1,005 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  $\pm 3.0$  percentage points and higher for partisan subgroups ( $\pm 5.7$  for Republicans,  $\pm 5.5$  for Democrats, and  $\pm 5.0$  for Independents).

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