

Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans Wary of China's Intentions

Karl Friedhoff, Marshall M. Bouton Fellow for Asia Studies
Craig Kafura, Assistant Director, Public Opinion & Foreign Policy
Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion & Foreign Policy

Against a backdrop of growing regional rivalry, March and April 2021 surveys conducted in the United States, Japan, and South Korea show that publics in all three countries share similar views of China's growing influence and intentions. But the data also show that internal divisions within the US-Japan-South Korea relationship will pose challenges to deeper cooperation.¹

Key Findings

- Greater than 80 percent in the United States, Japan, and South Korea say China intends to replace the United States as either the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific or as the dominant power in the world.
- But when placed in a broader context, neither China's military power nor its economic power are considered as critical a threat as global or domestic challenges in any country. Moreover, denuclearizing North Korea and encouraging economic growth are seen as higher priorities for the alliances than is limiting China's expansion in Asia.
- Despite strong economic ties with China, 6 in 10 in all three countries view China as more of an economic threat than a partner. And more than three-quarters say China is more of a security threat than a security partner.
- The South Korean and Japanese publics view the relationship between their own countries as more competitive than cooperative. In South Korea, 72 percent see Japan as a rival. In Japan, 80 percent say South Korea is a rival.
- But Koreans and the Japanese see potential areas of cooperation. Majorities in both countries support sharing intelligence on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs (73% in Japan, 53% in South Korea) as well as cooperating on international development projects in Southeast Asia (58% in Japan, 62% in South Korea).

¹ This work was made possible by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Korea Foundation, and the Nakasone Peace Institute. It is part of a larger project focusing on US-Japan-South Korea cooperation, and the main report can be [found here](#).

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is undergoing a period of intense change. China's economic influence has made it the dominant economic power in the region, and its security interests are now [expanding](#) accordingly. These developments have triggered alarm among officials and experts [in the United States](#) and [neighboring countries](#).

While Beijing [had hoped for](#) better relations with the United States under the Biden administration, initial meetings have been [contentious](#). Publics in all three allied countries are taking note. Large majorities of the publics in South Korea (88%) and Japan (90%) say the United States and China are mostly rivals rather than being mostly partners. And that sense of rivalry extends to their own country's relations with China as well. A majority of the Japanese public (80%) say Japan and China are mostly rivals, and 59 percent in South Korea see China as being mostly a rival.²

But perceptions of rivalry are not confined to relations with China. Ties between Korea and Japan, the two key US allies in the region, remain tense. Eight in ten (80%) in Japan say South Korea is a mostly a rival, and 72 percent in South Korean say the same about Japan.

Despite this backdrop of regional rivalry and lingering [doubts](#) about US credibility, public opinion surveys conducted in the United States, Japan, and South Korea show that all three publics are on the same page when it comes to China's growing influence and power. Although China plays an important role in the economies of all three countries, American, Japanese, and South Korean publics are deeply suspicious of China's growing influence and power. Even if relations with China improve, the internal divisions that remain between the trilateral partners will persist as stumbling blocks on the road to greater trilateral cooperation.

China's Intentions and Threat Perceptions

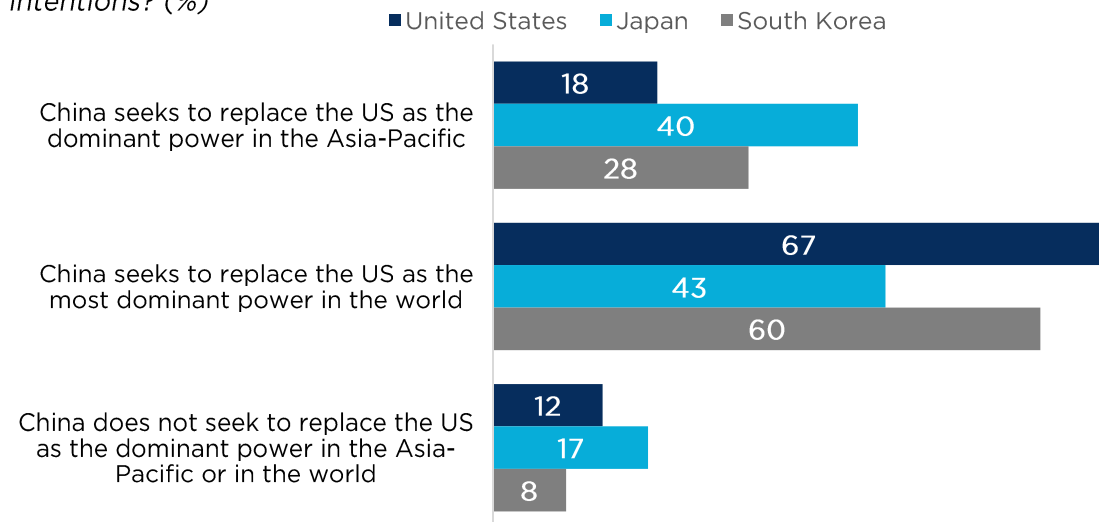
Publics Wary of China's Intentions

Chinese [officials regularly claim](#) that Beijing has no interest in replacing the United States as the dominant power in the region. But publics in the United States, Japan, and South Korea are skeptical. Majorities of Americans (67%) and South Koreans (60%) say China seeks to replace the United States as the dominant power in the world. Smaller percentages of both publics believe China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region (18% of Americans, 28% Koreans). Japanese are split, with similar proportions believing China seeks to replace the United States as the dominant power globally (43%) or in the Asia-Pacific (40%). Notably, few in any of the countries say Beijing does not intend to replace the United States as the dominant power in either the Asia-Pacific or the world.

² See appendix for full figure.

Views about China's Intentions

Among the following statements, which best represents your view about China's intentions? (%)



US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
 Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
 South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Fewer Consider China a Critical Threat Compared to Global and Domestic Challenges

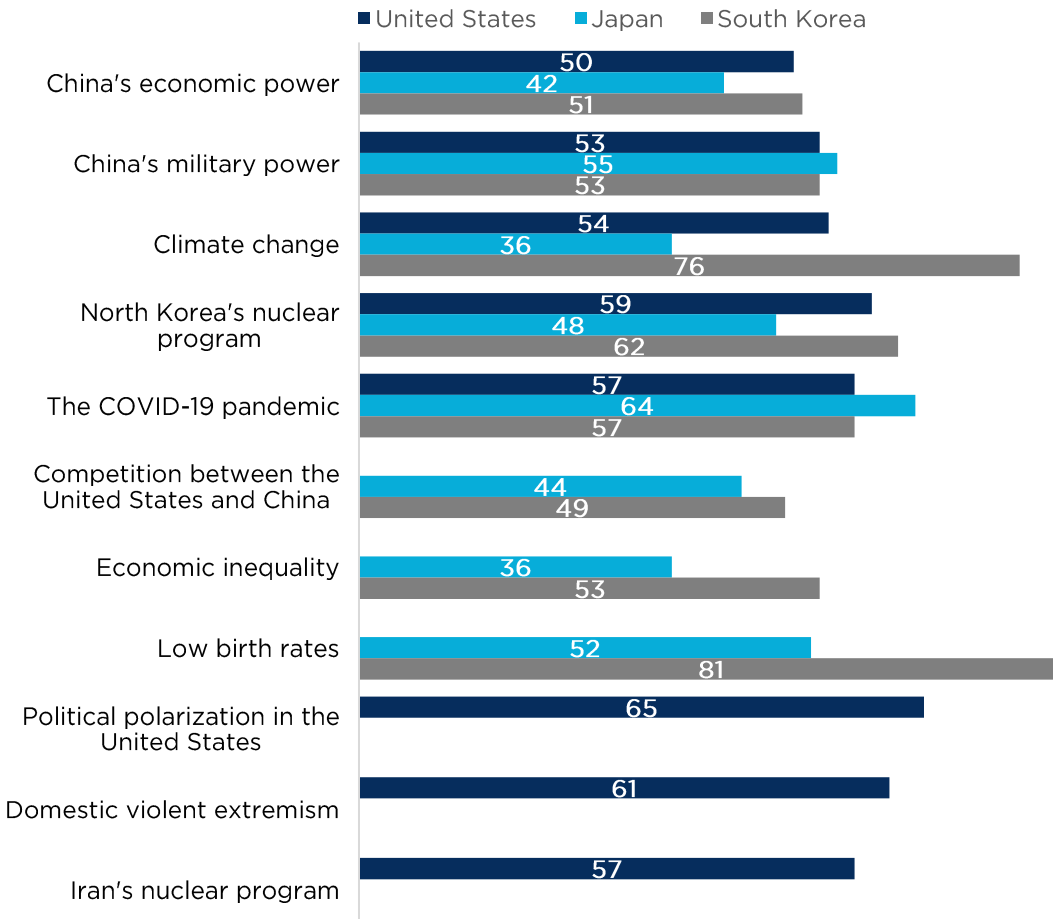
Along with common views of China's intentions, these publics share a common perception of the potential threat posed by China's economic and military power. Slim majorities in the United States (53%), Japan (55%), and South Korea (53%) say China's military power is a critical threat.³ Views are similarly aligned on views of China's economic power as a critical threat—with Japan's public being less convinced (42% critical).

But China's economic and military power is not generally viewed as a top critical threat in any of these countries. Instead, there is more focus on global and economic challenges facing all three countries. For example, in the United States, the top critical threats are political polarization at home (65% critical) and domestic violent extremism (61% critical). In Japan, the COVID-19 pandemic (64% critical) is the top threat, although China's military power is the second-ranked critical threat. And in South Korea, low birth rates (81% critical) and climate change (76% critical) are seen as issues most critical to the vital interests of the country.

³ In the United States, views of China's economic and military power as a critical threat are on the rise. In March 2018, 31 percent said China's economic power was a critical threat and 39 percent said China's military power was a critical threat. Trend data is not available for Japan and South Korea. See appendix for figure. There is also a growing appetite in the United States to try to contain the growth of China's power. In 2021, 51 percent prefer to actively work to limit the growth of China's power, up from just 29 percent in 2006.

Critical Threats to Vital Interests

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests of [the United States / Japan / South Korea] 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. **Critical threat (%)**

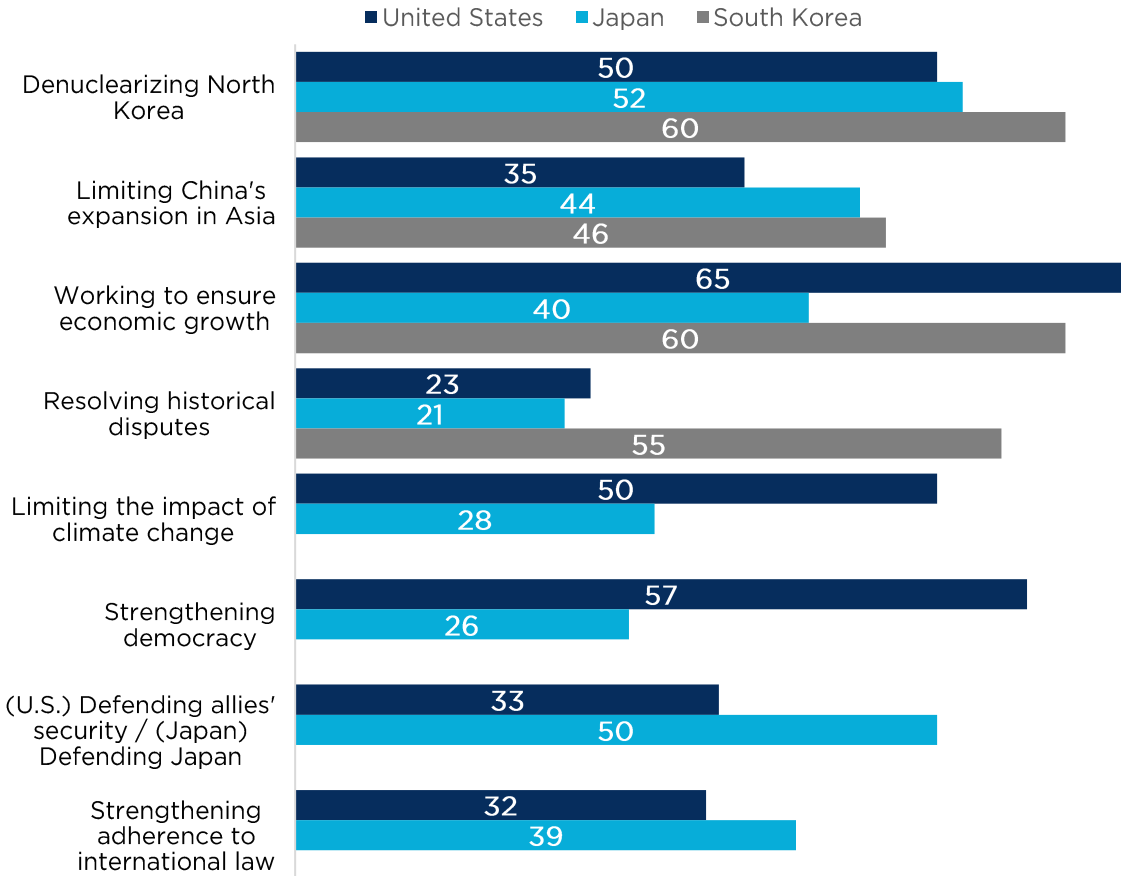


US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
 Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
 South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Coinciding with the midtier threat perception they assign to China, only minorities in all three countries think their respective alliance relationships should focus on limiting China's expansion in Asia. The most common priority for publics in all three countries is denuclearizing North Korea. Working to ensure economic growth is also a priority in the United States and South Korea, but less so in Japan.

Alliance Priorities

Of the following issues, could you tell me if each one should be a top priority, an important but not top priority, or a low priority [for the United States in Asia / for the alliance with the United States]? **Top priority (%)**



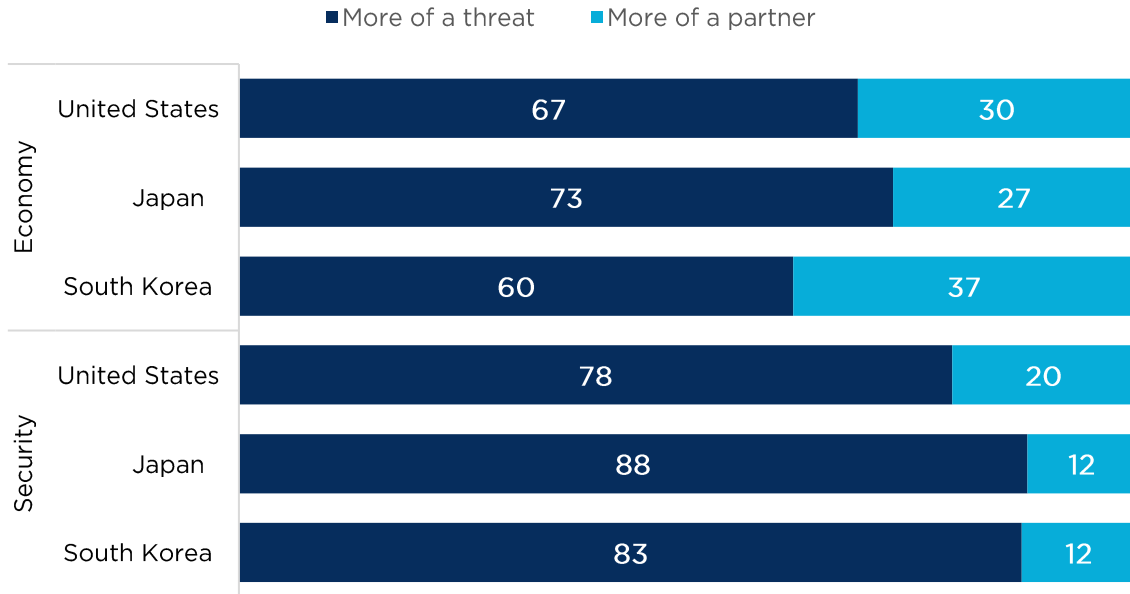
US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
 Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
 South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

But Bilateral Relations with China Are Viewed as Adversarial

Even though China is not viewed as the top critical threat in any of these countries, and there is no shared appetite for limiting China's expansion in Asia, the publics in each country view their respective relations with China as more adversarial than cooperative. Despite the strong economic ties, majorities in Japan (73%), the United States (67%), and South Korea (60%) all see China as more of an economic threat than an economic partner. And even larger shares of the public in all three nations see China as more of a security threat than a security partner.

Economic and Security Views on China

In your view, is China more of an economic partner or more of an economic threat? (%)
In your view, is China more of a security partner or more of a security threat? (%)



US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
 Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
 South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Cooperation and Confrontation

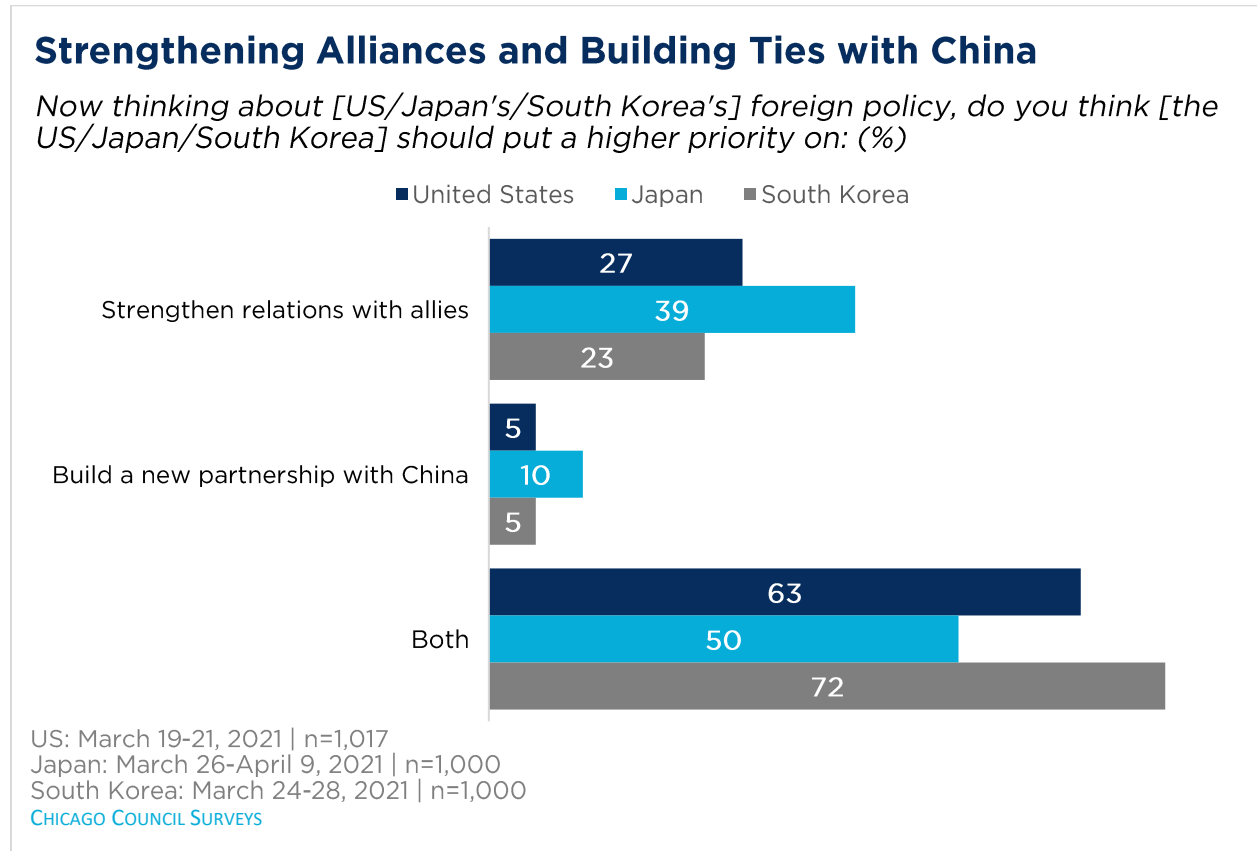
If Given a Choice, Publics Prefer to Solidify Alliances and Cooperate with China

The foreign policy decisions facing the United States, Japan, and South Korea will not force a choice between their respective alliances and relations with China. Instead, there will be a careful balancing act that will see all three countries try to strengthen their alliances and preserve opportunities to cooperate with China.

Solid majorities in the United States (63%) and South Korea (72%) and half in Japan (50%) prefer a policy that would seek to strengthen relationships with traditional allies and at the same time build a new partnership with China.⁴ A sizable percentage

⁴ In the US survey, the response options are “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 traditional allies like South Korea and Japan,” and “Both build strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan and build a new partnership with China.” In the Japan and South Korea survey, the response options are “Building up our strong relations with the United States even if this might diminish our relations with China,” “Building a new partnership with China even if this might diminish our relations with the United States,” and “Both build strong relations with the United States and build a new partnership with China.”

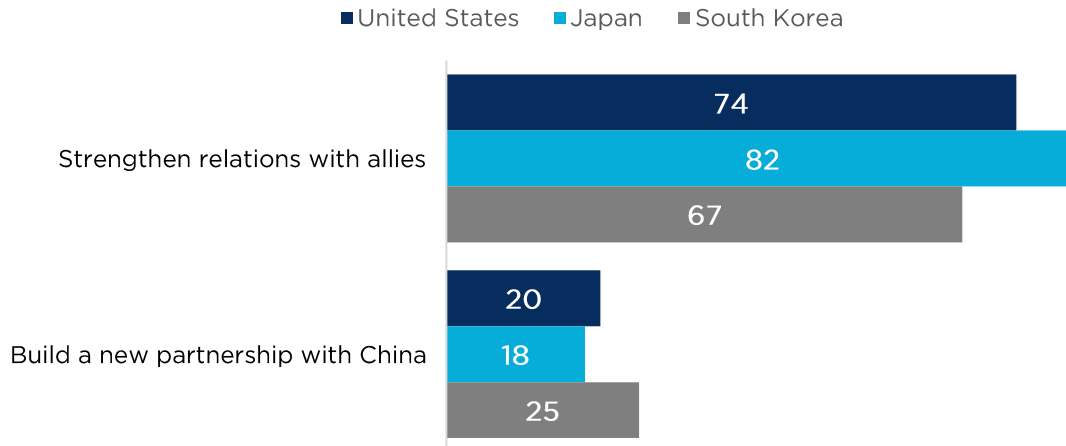
in Japan (39%) and fewer in South Korea (23%) and the United States (27%) would prefer to build up strong relations with the United States even if that might diminish their country's relations with China.



But in all three countries, there remains a strong preference for strengthening traditional alliances if pursuing both outcomes is not an option. When the option to strengthen those alliances and build a new partnership with China is removed, large majorities in the United States (74%), Japan (82%), and South Korea (67%) prefer to strengthen relationships with traditional allies even if it might diminish relations with China.

Strengthening Alliances

Now thinking about [US/Japan's/South Korea's] foreign policy, do you think [the US/Japan/South Korea] should put a higher priority on: (%)



US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
[CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS](#)

Publics Support Carrots and Sticks with China

Despite the growing competition and wariness about China's intentions, working with China across a range of issues will remain a vital part of each country's approach to the region. Cooperating with China on global issues such as climate change and dealing with potential pandemics will be vital. At the same time, each country will face challenges in how to deal with China's territorial encroachment and human rights abuses. And in Japan—and in South Korea, especially—economic considerations will be important in shaping how and when the countries cooperate.

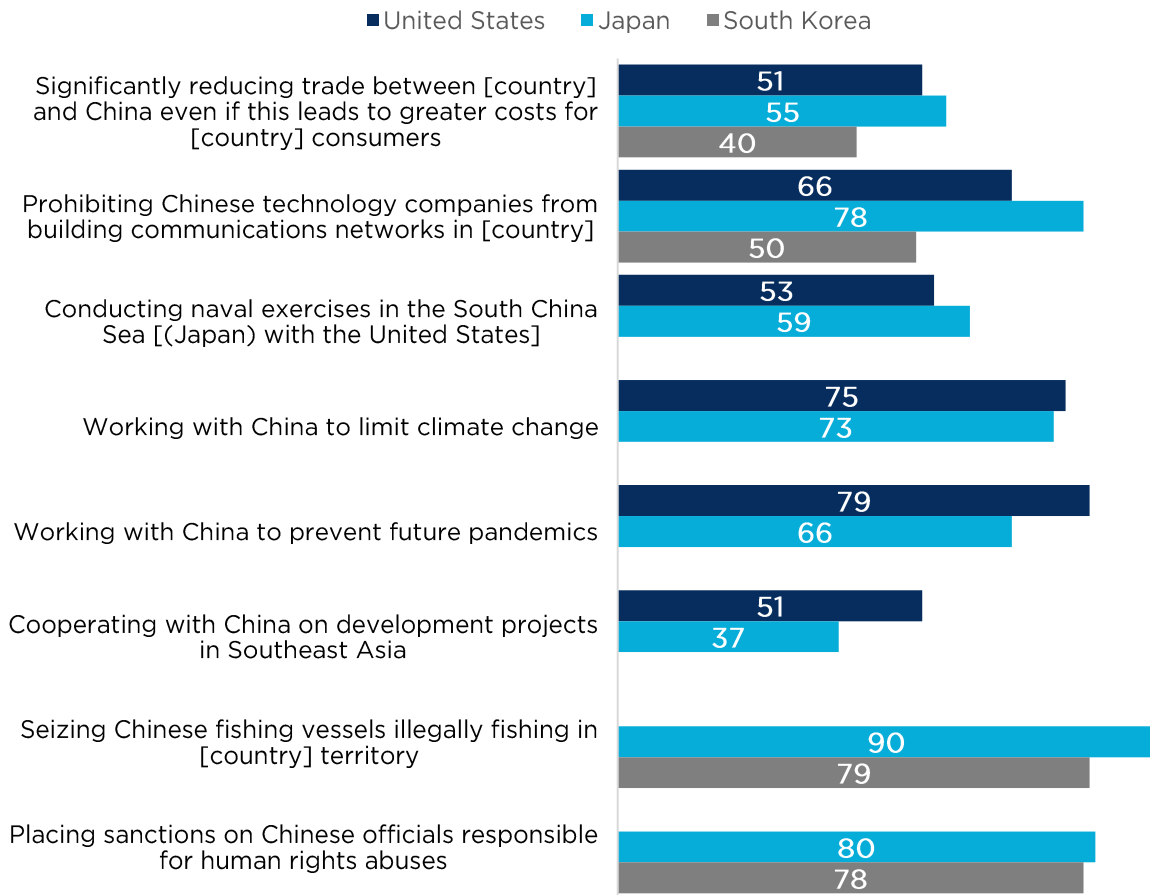
When it comes to climate change, Americans (75%) and Japanese (73%) support working with China to limit it. There was also broad support in the United States (79%) and Japan (66%) for working with China to prevent future pandemics.⁵

But despite the economic importance of China to Japan and South Korea, there is also relatively high support for actions that might antagonize China. First, large majorities in Japan (90%) and South Korea (79%) approve of seizing Chinese vessels illegally fishing in their respective territories. And when it comes to human rights, 80 percent in Japan and 78 percent in South Korea support placing sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses.

⁵ These response options were not asked in South Korea.

Policies towards China

Would you support or oppose the following policies toward China? **Support (%)**



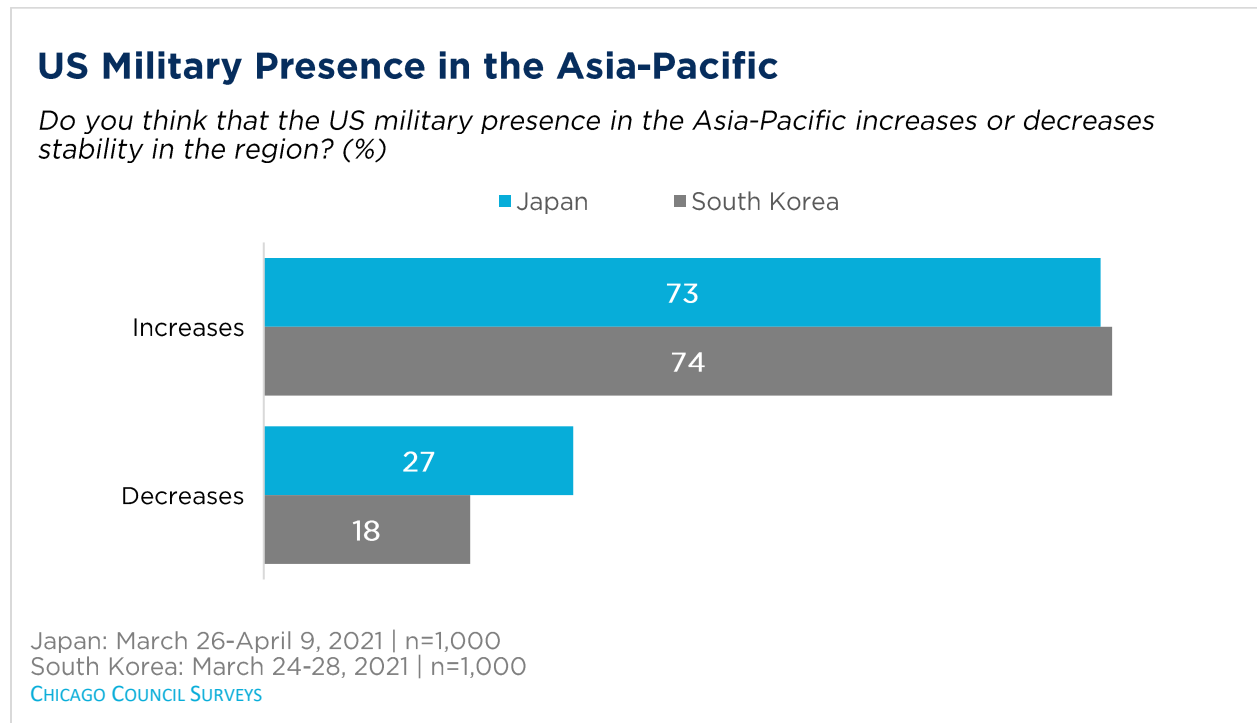
US: March 19-21, 2021 | n=1,017
 Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
 South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
 CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

US Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific

The US military presence in the Asia-Pacific is a core component of the alliances with Japan and South Korea. At times, that presence can attract criticism in both host countries, but military bases are generally supported by both publics. When last asked in South Korea in [June 2020](#), 74 percent of South Koreans stated support for the long-term stationing of US troops in the country. In Japan, there is also majority support—albeit at lower levels than in South Korea—with 57 percent stating support for the long-term stationing of US soldiers in the country.

When asked about the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific more generally, majorities in Japan (82%) and South Korea (83%) say the American presence should either be increased or maintained. In a separate question, greater than 7 in 10 in

Japan (73%) and in South Korea (74%) think the US military presence increases stability in the region.

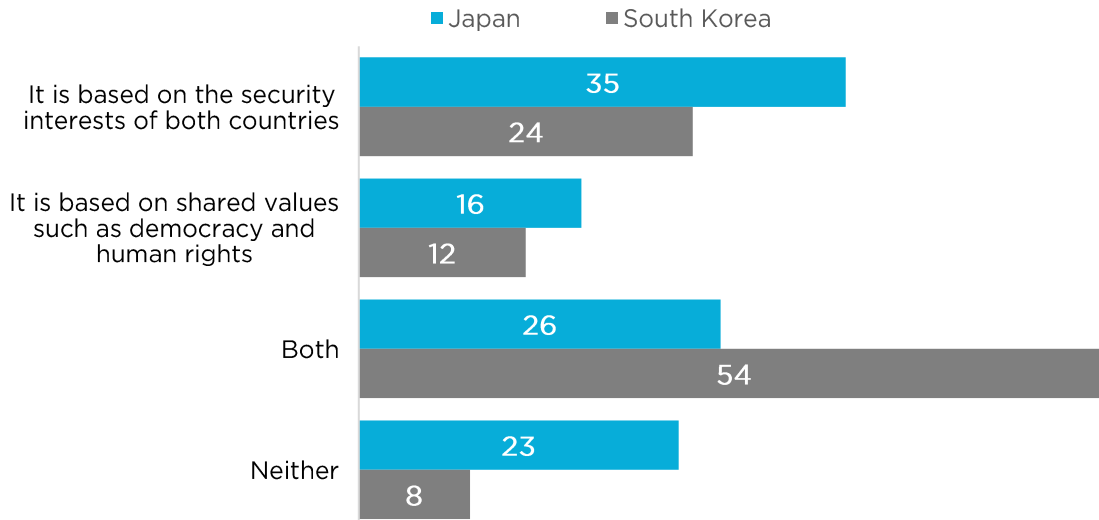


Despite similar views on hosting US bases and the role the US military plays in the region, there are slightly different views in South Korea and Japan in describing their respective alliance with the United States. While these alliances started off as military alliances, primarily focused on security, those relationships have grown over time and are now described as being based on not just security interests but also on shared democratic values.

In South Korea, this expanded view of the alliance seems to have taken hold—a slim majority (54%) say the alliance is based on the security interests of both countries and on shared values such as democracy and human rights. In Japan, that transition is less clear. While a plurality (35%) sees the alliance as being based on security interests, 26 percent say it is based on security interests and shared values. But a similar proportion (23%) say it is neither.

Alliance with the United States

In your opinion, which of the following best describes the alliance with the United States? (%)



Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

BOX

Japan-South Korea Mutual Perceptions

Despite Japan and South Korea's respective alliances with the United States, as well as their shared commitment to democratic principles, tensions between the two countries have run high over the past four years. The two countries continue to disagree over territorial issues and on how to reconcile their historical disagreements. There were opportunities for potential breakthroughs, but each was smothered before any progress could be made.

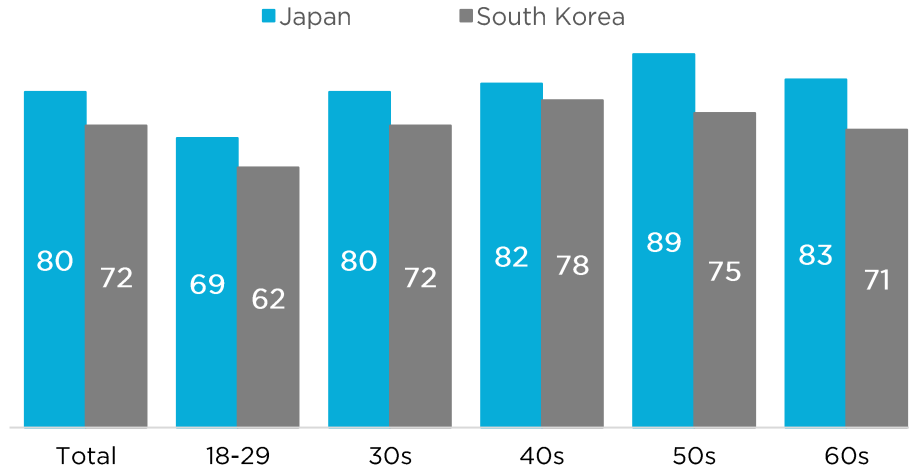
The enmity between them shows up in the data. In Japan, 8 in 10 (80%) say the relationship with South Korea is mostly a rivalry. Among South Koreans, 72 percent say the same about their relationship with Japan.

And these attitudes are not the remnants of bygone history. They have been passed on to younger generations in both countries. In South Korea, views of Japan as a rival are largely consistent—more than 60 percent of all age groups agree. Among those 30 and older, more than 71 percent say Japan is a rival, while 62 percent of those 18 to 29 agree.

In Japan, the results are similar. More than 68 percent of all age cohorts see South Korea as a rival. For those 30 and older, more than 80 percent say South Korea is a rival, while 69 percent of those 18 to 29 agree.

Japan-South Korea Mutual Perceptions

At present, are the following countries mostly rivals or mostly partners? (Japan and South Korea) **Mostly rivals (%)**

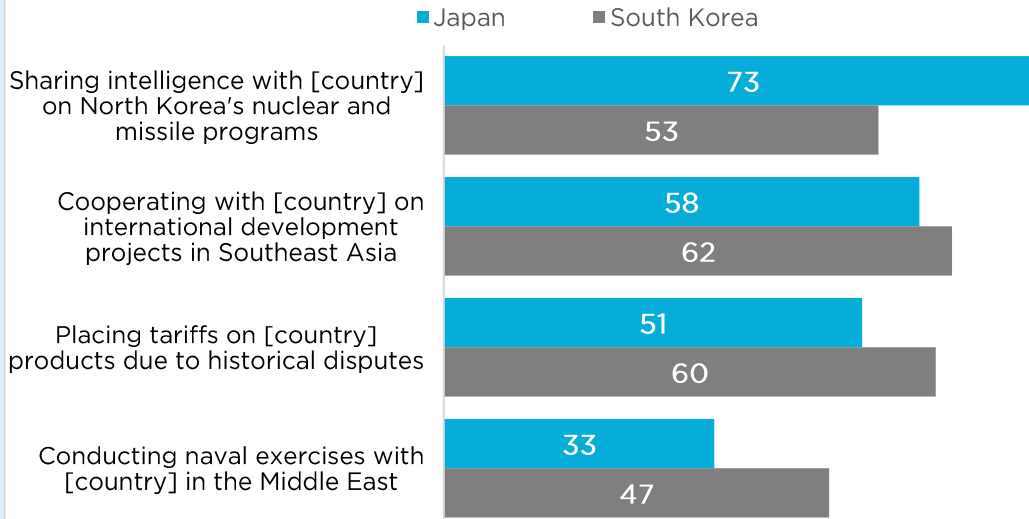


Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

While the potential for cooperation between the two countries remains limited, there are two key areas where majorities in both countries may support working together. The first is in sharing intelligence on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Seven in 10 (73%) in Japan and 53 percent in South Korea say they support the two countries working together on this issue. The second is in cooperating on international development projects in Southeast Asia. Here, 62 percent in South Korea and 58 percent in Japan support working together. This is potentially fruitful ground, given the growing importance of the region to the foreign policy of both countries, as well as the role it will play in US-China relations.

Japan and South Korea Collaboration

Would you support or oppose the following policies? **Support (%)**



Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Historical disputes lie at the center of South Korea-Japan tensions, and progress on resolving those issues has been sporadic. In the past, the United States worked behind the scenes to pressure both sides to make progress in repairing the relationship. But the publics in Japan and South Korea disagree on how to prioritize this issue within the context of their respective alliances with the United States. For South Koreans, 55 percent say resolving these disputes should be a top priority for South Korea's alliance with the United States. Only working to ensure economic growth and denuclearizing North Korea receive higher support. In Japan, just 21 percent say that resolving historical disputes should be a top priority, and 23 percent in the United States agree.

Conclusion

Coordination between the United States, Japan, and Korea will remain a core component of managing relations with China for each country. The foundation for that coordination is reflected in public attitudes in each country. All three publics share similar views of China and its intentions. And people in each country seemingly understand the need to cooperate with China when possible but also stand ready to confront China when necessary. However, internal tensions will remain a challenge as Japan-South Korea mutual perceptions show little sign of improvement. But more importantly, there is broad agreement among both publics that the US presence in the region is a stabilizing force and that relations with the United States should remain a point of focus even if it means diminishing relations with China.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan organization that provides insight on critical global issues, advances policy solutions, and fosters dialogue about what is happening in the world and why it matters to people in Chicago, the United States, and around the globe. As the premier, nonpartisan global affairs organization in America's heartland, we believe an informed, engaged public with access to fact-based and balanced views on global issues helps to ensure effective US engagement and supports a more inclusive, equitable, and secure world.

Methodology

United States

These are results of a survey conducted March 19–21, 2021, by Ipsos 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. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups.

Japan

These are results of a survey conducted by Ipsos on its Global Advisor online platform. Ipsos interviewed 1,000 adults aged 16 to 74 in Japan between March 26 and April 9, 2021. The sample in Japan can be taken as representative of its general adult population under age 75. The data is weighted so that the country's sample composition best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the most recent census data. Where results do not sum to 100, or the "difference" appears to be +/-1 more/less than the actual, this may be due to rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of "don't know" or not stated responses. The precision of Ipsos online polls is calculated using a credibility interval with a poll of 1,000 accurate to +/- 3.5 percentage points and of 500 accurate to +/- 5.0 percentage points.

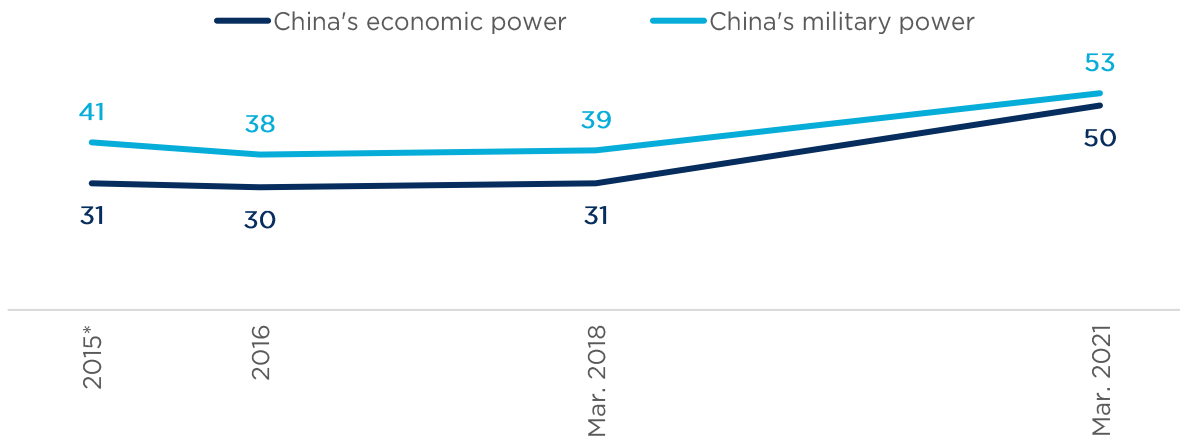
South Korea

The survey was conducted March 24–28, 2021, in South Korea by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,000 adults aged 18 and older. The sample was constructed using RDD for mobile and landline phones, and the margin of error is +/-3.1% at the 95 percent confidence interval. Among that sample, 797 respondents took the survey via mobile telephone and 203 took the survey via landline. The data is weighted so that the country's sample composition best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the February 2021 Population Registration maintained by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

Appendix

American Views of Chinese Power as a Threat

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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. **Critical threat (%)**

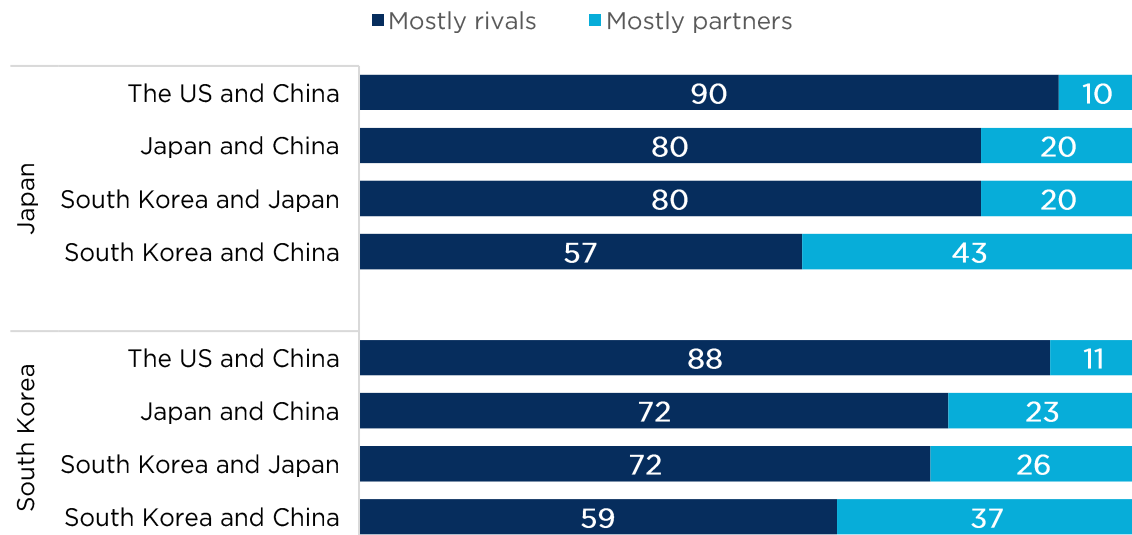


March 19-21, 2021 | n = 1,017
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

*In 2015, the items were prefaced by "The development of..."

Views on Rivals and Partners in Asia

At present, are the following countries mostly rivals or mostly partners? (%)



Japan: March 26-April 9, 2021 | n=1,000
South Korea: March 24-28, 2021 | n=1,000
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS