

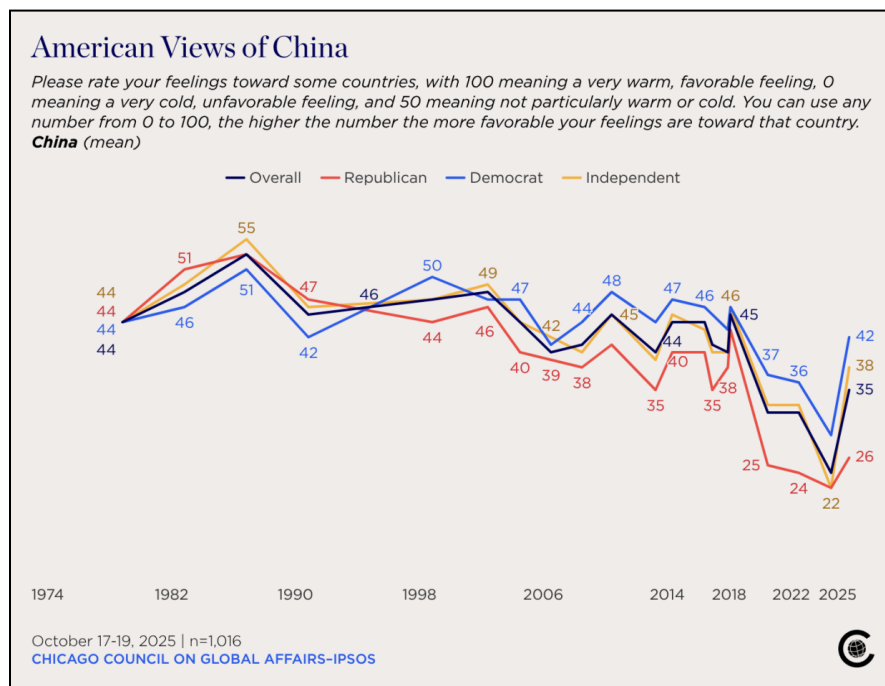
Polling on Americans' Views of US-China Relations

Prepared by ReThink Media, June 2026

Key Findings

- **Americans' views of China have begun to improve after years of decline.** After reaching historic lows in 2024, multiple polls show an easing of unfavorable attitudes in 2025–2026, including declines in “very unfavorable” views and a shift away from seeing China primarily as an “enemy.”
- Although most Americans continue to describe China as a “threat,” the perceived **intensity of the “threat” is moderate and relatively low-salience.** This pattern may reflect two complementary dynamics: long-term anxiety about America’s future role in the world, and the circulation of alarmist narratives by political elites, which Americans may absorb abstractly but rarely see reflected in their daily lives.
- **Attitudes towards China tend to fall along partisan and generational lines.** Polling over the past few years shows that Republicans are less likely to believe the US is losing global power and influence, and more likely to view China as a threat that needs to be addressed. By contrast, Democrats, Independents, and younger Americans are more inclined to accept — or even welcome — a shifting global balance of power. Following the Trump-Xi summit, however, partisan divides have narrowed.
- These shifts in Americans’ attitudes coincide with **increasingly positive views of China’s global leadership among populations worldwide.** Gallup data shows that global approval of China’s leadership has steadily risen over the past 4 years, surpassing that of the US in 2025. na
- On the whole, **support for cooperation with China is growing.** Alongside publics in traditional US allies like Germany and Canada, a majority of Americans favor closer engagement with China, particularly when tied to outcomes like economic stability, nuclear arms control, or green energy development. Growing recognition of China’s technological and clean energy leadership is correlated with increased support for cooperation.

Since 2024, Americans' attitudes towards China have begun to improve



After years of increasingly negative sentiment toward China, Americans' views are beginning to soften, with multiple polls showing a recent easing of unfavorable attitudes, which peaked during the height of Biden's "strategic competition" policies.

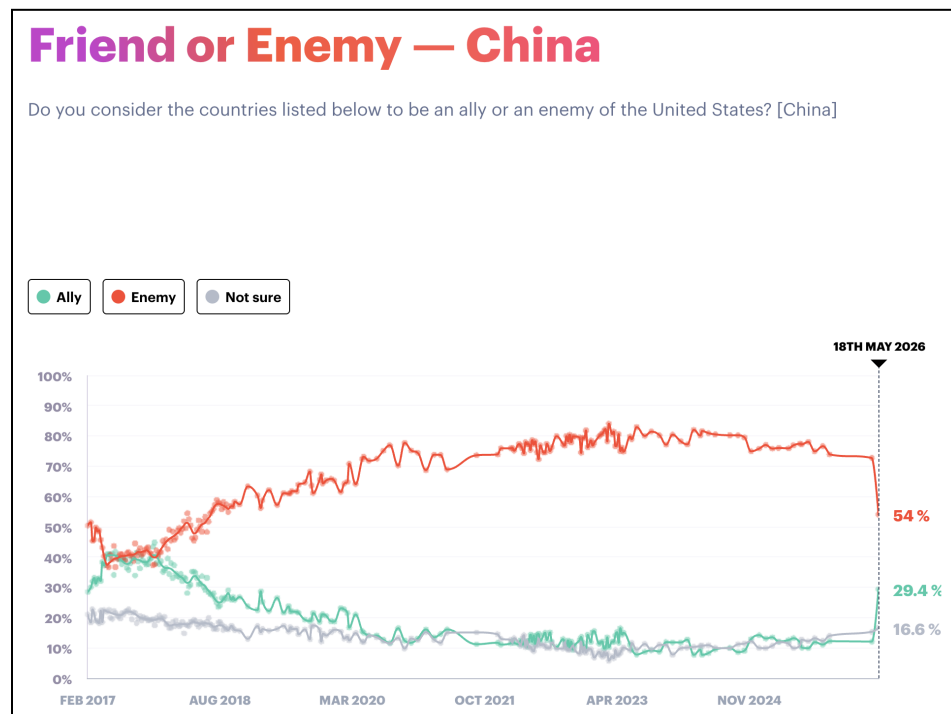
According to the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs Survey \(CCS\)](#), which measures favorability on a 100-point scale (with zero the most negative and 100 the most positive), Americans consistently rated China in the mid-40s throughout the early 2010s, reflecting broadly stable and only mildly negative views. After 2016, China's favorability began to decline – only marginally, at first, and then more sharply between 2018 and 2020, as the first Trump administration committed to a "great power competition" against China and escalated alarmist discourses on trade imbalances, economic competition, security threats, human rights abuses, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden administration inherited and intensified "great power competition" against China and by 2024, China's favorability had dropped another 8 points to 24 — a record low in the nearly 50-year history of the poll.

Yet in 2025, China's favorability [increased by 11 points](#), signaling a softening of negative attitudes among Americans. [Analysts](#) have pointed to a confluence of factors, including fading hostilities tied to the COVID-19 pandemic; backlash against trade war tariffs; a shifting foreign policy focus toward the Americas and the Middle East; growing disillusionment with US leadership abroad and political dysfunction at home; and increasing familiarity with and acceptance of Chinese technologies, products, cultural influences, and the reality of Chinese global power, especially among younger generations.

Other polls reflect this trend towards improved public attitudes: from 2024 to 2026, [Pew Research Center data](#) shows a 14-point drop in the share of Americans with a "very unfavorable" view of China (43% to 29%), and the Harvard CAPS/Harris Poll similarly shows unfavorable views falling from [67% in March 2024](#) to [51% in May 2026](#).

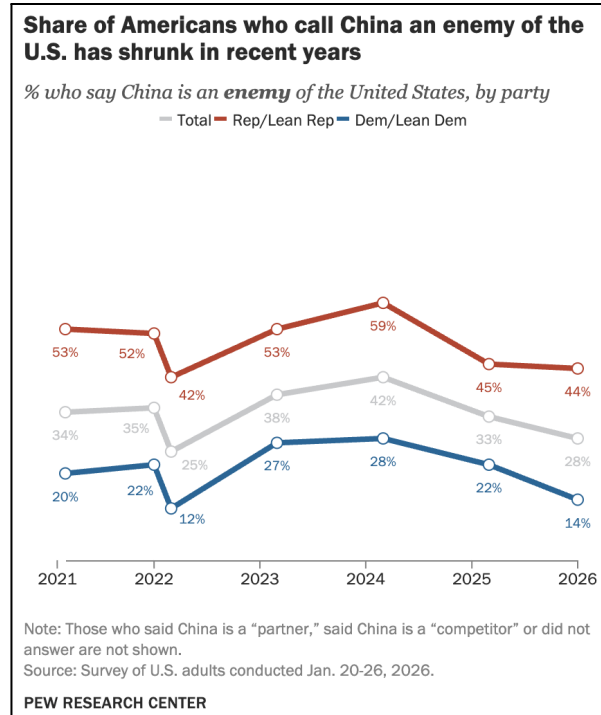
Fewer Americans Think of China as “Enemy” than in Previous Years

[Polls by YouGov](#) tracking whether Americans see China as an “ally” or “enemy” broadly mirrors these trends. The share describing China as an “enemy” or “unfriendly” rose steadily from April 2017 (~40%) through April 2023 (~81%) before beginning to ease in late 2024 and falling further by May 2026 (~54%). In the most recent surveys, more Americans describe China as “unfriendly” rather than as an “enemy”: [37% vs. 34% in July 2025](#); [37% vs. 32% in October 2025](#); and [33% vs. 21% in May 2026](#). This suggests a more nuanced set of attitudes toward China that dichotomous “ally/enemy” framings fail to capture.



In another variation of this question, [Pew Research Center](#) annually asks respondents if they see China as an “enemy,” “competitor,” or “partner.” The majority of respondents consistently describe China as “competitor,” with the past two years showing a 14 point decline in those who call China an “enemy” (28% in 2026 vs. 42% in 2024). Although relatively few see China as a “partner,” this perception has increased modestly since 2024 (from 6% to 10%). More recent [2026 NPR/Ipsos/Chicago Council polling](#) similarly found that Americans are more likely to describe China as a “rival” (37%) than an “adversary” (21%), suggesting that competitive framings remain more prominent than overtly hostile ones.

Historically, partisan differences have been pronounced. [January 2026 polling by Pew](#) shows that Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents were roughly three times as likely as Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents to view China as an “enemy,” and the [March 2026 NPR/Ipsos/Chicago poll](#) showed a similar split. **But even among Republicans, views have improved over the past two years**, with the share describing China as an “enemy” falling 14 points since 2024 in Pew’s polls.



More recent polling shows the partisan gap has narrowed further since the May, 2026

Trump-Xi summit: according to a [May 2026 YouGov survey](#), only 22% of Republicans now consider China to be an “enemy,” compared with 16% of Democrats. Generational divides might be influencing this shift: younger Republicans are far less likely than their elders to view China as an “enemy” (32% vs. 55%) and are just as inclined as older Democrats to view China as a partner (10% vs. 9%).

Many Americans still view China as a threat—but with caveats

Even as views of China as an *enemy* have generally declined, **many Americans nonetheless see China as the country that poses the greatest threat to the US.** For instance, in an open-ended question posed by [Pew in its Spring 2025 survey](#), a plurality of respondents (42%) named China as the top threat to the US — well ahead of countries like Russia (25%), Iran (2%), and North Korea (1%). Perceptions of China as more threatening than Russia are particularly notable given that Russia is seen [less favorably overall](#) and is [more likely to be perceived as an “enemy”](#) of the US.

It is likely that **Americans’ understandings of what constitutes a threat differ from what constitutes an enemy.** For some, an “enemy” might imply an active adversary intent on doing material harm, particularly via militarized means, while a “threat” might be less clearly defined, reflecting complex, albeit relatively low salience, anxieties regarding shifts in relative global power, influence, or reputational standing more than direct hostility. In this sense, the “threat” of China may be as much about perception of US decline in a zero-sum framework as it is about China’s actions per se.

“Threat” of China is moderate and low-salience

While most Americans continue to view China as some form of threat, polling by [The Institute for Global Affairs \(IGA\)](#) and [The Chicago Council](#) reveals that **Americans tend to view China’s threat as moderate rather than severe**, with most Democrats and Independents [not ranking it as a top](#)

[concern](#) relative to domestic issues. Along these lines, pluralities in April 2025 Economist/YouGov polls describe China's military, economic, and technological potential as only "[somewhat serious](#)" threats. Immediate concern is highest in the technological domains, but even there, the share of respondents describing the threat as "urgent" has fallen over the past two years ([33% in April 2025](#), compared with [38% in March 2024](#) and [39% in June 2023](#)). The [2025 IGA report](#) found that **only 3% of Americans worry about competition with China in their daily lives**, underscoring that for most Americans, the "threat" of China is a low salience issue.

The apparent contradiction between Americans' widespread perception of the "China threat" and the low salience they attach to it may have two explanations. On one hand, the lack of urgent concern hints at more future-oriented interpretations of the "threat" China poses — **one less about present-day hostilities than about anxieties of perceived trajectories of global power**, operating on more distant horizons. Late 2025 polling by [NPR/Ipsos](#) shows that the majority of Americans believe China is gaining influence (57%) on the world stage, while a near equal share believes the US is losing influence (50%), with Democrats especially inclined to hold the latter view (72%). Research from the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace \(Carnegie\) \(Nov. 24-Dec. 1, 2025\)](#) similarly found that while a plurality view China's global power as the same as that of the US (45%), a roughly equal share expect it to surpass the US within the next five years (47%).

On the other hand, the disconnect between the public's perception of China as a threat and relatively low felt salience of the issue may be explained by **years of threat inflation by policy and media elites**. The hawkish voices that dominate public conversations on China often portray the country not merely as a *future* challenge to US interests, but as an *immediate* danger that is already infiltrating, impoverishing, and threatening the US and its allies. The prevalence of such alarmist rhetoric may lead many Americans to internalize the threat framing and develop broadly negative views of China. Yet for most people, such concerns remain largely abstract. Because most Americans do not experience or have clear evidence of China's nefarious influence or material harm to their daily lives, they have little reason to devote sustained attention or concern to the "China threat." The result is a public that may readily endorse threat-based framings when asked, while rarely treating China as a pressing concern day-to-day.

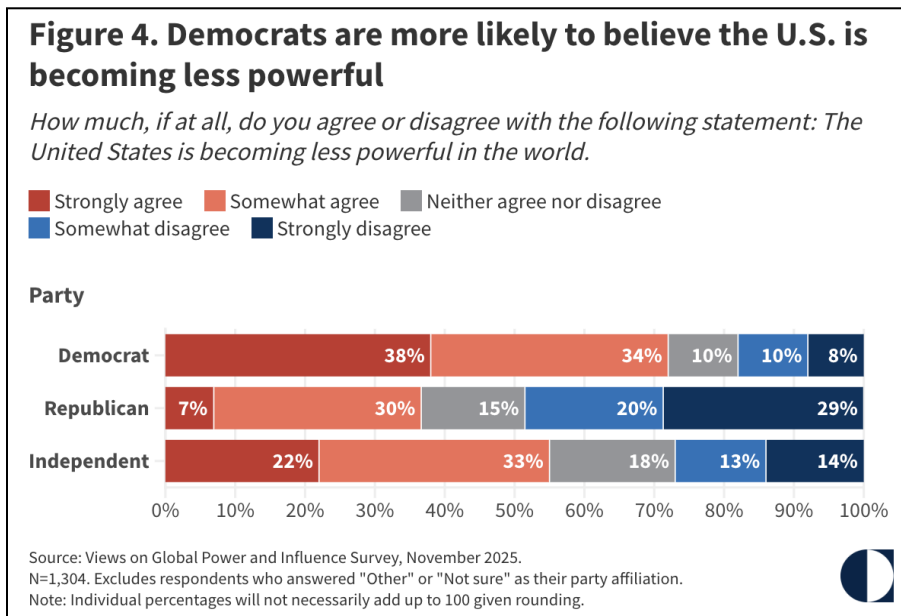
For some, the "threat" of China might be rooted in their assumptions that its rise will fundamentally alter the international balance of power at America's expense. When given a set of statements to describe their views of China, [IGA research \(Oct. 6-14, 2025\)](#) found twice as many respondents believe China seeks to replace (22%), rather than participate in (10%), the current international order. Relatedly, 78% of Americans in a [2026 NPR/Ipsos/Chicago Council survey](#) said they believe China wants to be "the dominant leader" in the world.

Yet the relatively low salience of the China threat overall suggests a degree of ambivalence and contradiction in these views: although many Americans express concern about China's rise in the abstract, relatively few appear to experience that concern as personally consequential. This tension indicates that **public attitudes toward China may be less fully formed than top-line metrics suggest**, perhaps reflecting broader anxieties about American decline and an uncertain future more than fixed expectations that China's rise will necessarily produce direct negative consequences for Americans.

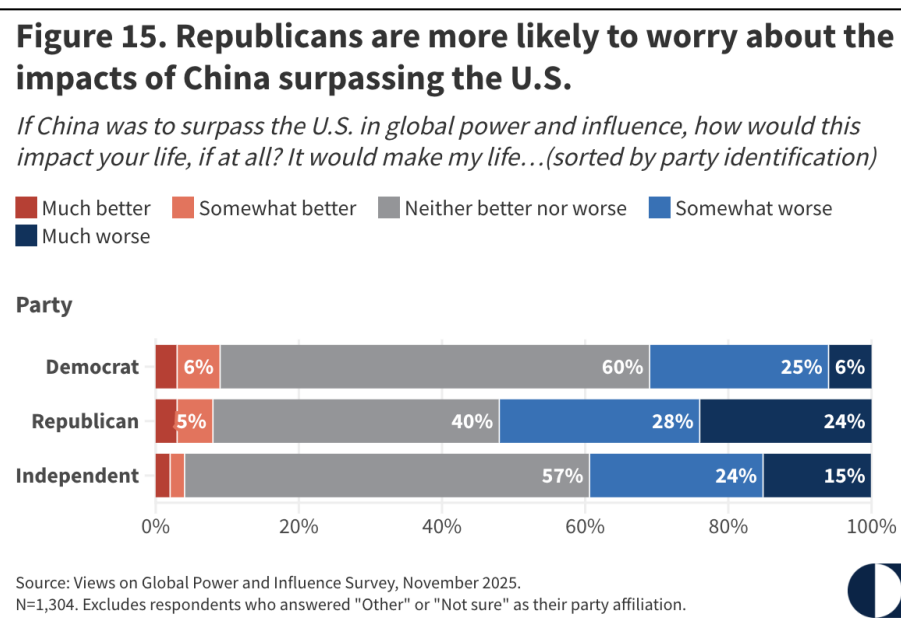
Views of China's rise vary along partisan and generational fault lines

Attention to partisan divisions reveals a significant asymmetry on this point: **Republicans are both more skeptical that the United States is in decline and are more alarmed by the prospect of China's ascent**. According to Carnegie's 2025 survey, while majorities of Democrats and

Independents believe that the US is becoming “less powerful in the world” and is but one of several powerful nations, [Republicans are more likely to reject](#) these views.

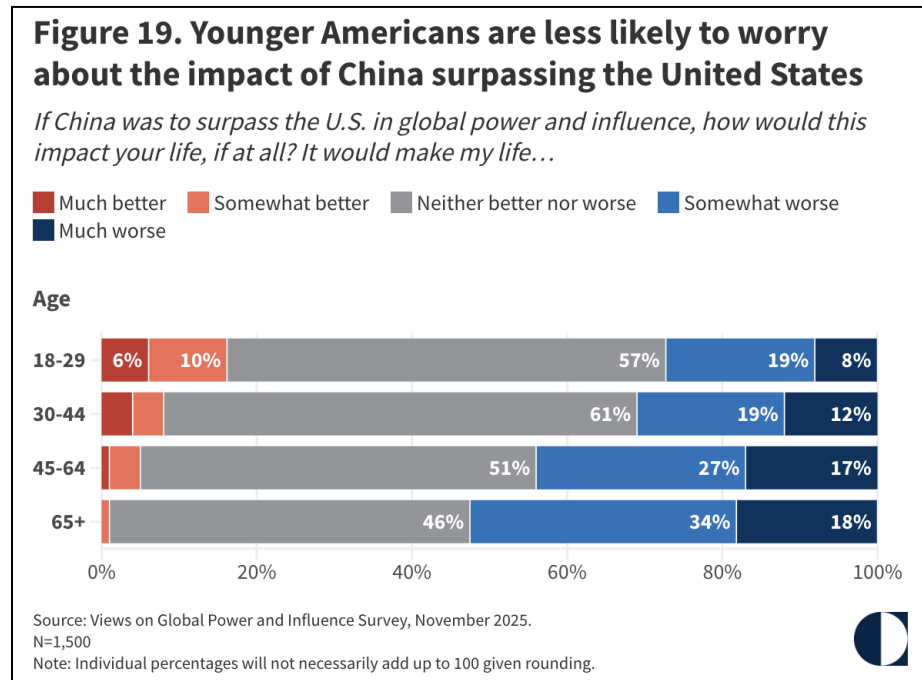


Yet Republicans’ skepticism about US decline coexists with heightened concern about China’s rise. The [2025 Chicago Council Survey](#) shows that a majority of Republicans (66%) describe the development of China as a world power as a threat to US interests, compared to only 44% of Democrats and Independents. According to [Carnegie’s 2025 report](#), they are also more inclined to view China “surpassing” the US as having a negative impact on their lives.



On the other hand, **Democrats, Independents, and younger Americans tend to recognize the reality of China’s rise without interpreting it as a severe threat.** Most in these groups believe that “if China was to surpass the US in global power and influence,” [their lives would be largely](#)

[unaffected](#). Some even see potential benefits in China's ascendance: according to [April 2025 polling by The Economist/YouGov](#), many Democrats view US-China's trade relationship as more as an *opportunity* than a *threat*, and the [Carnegie survey](#) shows that a small but notable share of Gen Z adults (ages 18-29) believe China surpassing the US could have positive impacts on their lives.



[May 2026 Economist/YouGov polling](#) suggests that adults under 30 often hold less rigid views about China than older generations. They are less likely to describe the Chinese government as purely “authoritarian” or the Chinese economy as purely “communist.” **Rather than fitting China into familiar ideological categories, younger Americans appear more likely to express uncertainty or see China as occupying a more ambiguous position.** This tendency extends to their broader comparisons of the United States and China. While pluralities of Gen Z adults continue to rate the United States more favorably on questions of governance, quality of life, and desirability as a place to live, those margins are considerably narrower than among older adults. Younger Americans are more likely to say that China and the United States are “about the same” on these measures, and somewhat more willing to view China favorably.

Generational divides in views of China may be shaped in part by differences in media exposure and information environments. US adults under 30 are less likely than their older counterparts to follow the news [closely](#) or to [intentionally](#) seek it out. Instead, younger Americans are more likely to learn about world events and politics [passively](#), often by scrolling on social media platforms like TikTok, where they are more likely to [encounter current events](#) in the form of funny posts (84%) or other users’ commentary (80%), rather than legacy news articles (57%). Some [analysts](#) argue that exchanges on social media are providing young Americans alternative and more positive windows into everyday life in China — including its cultural aesthetics, public infrastructure, green energy and technological developments — offering multidimensional images of the country that [complicate or contest](#) threat-based narratives prevalent in mainstream legacy news.

Young Americans are also disillusioned about the state of American politics and the functioning of US institutions. The [2026 Harvard Youth poll](#) found that only 13% of Americans under 30 are optimistic about the direction of the country, while a majority believe the government does not represent the country they love and half believe they have no meaningful say in what the government does. In the [Fall 2025 version of the poll](#), nearly two-thirds reported they believe democracy in the US is either in trouble (45%) or already failed (19%). In this context, more favorable views of China may reflect broader frustration with domestic conditions and declining attachment to traditional narratives of American exceptionalism.

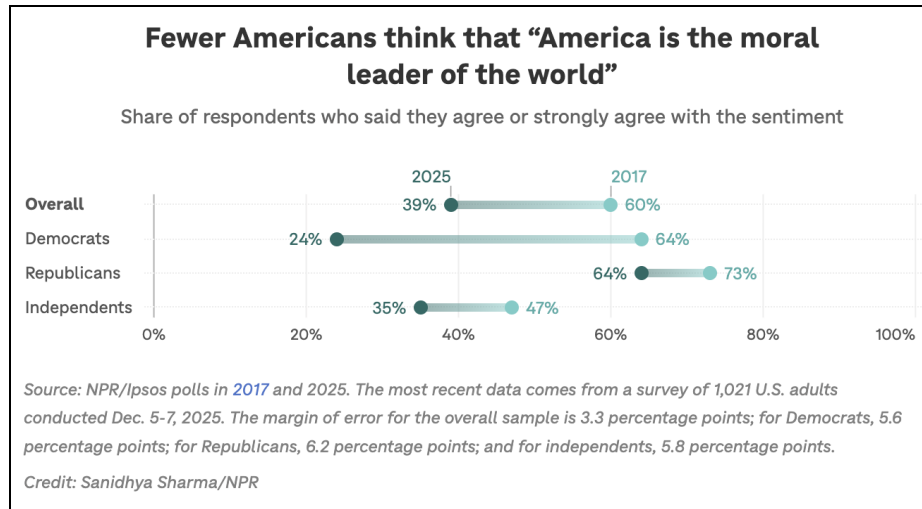
Growing share of Americans are ambivalent about US hegemony

Younger generations' relative indifference regarding China's rise may relate to their views about US hegemony more generally. According to the [2025 Carnegie survey](#), only 38% of adults under 45 think of US global power and influence as "very important," compared with 53%-60% of adults over 45. More recent polling by [Gallup](#) shows that Gen Z adults, in particular, are less interested in the US taking "the leading role" in global affairs. **Younger Americans are also more inclined to believe the US is currently operating in a multipolar world**, and one in four Gen Z adults believe China already [surpasses](#) the US in power and influence. Having grown up in a context in which multipolarity is assumed may make them less inclined to view China as a threat.

Attitudes toward Taiwan, the most dangerous potential flashpoint in the US-China relationship, reflect this broader ambivalence regarding the US global role. In its December 2025 survey, [NPR/Ipsos](#) found widespread uncertainty about the extent to which the US has a responsibility to defend Taiwan against a potential Chinese invasion, with a plurality (41%) saying they are unsure how the US should be involved (see also [CCS, Aug. 22-24, 2025](#)).

[YouGov's May 18-22, 2026](#) polling suggests this ambivalence persists even after the Trump-Xi summit. **Americans are nearly evenly divided between prioritizing good relations with China (36%) and preventing a takeover of Taiwan (34%)**. The divide is particularly stark by age: adults under 30 favor maintaining good relations by more than two-to-one (45% vs. 21%), while a majority of adults over 65 prioritize defending Taiwan (51% vs. 31%). In the case of hypothetical armed conflict, a majority of Americans (54%) said they "do not know enough about the topic to say" whether the United States should or should not use military force to help protect Taiwan.

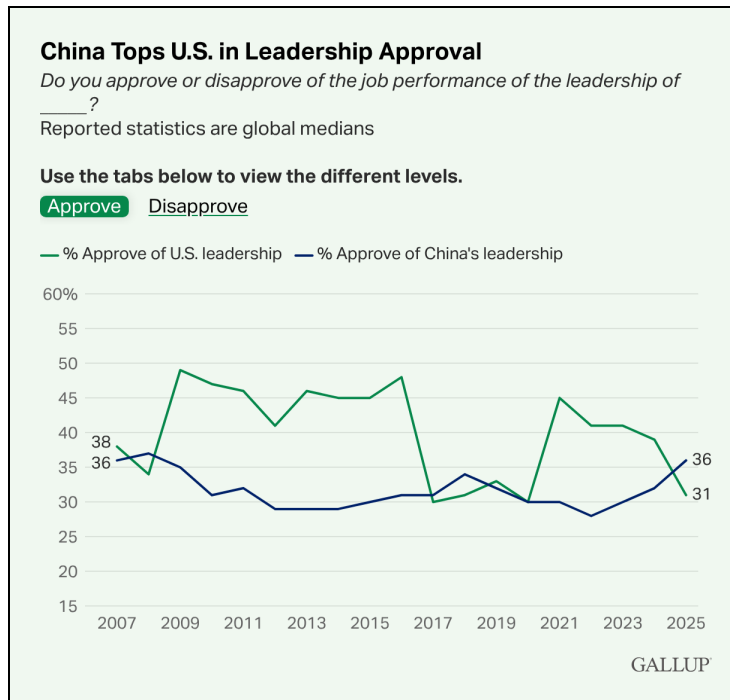
Ambivalence towards US intervention is likely linked to Americans' interest in preserving good relations with China, but it may also be rooted in **widespread disillusionment with US global leadership and moral authority**. December [2025 NPR/Ipsos](#) polling indicates that the majority of Americans no longer believe that America is the "moral leader of the world," with the strongest shift in views since 2017 among Democrats (60% to 39%) and Independents (47% to 35%).



According to [Gallup polling \(Feb. 2-16, 2026\)](#), majorities of both groups also agree that the US is seen “unfavorably” in other countries. These perceptions align with worldwide trends showing a [sustained decline](#) in approval of US global leadership from 2021 to 2025. Americans’ increased awareness of these trends may partially explain why some feel less invested in preserving US dominance.

Globally, China is increasingly seen in more positive light than US

As in the United States, perceptions of China are improving worldwide. [Gallup](#) research shows that from 2022 to 2025, approval of China’s global leadership rose 11 points, surpassing that of the US in the past year (36% vs. 31%). Over the same period, disapproval of US global leadership rose to a [record-high of 48%](#), with sharp declines in approval among publics in [traditional ally countries](#) like Germany (-39), Canada (-22), and the UK (-16) between 2024 and 2025. These same countries also showed modest but notable increases in positive views of China’s leadership: Germany (+1), Canada (+8), and the UK (+9).



[February 2026 polling by POLITICO](#) shows that publics in Germany and Canada are now more likely to want closer relations with China and more distant relations with the US, with majorities in both countries agreeing that such a move is necessary because the US is now “harder to depend on.” While there is some evidence in the POLITICO poll suggesting that the shift towards China is motivated by Trump’s policies, there is also a strong belief among the majority in Germany (51%) and pluralities in Canada (49%), France (48%), and the UK (45%) that China, rather than the US, will be the dominant global power in 10 years.

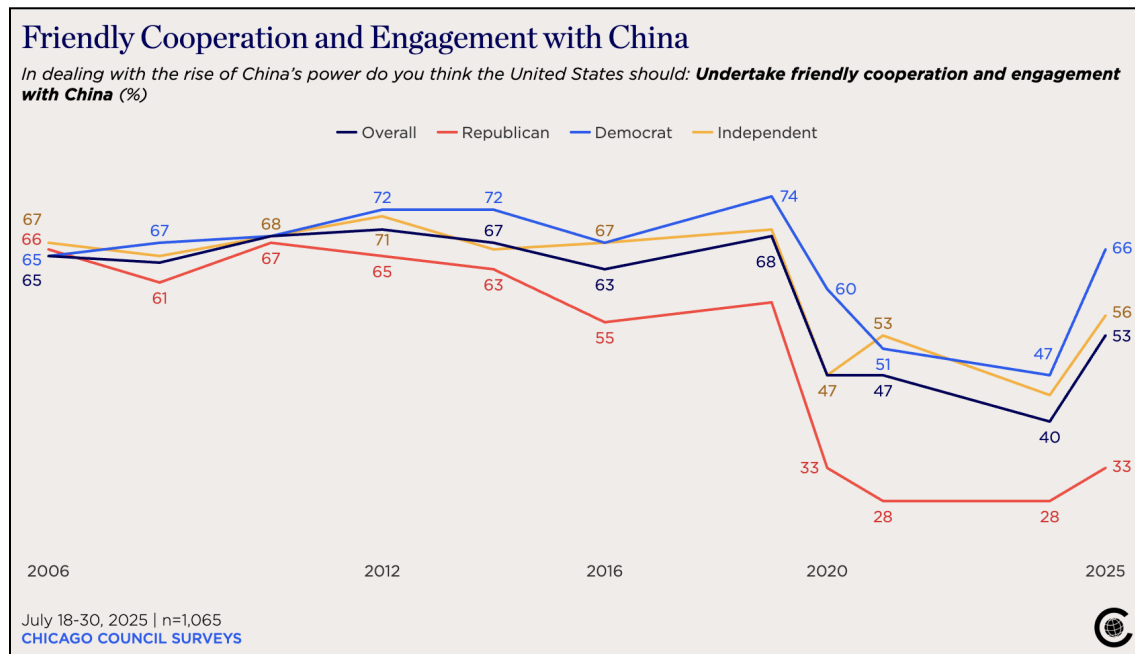
Support is growing for a closer US-China relationship

As views on China soften and skepticism of US dominance increases — both abroad and at home — more Americans are expressing a desire for more cooperative engagement with China. Economist/YouGov polling shows a **growing plurality favoring closer, rather than more distant, relations between the two countries**, with Republicans showing a steep jump in interest from [2024](#) to [2026](#). Although the share of Democrats calling for closer relations seems to have fallen since 2025, this coincides with increased calls to maintain the current relationship (23%), rather than seeking greater distance (16%).

“Do you think the United States should seek a closer or more distant relationship with China?” % Closer Relationship				
	Overall	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
May 2026	35%	34%	35%	35%
April 2025	36%	44%	38%	28%
March 2024	30%	38%	33%	18%

<i>"Do you think the United States should seek a closer or more distant relationship with China?"</i> <i>% Closer Relationship</i>				
March 2023	29%	35%	28%	25%

Along similar lines, when asked about the preferred nature of US-China engagement, most Americans favor cooperation. In July 2025, the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) found that 53% of respondents believe the US should pursue friendly engagement with China, up from 40% in 2024. However, partisan divides remain significant: 66% of Democrats and 56% of Independents favor this approach to China, while only 33% of Republicans agree.



But even within the Republican coalition, attitudes toward cooperation versus confrontation with China vary. For instance, [March 2026 NPR/Ipsos/Chicago Council polling](#) shows that non-MAGA Republicans are less likely than MAGA Republicans to favor restrictions on Chinese students in the United States (47% vs. 77%), higher tariffs on Chinese imports (52% vs. 82%), and reductions in US-China trade (47% vs. 66%). Similarly, [2025 Manhattan Institute polling](#) finds marked generational divides within the GOP, with under-50 Republicans substantially more likely to see China as a country to cooperate with (45%) than older Republicans (17%).

Americans are especially receptive to tangible, outcome-oriented cooperation

Polling suggests that Americans are especially receptive to concrete visions of cooperation with China, particularly when framed in tangible, outcome-oriented terms. [AFSC/Harris polling from January 2026](#) found that nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) support “restarting US-China dialogue” when it was explained that such talks had previously taken place and could help address issues like “global economic stability, public health, pandemic management, climate change mitigation, and cooperation on law enforcement.” It is possible that this framing — emphasizing specific, functional areas for partnership — prompted respondents to consider discrete areas of shared interest beyond the typical terms of geopolitical rivalry.

The [same survey](#) found that Americans prioritize collaboration in areas such as nuclear non-proliferation, trade and economic coordination, and to a lesser extent pandemic prevention and climate change mitigation. [May 2026 YouGov polling](#) shows that a plurality of Americans (39%) favor US companies sharing medical research with Chinese companies. These responses suggest that Americans are especially interested in problem solving around issues where the mutual benefit is clear. This tendency might be reinforced by growing perceptions of China's leadership in technological development. [Carnegie's 2025 survey](#) found that 63% of Americans believe China has technological advantages over the US, indicating that many see China as a leader in strategic innovation.

This is particularly evident in terms of clean energy. A [2026 Data for Progress poll](#) shows that while 52% of Americans overall still believe the US is leading in clean energy development, a plurality of Democrats (43%) and over a third of Independents (36%) already believe China outpaces the US. Perceptions of China's relative strength in this domain seem to be linked to support for cooperation. Majorities of Democrats (58%), Independents (52%), adults under 45 (55%) and over a third of Republicans (35%) agree that the US would "make progress on clean energy technologies faster if [it] prioritizes cooperating with China on the development and manufacturing of these technologies." In other words, where China is perceived as competitive or even ahead of the US, Americans are more likely to see cooperation as necessary to achieve domestic policy goals — particularly in clean energy.

Views are mixed on escalatory nuclear policy, particularly when “threat” framing is introduced

Comparing the [2026 AFSC/Harris poll](#) results with a [March 2026 survey by Paul Musgrave and Verasight](#) demonstrates how fear of nuclear weapons can motivate either collaboration or escalation, depending on how solutions are framed. While the [AFSC/Harris data](#) shows strong support for dialogue as a tool to reduce nuclear risks, the [Musgrave/Verasight poll](#) shows how threat-oriented framing can push public opinion towards more bellicose responses. In [Musgrave's survey](#), more Americans initially oppose expanding the US nuclear arsenal than support it (40% vs. 28%). However, when respondents are later told that China is rapidly increasing its nuclear arsenal, the ratio roughly flips (32% oppose US nuclear buildup vs. 40% support).

But the fact that opinion remains close — even under heightened threat framing — is notable. Public opinion does not consolidate around escalation even when additional “threat-oriented” context is introduced. Read alongside the [AFSC/Harris findings](#), this suggests that Americans might be more risk-averse than hawkish, and the same anxieties that can heighten perceptions of threat may also generate support for cooperation, depending on the framing.