



Strong Partners: Japanese and American Perceptions of the US and the World

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The United States and Japan are close and critical allies for one another, and the US-Japan alliance is viewed by both sides as [“the cornerstone of peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.”](#) As the United States focuses more of its attention and resources in Asia in response to a rising China, that alliance relationship will only become more important to US strategy.

That strategy is being shaped by Japan’s own thinking about the region. The Quad concept—a closer alignment of Japan, India, Australia, and the United States—was first promoted by Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2007 and has since taken a firm hold in US policy discussions. Similarly, the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” has migrated from Tokyo’s strategic planning into Washington’s: the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, released February 2022, puts the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept and the role Japan plays in achieving it front and center. Is this increasing alignment between the United States and Japan on policy issues reflected in the views of Americans and Japanese? Based on surveys conducted in the United States and Japan, our research finds a strong base of support, but more division when it comes to the details. Japanese view the alliance positively, are confident in US power, and support a leadership role for the United States in the region and around the world. However, the Japanese public is reluctant to support a greater role for Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF), even as it expects the United States to militarily intervene in a range of conflicts—not all of which are supported by the American public.

This survey was conducted prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and does not reflect the rapid changes in the international situation since then.

Key Findings

- Half of Japanese (48%) say the US-Japan alliance benefits both countries, while 37 percent say it mostly benefits Japan.

- Majorities of Japanese say their country should maintain its current commitment to the US-Japan alliance financially (63%) and militarily (55%), and 13 percent support an increased Japanese commitment to the alliance.
- Japanese (47%) are more likely than Americans (23%) to say the United States should play a dominant leadership role in the world. Americans prefer a shared leadership role (69%; 49% among Japanese).
- The Japanese public is more confident in American economic (54%) and military (64%) superiority over China than are Americans (27% and 46%, respectively).
- Half of Americans (50%) and Japanese (49%) say limiting China's influence around the world is a very important goal.
- A narrow plurality of Japanese (40%) support the SDF providing logistical support, not including the provision of weapons or ammunition, to US forces outside of combat areas, but they oppose other measures, including proposals for the SDF to fight alongside the United States (59% oppose).

Japanese and Americans on their Nations' Roles in the World

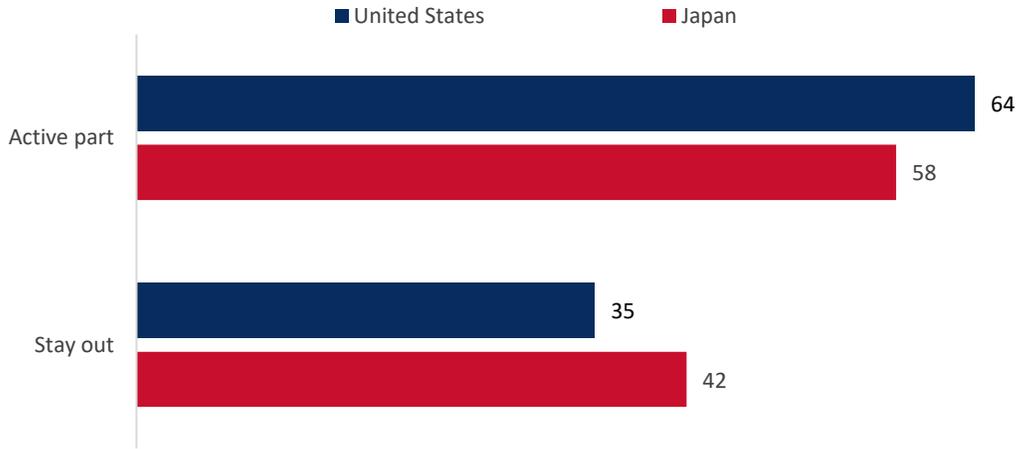
Public support for the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, 2021, which ended a 20-year military presence in the country, has once again given rise to a sense among the foreign policy commentariat that the American public would prefer to step away from international affairs. That sense builds on what seems to be a longstanding view among policymakers that the public is dissatisfied with the US role in the world. As US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a March 2021 speech, “for some time now Americans have been asking tough but fair questions about what we’re doing, how we’re leading – indeed whether we should be leading at all.” Certainly, the United States has many challenges to face at home—and as the Chicago Council’s surveys have shown, Americans are more concerned about challenges at home than those from abroad.

Japanese, too, confront a range of domestic and foreign challenges. Like all countries, Japan has suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic, though it has gotten through the past two years with far fewer deaths proportionately than the United States. Regionally, Japan faces challenges from a rising China and a nuclear North Korea, and it has yet to resolve its territorial dispute with Russia over the Northern Territories. And domestically, Japanese policymakers must grapple with a shrinking population and the challenges of an aging society.

However, the challenges faced by the United States and Japan have not caused their people to turn away from engaging in the world. Instead, majorities of Americans (64%) and Japanese (58%) say it will be best for the future of their countries if they take an active part in world affairs. For Americans, this has been a long-held position: for as long as the Chicago Council has asked this question, a majority of Americans have supported the US playing an active part in world affairs.

Support for an Active Role in World Affairs

Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs? (%)



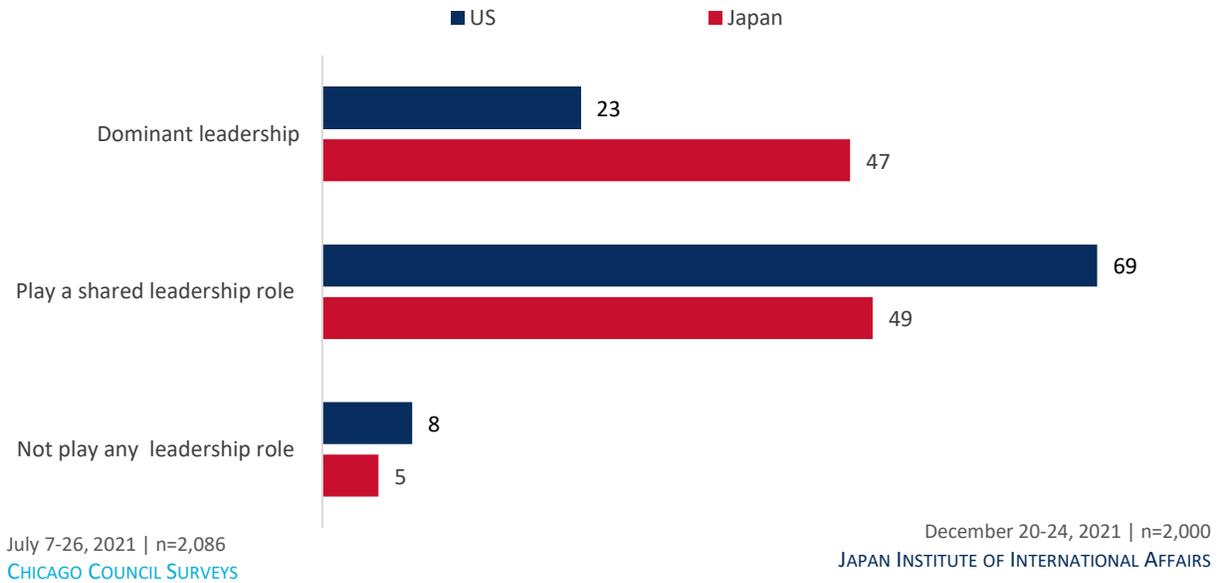
July 7-26, 2021 | n=2,086
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

December 20-24, 2021 | n=2,000
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But what kind of role should that be for the United States? A majority of Americans (69%) and half of Japanese (49%) say the United States should play a shared leadership role. But nearly as many Japanese (47%) say the United States should play a dominant leadership role, a position with significantly less support among Americans (23%). Notably, few Americans (8%) or Japanese (5%) want the United States to play no leadership role at all.

US Leadership Role

What kind of leadership role should the United States play in the world? Should it be the dominant leader, or should it play a shared leadership role, or should it not play any leadership role? (%)

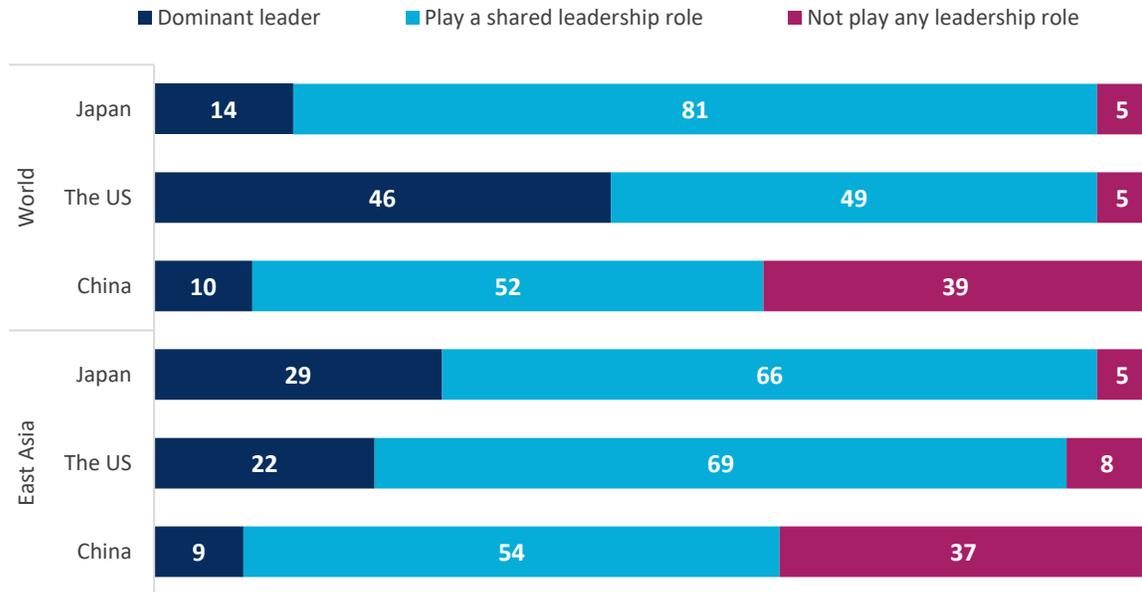


When it comes specifically to East Asia, majorities of Japanese say the United States (69%), Japan (66%), and China (54%) should play a shared leadership role. Notably, three in ten Japanese (29%) would like Japan itself to play a dominant leadership role in the region, and more than a third (37%) say China should not play any leadership role at all.

Globally, Japan also envisions a shared leadership role for itself, with eight in ten Japanese (81%) preferring a shared leadership role for the country. Few Japanese want it to play a dominant role in the world (14%) or, conversely, no leadership role at all (5%). The global role of China is more divisive among the Japanese public. A narrow majority of Japanese (52%) want to see China also playing a shared leadership role in the world—though a notable four in ten (39%) do not want China to play any leadership role at all in the world. Relatively few (10%) want to see China as a dominant leader in the world.

Japanese Views on Leadership Roles

What kind of leadership role should Japan, the United States, and China play in the world and East Asia, respectively? Should they be the dominant leader, or should they play a shared leadership role, or should they not play any leadership role? (%)



December 20-24, 2021 | n=2,000
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Threats to Japan and the United States

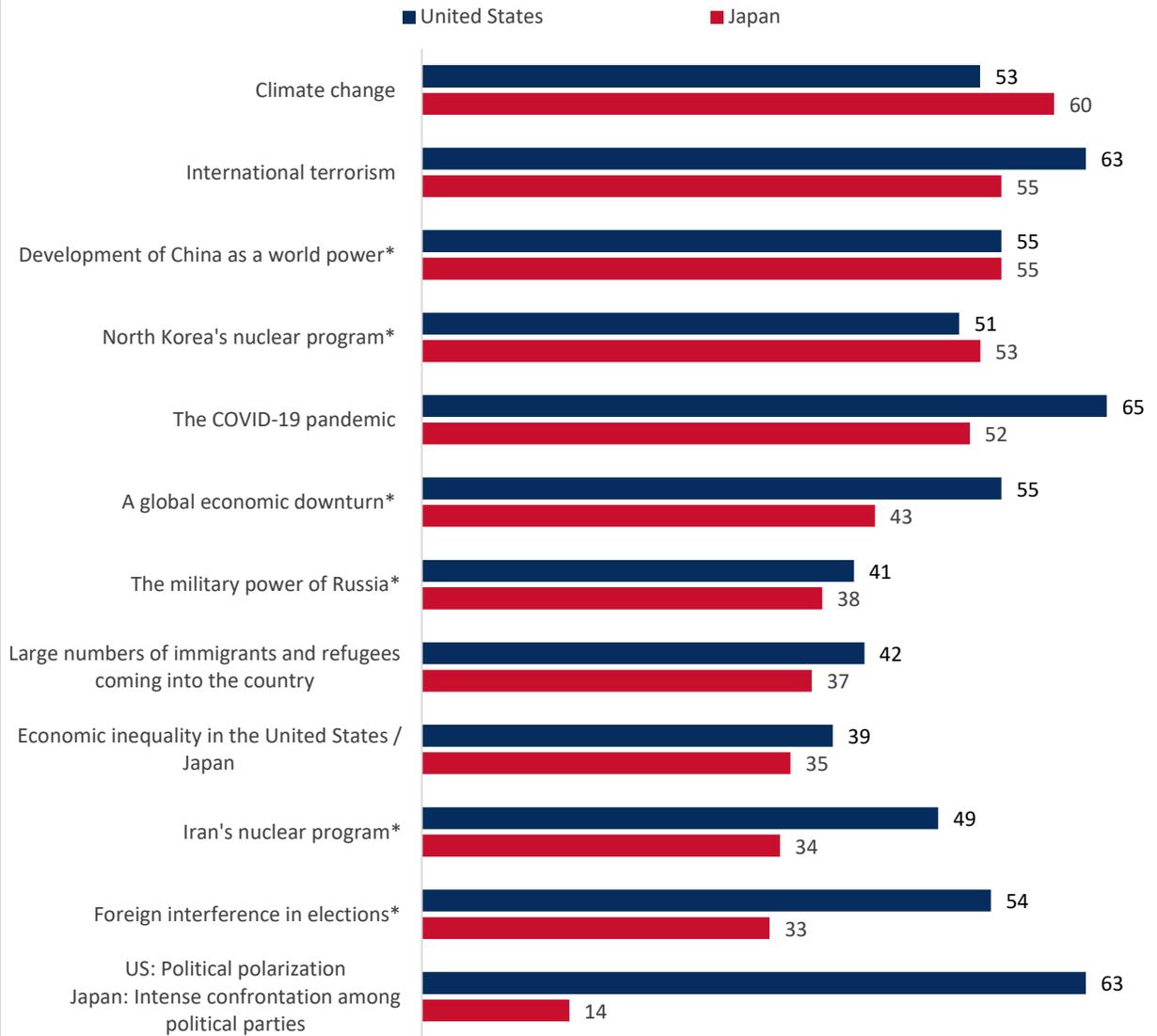
Americans and Japanese agree on several of the most critical threats facing their countries. These include global challenges, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as direct threats to their citizens' security in the form of international terrorism. A majority of Americans and Japanese view all three of these challenges as critical threats to their country.

Both publics also agree on some of the critical challenges in the region. An identical 55 percent of Americans and Japanese view the development of China as a world power as a critical threat to their vital interests, and majorities of Japanese (53%) and Americans (51%) say the same about North Korea's nuclear program.

Other issues are of notably more concern to Americans than to their Japanese allies, particularly on the domestic front: while Americans view foreign interference in elections and political polarization as critical threats to the country, relatively few Japanese see them as threats to Japan.

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: (% critical threat)



August 23-26, 2021 | n=1,924

*July 2-19, 2020 | n= varies (786-1637)

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December 20-24, 2021 | n=2,000

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Goals of Japanese and American Foreign Policy

Reflecting their common threat perceptions, Americans and Japanese also share a common sense of their countries' top foreign policy goals. Some of those goals focus on ensuring domestic security and prosperity, such as preventing cyberattacks and protecting the jobs of American and Japanese workers. Others are cooperative efforts to improve global security and sustainability. Majorities of Americans and

Japanese alike name preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, limiting climate change, and preventing and combating global pandemics as very important goals for their countries' foreign policies.

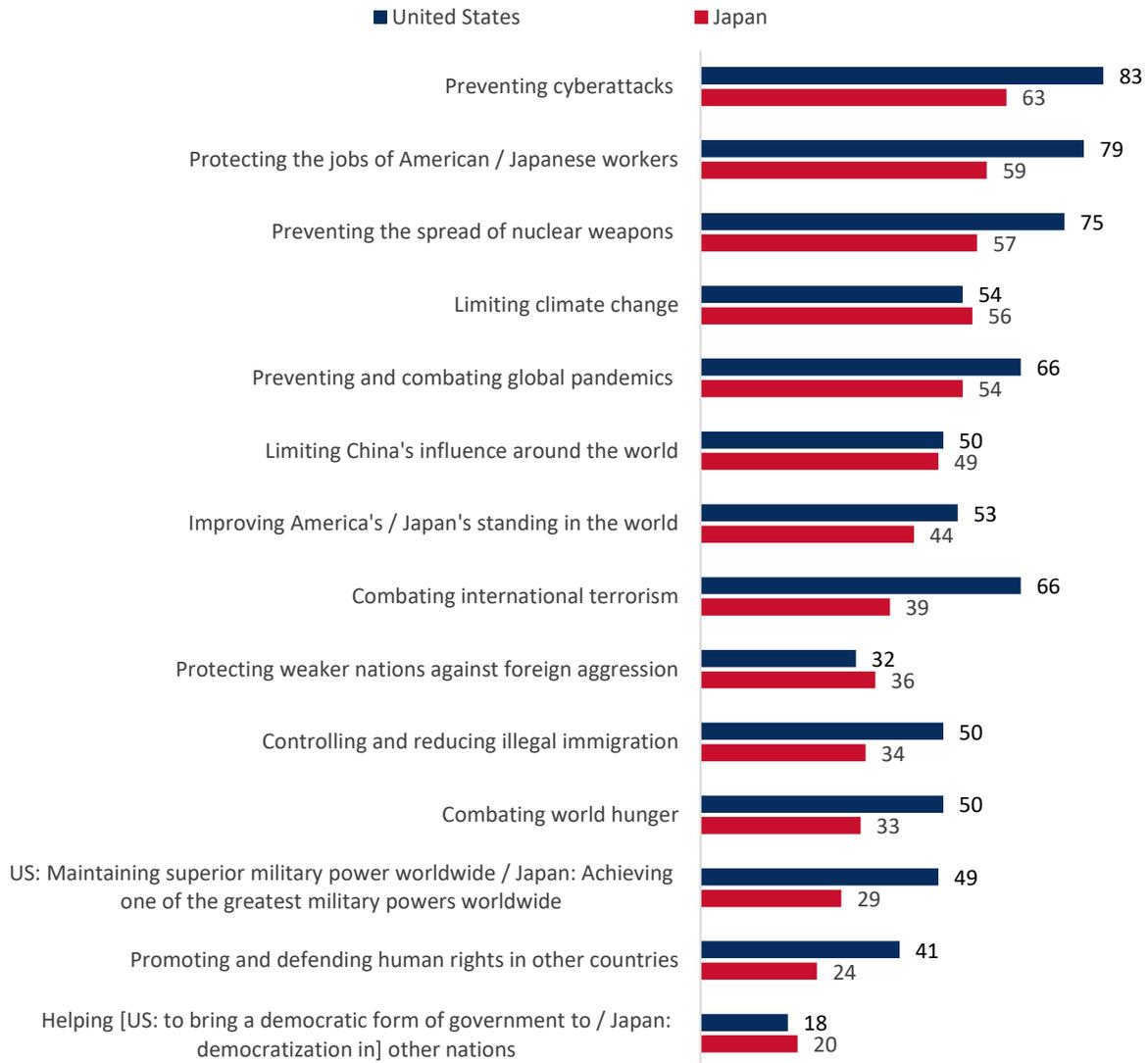
Another common area of concern is China. Its' rising power, and how the United States should respond, has been a major focus of the Biden administration and of the US-Japan alliance. And Americans and Japanese hold quite similar views: half of Americans (50%) and Japanese (49%) say limiting China's influence around the world is a very important goal.

Other issues are of greater concern for Americans, including combating international terrorism. Though majorities of Japanese also view international terrorism as a critical threat, they are less likely than Americans to say combating international terrorism represents a very important goal for Japanese foreign policy (39%, compared to 66% of Americans).

Lastly, while human rights and democracy have been rhetorical focuses of the Biden administration in its first year in office, those issues have less purchase on the public imagination in the United States and Japan. Only minorities of Americans and Japanese see promoting and defending human rights abroad (41% Americans, 24% Japanese) or helping other nations democratize (18% Americans, 20% Japanese) as very important foreign policy goals.

Foreign Policy Goals of the United States and Japan

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that [the United States / Japan] might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of [the United States / Japan], a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: (%)



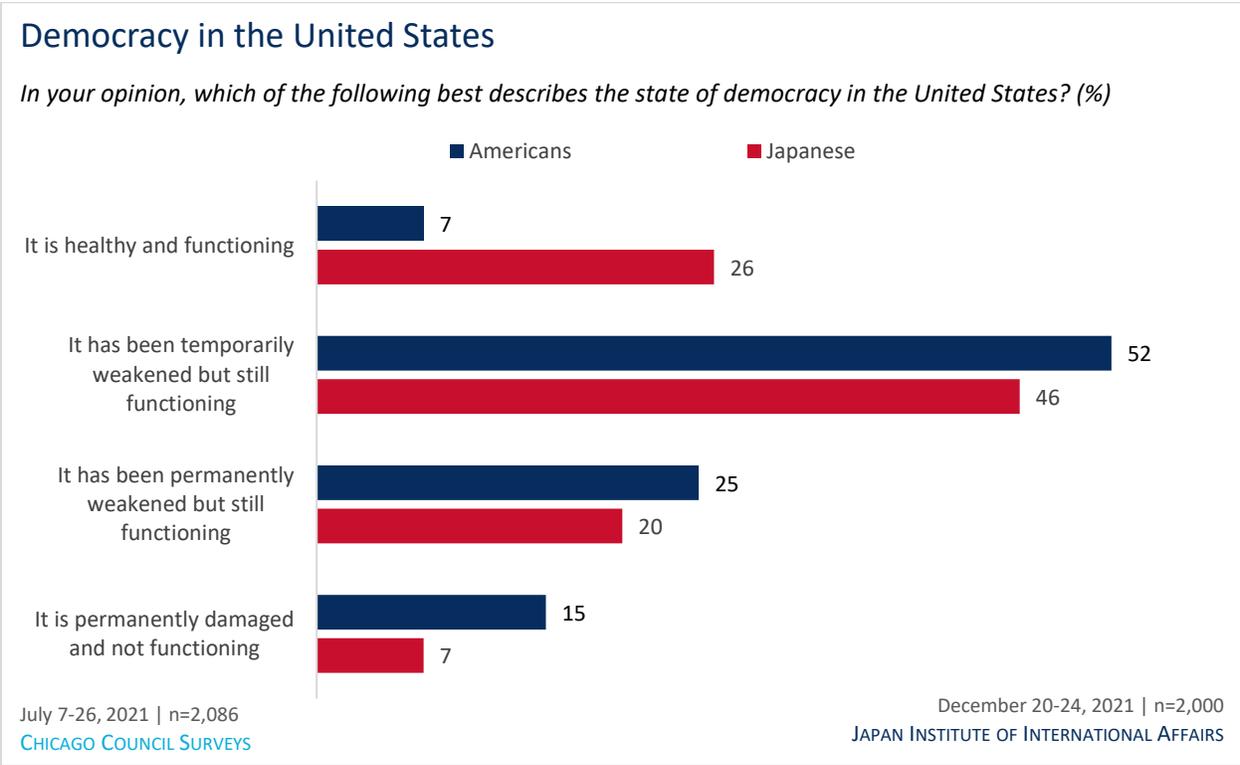
July 7-26, 2021 | n=varies (1446-1536)
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

December 20-24, 2021 | n=2,000
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Democracy in Japan and the United States

Questions of democracy have more resonance for both publics in a domestic context, where Japanese and Americans both have concerns about the state of their democracies. Just as Japanese are more confident in American economic and military strength vis-à-vis China, Japanese are also more positive

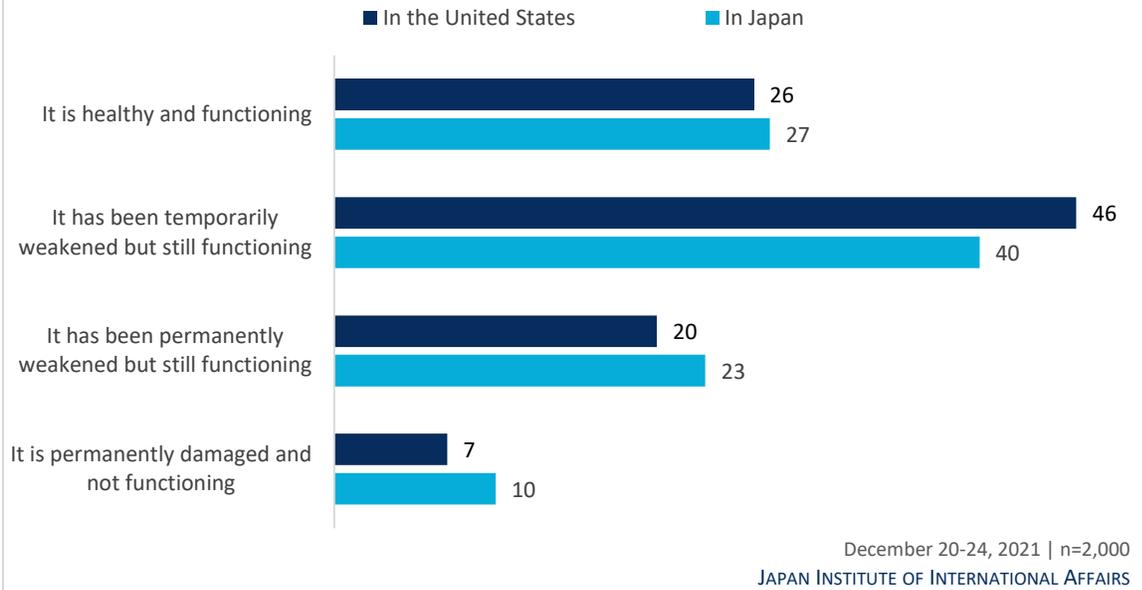
about the state of democracy in the United States. While many Americans (52%) and Japanese (46%) say American democracy has been temporarily weakened but is still functioning, Japanese (26%) are far more likely than Americans (7%) to say American democracy is healthy and functioning.



In fact, Japanese are marginally more positive about democracy in the United States than they are about democracy at home. A quarter of Japanese see democracy in the United States (26%) and Japan (27%) as healthy and functioning, and slightly more see democracy as functioning but temporarily weakened in the United States (46%) compared to Japan (40%).

Democracy in Japan and the United States

In your opinion, which of the following best describes the state of democracy in Japan and the United States? (%)



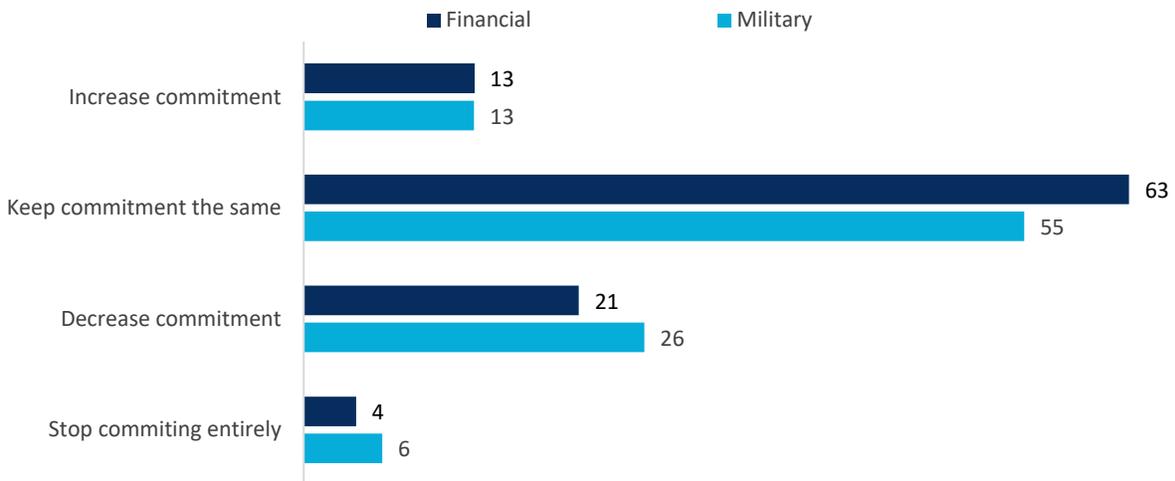
The US-Japan Alliance, the SDF, and the US Military

The original US-Japan Security Treaty was signed September 8, 1951, and was revised in 1960. Though the original treaty's enactment was met with a wave of protests in Japan, the alliance is broadly popular today. Half of Japanese (48%) say the US-Japan alliance benefits both countries, while 37 percent say the alliance mostly benefits Japan. Few see the alliance as not benefiting either country (9%) or mostly benefiting the United States (6%).

With so many Japanese seeing the US-Japan alliance as beneficial, it is perhaps little surprise that most also want to maintain or increase their commitment to that alliance. Majorities say Japan should maintain its current commitment to the alliance financially (63%) and militarily (55%), with 13 percent supporting an increased Japanese commitment. Though there is slightly more support for decreasing Japan's military commitment (26%) than its financial commitment (21%), both groups are firmly in the minority—and few say Japan should end its commitment to the alliance entirely.

Japan's Commitment to the US-Japan Alliance

Do you feel we should increase our commitment to the US-Japan alliance, keep our commitment what it is now, decrease our commitment to the US-Japan alliance, or stop committing to the US-Japan alliance entirely? Please answer both in financial and military aspects. (%)

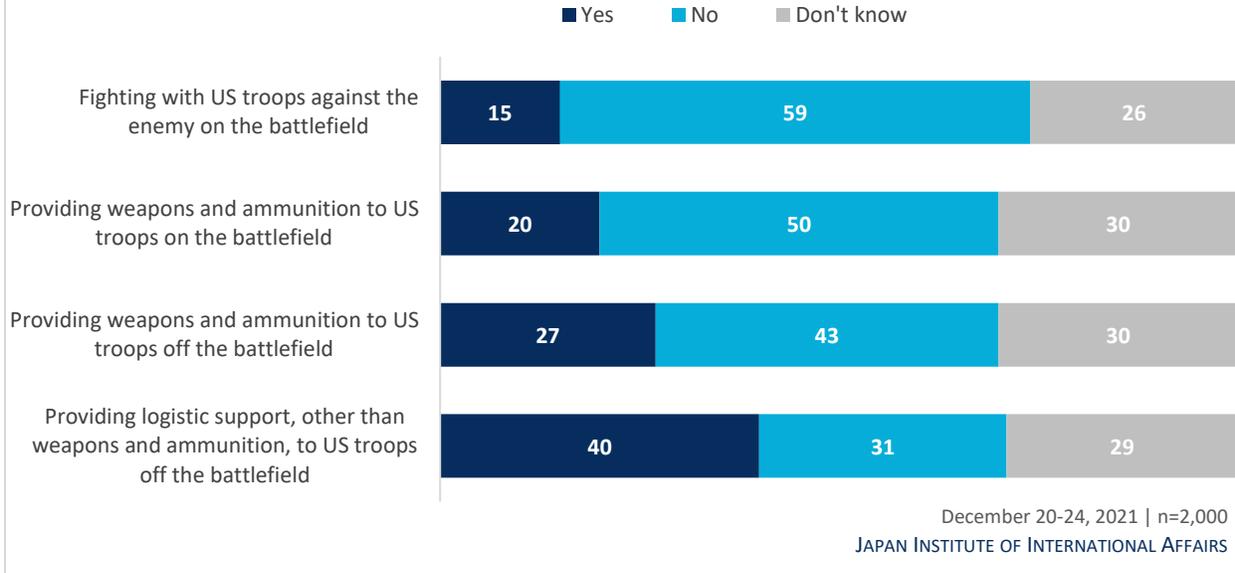


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Despite this interest in increasing Japan's military commitment to the US-Japan alliance, there is limited support among the Japanese public for an increased role for the SDF acting in cooperation with the United States. Six in ten (59%) oppose the SDF taking part in combat alongside the United States, and half (50%) oppose the SDF providing weapons and ammunition to US troops who are in combat. A plurality (43%) also oppose providing military assistance to US forces outside of combat zones. The only option that received plurality support (40%) is the proposal to provide logistical support, not including the provision of weapons or ammunition, to US forces outside of combat areas.

Actions of the Self-Defense Forces

Do you think the Self-Defense Forces should do the following things in its military cooperation with the United States? (%)



Despite this reluctance to endorse the SDF playing a larger role in potential conflicts, the Japanese public does expect the United States to use military force in a variety of scenarios, including those involving Japan, Taiwan, or South Korea in which SDF support could be needed. Three-quarters of Japanese (73%) say the United States would militarily intervene if North Korea attacked Japan, and a smaller majority (54%) say the same in the case of a North Korean invasion of South Korea. In both cases, majorities of the American public also endorse the use of US troops, whether the target is Japan (64%) or South Korea (63%). The two publics are also closely aligned on Taiwan, with a narrow majority of Americans (52%) supporting the use of US troops to defend the island from invasion by China, and a similar majority of Japanese (55%) expecting the United States to militarily intervene in the conflict.

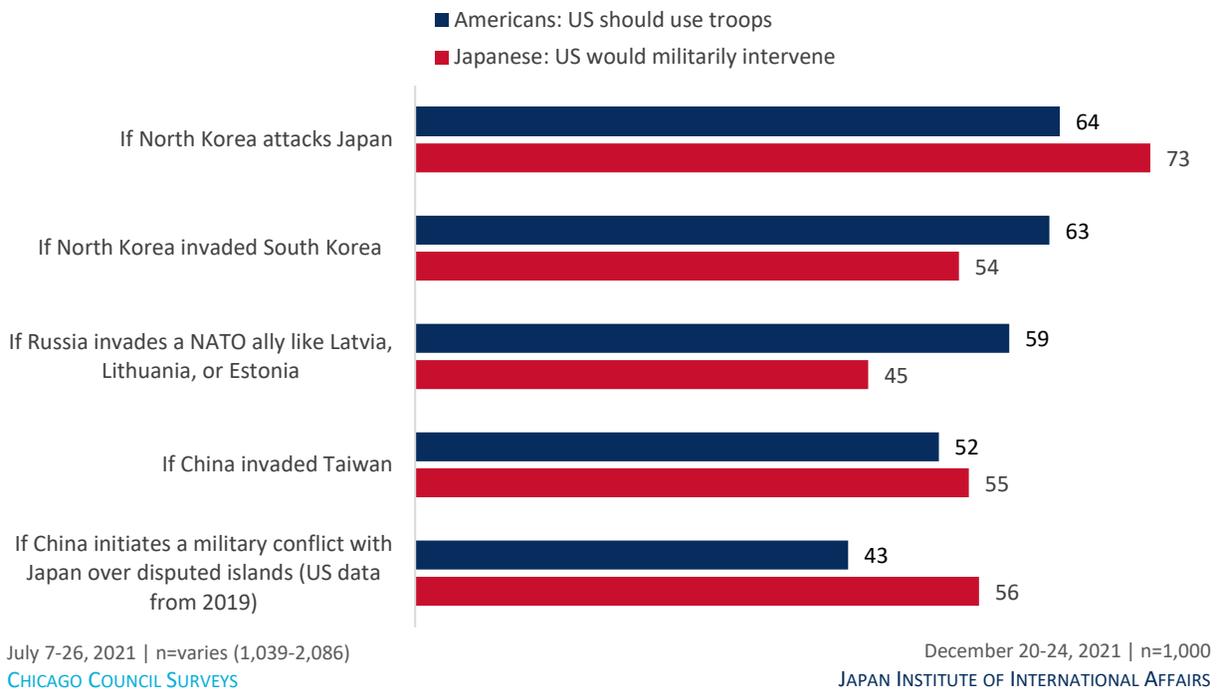
However, there are two cases where the publics are not aligned: one involving US allies far from Japan, and one involving Japan itself. While six in ten Americans (59%) favor the use of US troops in response to a Russian invasion of a NATO ally in the Baltics, only a minority of Japanese (45%) expect the United States to intervene in such a conflict. And though a majority of Japanese (56%) expect that the United States would intervene should China initiate a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands, only a minority of Americans (43%) favor US involvement.¹

¹ We note that the most recent US data on this question is from 2019. It is possible that Americans have grown more willing to commit US troops in the event of a dispute between China and Japan, matching the rise seen in other scenarios involving the use of US troops and the defense of allies. Given the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the same could be said about a Russian invasion of a NATO ally.

Uses of US Troops

Japan: There are some possible circumstances where the United States militarily intervenes in other parts of the world. Do you think the United States would militarily intervene if the following circumstances happened? (%)

United States: There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops:(%)

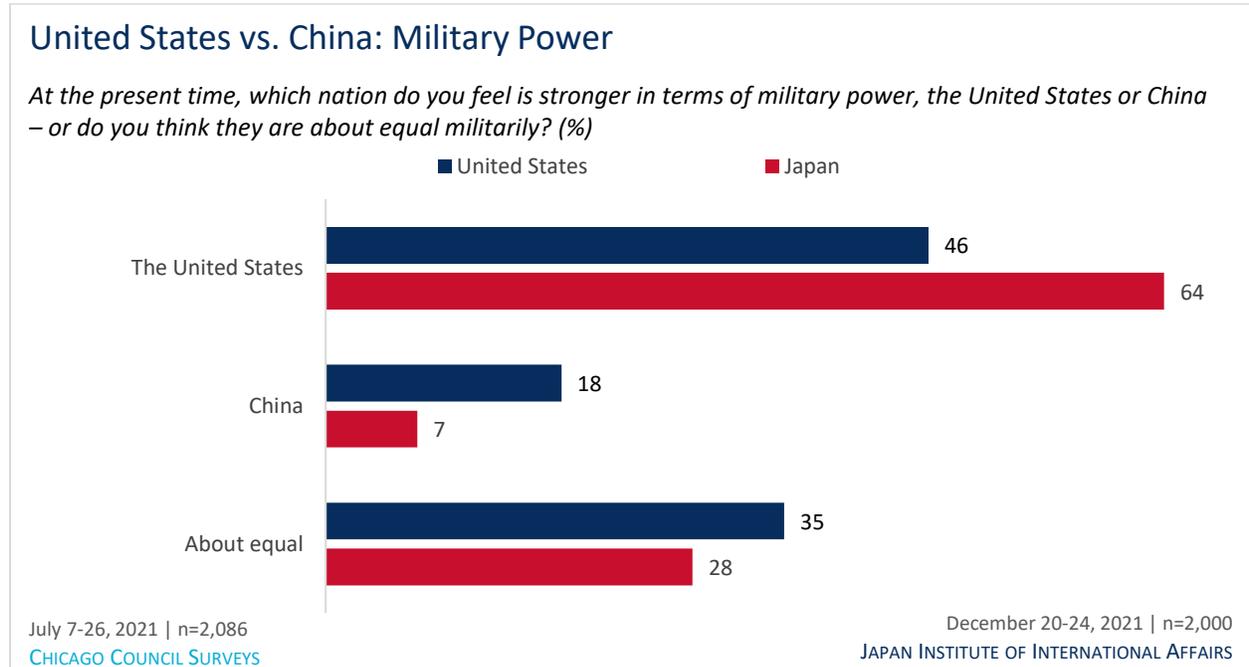


With these somewhat contradictory elements, the overall picture is mixed. The Japanese public views the alliance with the United States as beneficial (and many see it as beneficial to both sides) and supports maintaining or increasing its financial and military commitment to the alliance. However, the public also opposes specific steps the SDF could take to assist the United States in time of conflict, while also expecting the United States to militarily intervene in conflicts involving Japan (even if the American public is not necessarily enthusiastic about doing so). With [Chinese incursions into Japanese territory](#) around disputed islands such as the Senkakus remaining at a high level, alliance managers on both sides of the Pacific Ocean will need to square this circle of public attitudes; the gap between high Japanese expectations of American action and lower American public support for those actions could cause real strain on the US-Japan alliance.

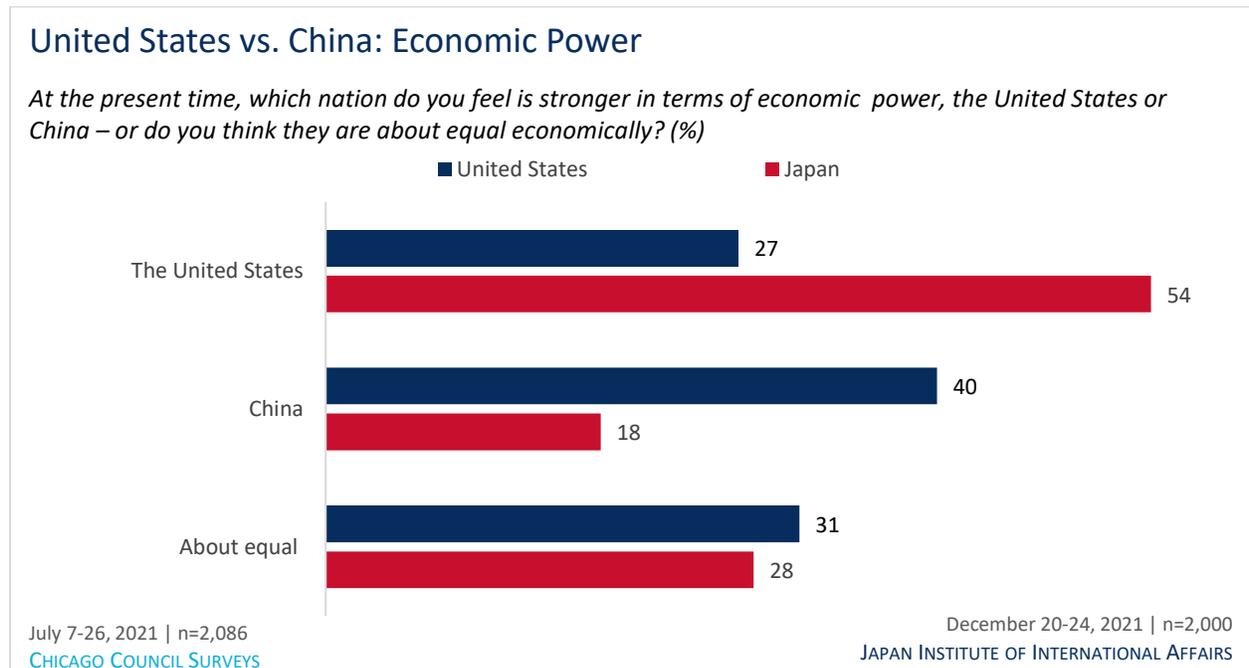
American and Japanese Views of the US-China Balance of Power

One element factoring into public calculations may be the rising power of China in Americans' eyes. Japanese, however, are notably more confident in American power than are Americans. While just under half of Americans (46%) say the United States is a stronger military power than China, two-thirds

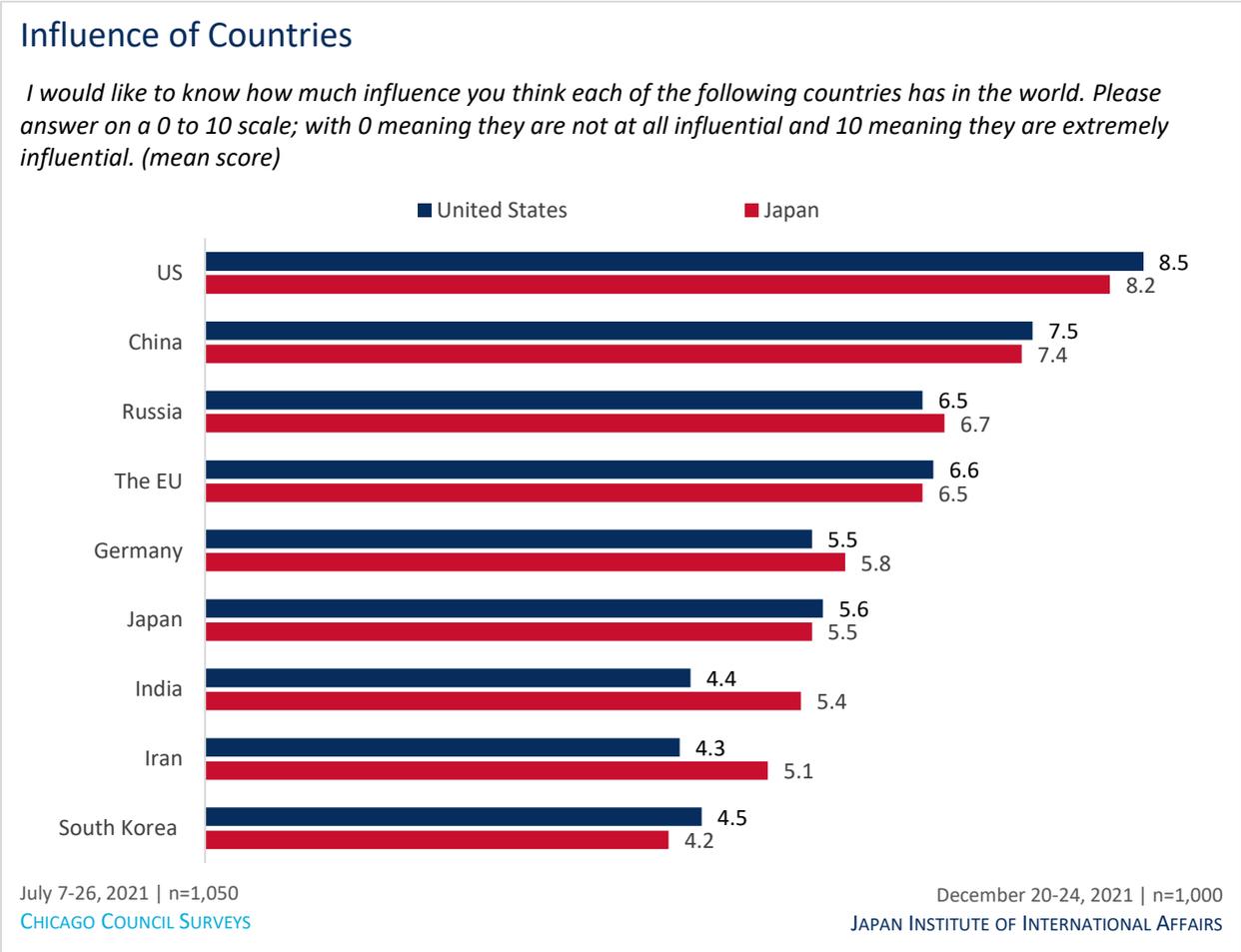
of Japanese (64%) see the United States as stronger. And few Japanese (7%) see China as the stronger military power, as two in ten Americans (18%) do.



The difference is even more stark when it comes to American and Japanese evaluations of the economic balance of power. A plurality of Americans (40%) view China as a stronger economic power than the United States—a position just 18 percent of Japanese hold. Instead, a majority of Japanese (54%) see the United States as the stronger economic power, compared to just a quarter of Americans (27%).



However, American and Japanese estimates of overall international influence are much closer than these two questions about economic and military power would suggest. Both Americans and Japanese view the United States as the most influential country in the world, followed by China. In fact, the two publics are close together in their estimates of most countries' international influence, though Japanese see India and Iran as notably more influential than Americans do.



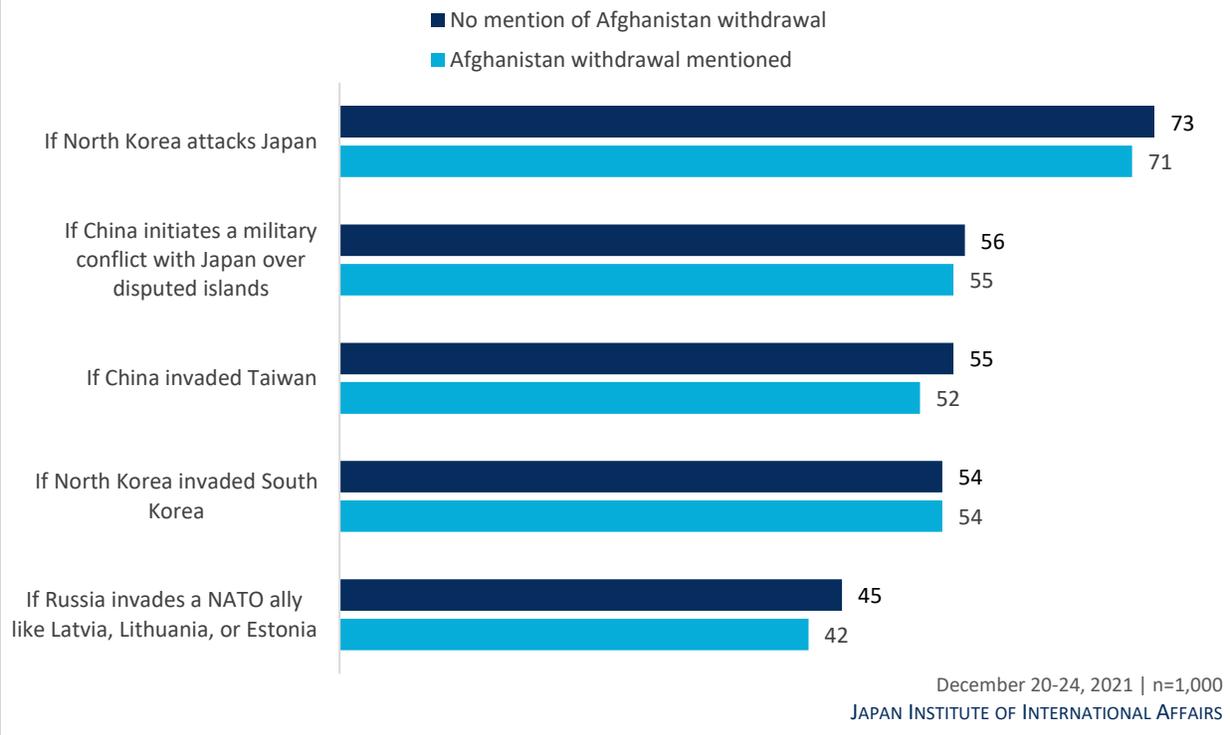
Has America’s Afghanistan Withdrawal Affected Japanese Attitudes? Experimental Evidence Suggests Not

One side effect that many experts predicted following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a diminishing of US credibility. Many commentators in the United States also seem to feel that the public support for the Afghanistan withdrawal reflected a larger desire to keep the United States out of overseas conflicts, a position belied by the increasing willingness of the American public to come to the aid of US allies and partners in Asia and Europe. Some experts also predicted that US allies around the world would become more skeptical about US commitments to use force on their behalf. To test this theory, we ran a split-sample experiment, assigning half of the sample a standard question and the other half a question that included reference to the US invasion of and withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, responses did not differ significantly between the two scenarios. Majorities in both scenarios

believed that the United States would militarily intervene in conflicts involving North Korea and China, and narrowly doubted that the United States would do so in the case of a conflict with Russia.

Afghanistan and Future US Interventions

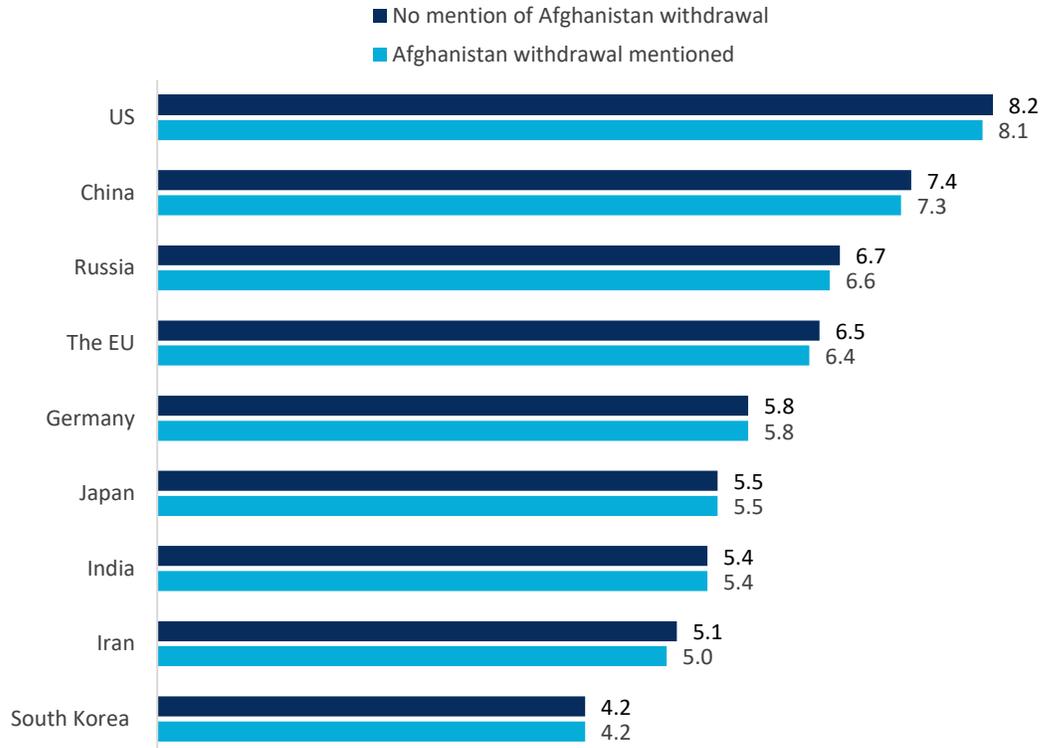
There are some possible circumstances where the United States militarily intervenes in other parts of the world. [For example, the United States sent its troops to overthrow the Taliban in 2001 and withdrew all troops in 2021.] Do you think the United States would militarily intervene if the following circumstances happened? (% would military intervene)



Nor has the withdrawal significantly affected Japanese views of American influence around the world. Despite predictions of diminished US standing in the eyes of others around the world, the Japanese public views US influence in the world as similarly high—and higher than all other countries asked about—regardless of whether they were recently reminded about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Influence of Countries

I would like to know how much influence you think each of the following countries has in the world. Please answer on a 0 to 10 scale; with 0 meaning they are not at all influential and 10 meaning they are extremely influential. (mean score)



December 20-24, 2021 | n=1,000
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Conclusion

Despite some differences, the results of the binational surveys show there is a common understanding of the importance of the US-Japan alliance in both countries. Americans and Japanese share a common view of many of the most critical threats facing their countries and have similar international priorities. Moreover, the Japanese have successfully weathered the uncertainties and tensions of the Trump era and are less anxious than other countries about the state of US internationalism. Japanese remain confident in American economic and military strength and want to see the United States play a leadership role both globally and in East Asia. This reflects Japanese views of the US presence in Asia as indispensable, and is paralleled in the United States by American views of Japan as an indispensable partner in Asia.

It is important to note that these surveys were conducted prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and that the situation in Ukraine will undoubtedly affect attitudes in the United States and Japan. For one thing, while in these surveys Russia was not seen as a major threat to either Japan or the United States, the threat perception and priority assigned to Russia would likely change if the surveys were conducted today. Also, the conflict and the renewed focus on Russia as a hostile actor may pull American attention toward Europe and away from long-promised "pivot to Asia." This could result

in concerns among the Japanese public about whether Americans will be truly focused on helping Japan deal with the challenges posed by China's rise, or if Americans will remain more attentive to crises in Europe.

The Ukraine crisis has also led to a more extensive reaction by Japan than to past international crises, such as the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. In addition to joining other major powers in [imposing severe economic sanctions](#) against Russia, Japan has also provided Ukraine with humanitarian aid and defense equipment. These policies have been [broadly supported by the Japanese public](#). And unlike in 2014, the Japanese public has favored tougher sanctions in line with the United States over pursuing an independent policy towards Russia. The public support for more significant sanctions on Russia, and the desire to remain close to the United States in responding to the Ukraine crisis, also reflects a widespread concern that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could set a precedent for how China deals with Taiwan.

The crisis in Ukraine has the potential to significantly reshape the international political landscape in a way not seen in decades. In future studies, we will need to carefully assess how Japanese and Americans react to the drastic changes in international relations caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and how this affects public perceptions of the US-Japan alliance and its role in dealing with crisis in Asia and around the world.

Methodology

Most US data comes from the [2021 Chicago Council Survey](#) of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 7–26, 2021, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,086 adults, 18 or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.33 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1817. The margin of error is higher for subgroups or for partial-sample items. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

Additional US results come from a Chicago Council/Ipsos survey conducted August 23–26, 2021. This survey was fielded among a weighted national sample of 1,924 adults using the KnowledgePanel. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.5 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.29, and is higher for subgroups or partial-sample items.

Japan data comes from a survey conducted by the Nippon Research Center (NRC) for the Japan Institute of International Affairs. The survey was conducted online December 20–24, 2021, among a sample of 2,000 Japanese citizens 18 and older drawn from the NRC research panel and using age, gender, region, and city-size quota groups. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.22 percentage points and is higher for subgroups or partial-sample items.