

FOURTH ANNUAL EDITION
CHINESE CITIZENS' GLOBAL PERCEPTION SURVEY

How China Sees the World 2026

A national portrait
of how mainland
Chinese citizens view
ten global powers —
and China's place
among them.

Professor Reza Hasmath

University of Alberta · Department of Political Science · The China Institute

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

It is my great pleasure to introduce the fourth iteration of the *How China Sees the World* report. Drawing on the latest findings from the Chinese Citizens' Global Perception Survey, this report offers an updated assessment of how Chinese citizens view international affairs and China's role therein.

As the international environment undergoes profound changes, understanding how Chinese citizens view the world has become increasingly important. As one of the few longitudinal surveys of Chinese public opinion on global affairs, this survey provides a useful reference point. It sheds light not only on how Chinese citizens see China, major global actors, and international issues, but also on how those perceptions change over time.

The survey has evolved from valuable snapshots of public opinion into a growing baseline for tracking continuity and change in Chinese public opinion. The collection of four survey waves now makes it possible to identify both continuity and change in Chinese public opinion. For instance, support for an active international role for China, the importance of Russia as a strategic partner, and favourable views of Canada have remained consistent across surveys. Meanwhile, this year's findings show notable shifts in areas such as trust, security perceptions, and preferences for international engagement.

The breadth and depth of this survey will be of interest not only to scholars and researchers, but also to policymakers, business leaders, and the informed public. While respondents continue to support a larger international role for China, they express limited support for promoting China's governance model abroad. Likewise, despite low levels of trust toward certain countries, many respondents continue to support economic and technological engagement.

Canada's positive brand in China remains resilient, meaning that channels for constructive engagement exist even within a more complex geopolitical environment. Despite ongoing challenges in the bilateral relationship, Canada is still viewed as a desirable destination for study, travel, and immigration. Support for cooperation in areas such as culture, education, environmental and global governance also continues to be strong.

In closing, I would like to thank Professor Reza Hasmath for making this survey possible. As the dataset continues to grow, so does its value as a resource for policymakers, researchers, businesses, and all those seeking a deeper understanding of China and its place in the world. I encourage readers to engage with the findings, and I look forward to the insights and conversations they will elicit.



Philippe Rheault
Director, The China Institute, University of Alberta

About This Report

What does the world look like from inside China? Every day, governments, companies, universities, and news organizations make decisions that hinge on the answer. A trade negotiator weighing tariffs, a university recruiting international students, a tourism board planning a campaign, a foreign ministry calibrating its tone — all are, in effect, placing bets on what 1.4 billion people think and want. However, reliable evidence about what ordinary Chinese citizens actually believe about other countries remains surprisingly scarce. Most of what reaches international audiences comes filtered through official statements, state media, or the speculation of outside analysts.

The Chinese Citizens' Global Perception Survey (CCGPS) was created to fill that gap. Now in its fourth annual edition, the survey asks a nationally distributed sample of mainland Chinese citizens how they view ten major global actors — Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States — and what role they believe China should play in the world. Since the questions have been asked in consistent form since 2023, the project can now do something single snapshots cannot: distinguish the durable architecture of Chinese public opinion from the churn of any one news cycle.

This year's survey was collected in the first quarter of 2026, spanning all 31 provincial-level divisions of mainland China. Respondents answered most questions on a 7-point scale, where 1 means the lowest rating (least trust, least likely, least important) and 7 the highest. Throughout this report, “above-neutral” refers to scores of 5 to 7, and “top score” to the maximum of 7. Full details on how the survey was conducted, and its limitations, appear in the methodology section at the end. A note on reading the findings: this is a portrait of expressed public opinion, not of government policy, and the two should never be assumed to be identical. Where they diverge is often where the most interesting story lies.

Numbers That Tell the Story

68%	rate China's global influence at the maximum 7 out of 7 — more than any other country, including the United States.	67%	trust Russia above the neutral midpoint, making it China's most trusted partner by a wide margin.
55%	give Japan the lowest possible trust score — the deepest distrust recorded for any country in four years of surveys.	71%	see military conflict with Japan as likely, overtaking the United States for the first time.
65%	want China to lead the world on peace and security — the public's top global priority.	13%	strongly agree that China should export its governance model abroad — among the lowest levels of support measured.
49%	still favour deeper economic ties with the United States, despite trade disputes and deep distrust.	80%	support expanded cultural exchanges with Canada — the highest support for any cooperation domain.

The Big Picture

Four years of CCGPS data now allow us to separate the durable features of Chinese public opinion from the noise of any single news cycle. The 2026 findings reveal a public that is confident, pragmatic and selectively engaged with the world: convinced of China's arrival as a leading power, firmly attached to Russia, deeply sceptical of Japan and the United States, and notably unwilling either to cut economic ties with the West or to export China's political model abroad. Each of these threads complicates a familiar caricature — of a public marching in lockstep behind an assertive, ideological foreign policy — and together they sketch something more recognizable and more useful: a citizenry making trade-offs.

On global power, Chinese citizens see a two horse race. More than two-thirds rate China's influence at the maximum score, with the United States close behind and everyone else far back. Russia remains China's most trusted partner, though that trust has been quietly eroding — down from 81% in 2024 to 67% today. Japan is the least trusted country in the survey, and for the first time it has overtaken the United States as the nation respondents consider most likely to come into military conflict with China.

On China's role in the world, the public wants leadership in peace and security and in technology, and it supports a larger global military footprint. But there is strikingly little appetite for promoting China's governance model overseas: just 13% strongly agree that China should export its political and economic systems. The public, in other words, wants capability, not ideology — a distinction that recurs throughout this report and that outside observers routinely miss.

On cooperation, Russia dominates as the preferred partner for both trade and technology, with Germany and the European Union forming a clear second tier. Attitudes toward the United States are best described as cautious openness: roughly half of respondents still favour deeper economic engagement, even amid trade disputes and technology restrictions. Japan sits at the bottom of every cooperation ranking, alone.

On personal preferences, France tops the list of dream travel destinations, the United States remains the most sought after place to study, and Australia is the most preferred country for emigration. Interest in moving to the United States stands at just 2% — a quiet warning sign for anyone invested in America's long standing magnetism for Chinese talent.

On Canada, the news is consistently positive: support for cooperation has climbed across all five measured domains over four years, led by cultural exchanges at 80%.

And on information, the survey documents a distinctive hybrid environment in which citizens consume news overwhelmingly through social media while placing their highest trust in government and state media sources — a combination with major implications for anyone trying to communicate with the Chinese public. The sections that follow take each of these themes in turn.

PART I

How Chinese Citizens See the World's Powers

The survey opens by asking respondents to evaluate ten global actors on four dimensions: how influential each is, how much it can be trusted, how important its relationship with China is, and how likely it is to come into military conflict with China. Together, these four questions sketch a mental map of the world as seen from mainland China — and the map that emerges in 2026 combines striking continuity with a few consequential shifts. The most important interpretive lesson is that these four dimensions do not move together. A country can be powerful and distrusted, important and feared, familiar and disliked.

A Two-Power World

KEY TAKEAWAY

China and the U.S. dominate perceived global influence, with a wide gap separating them from everyone else.

Chinese citizens continue to see their own country as the most influential actor on the planet. 68% of respondents assign China the highest possible influence score of 7 — broadly consistent with the 72% recorded in 2025 and 67% in 2024. That consensus cuts across income and education levels, pointing to a settled public confidence in China's ascendancy rather than a mood that swings with the headlines. When a belief is this evenly distributed across a diverse population, it has usually stopped being an argument and become an assumption.

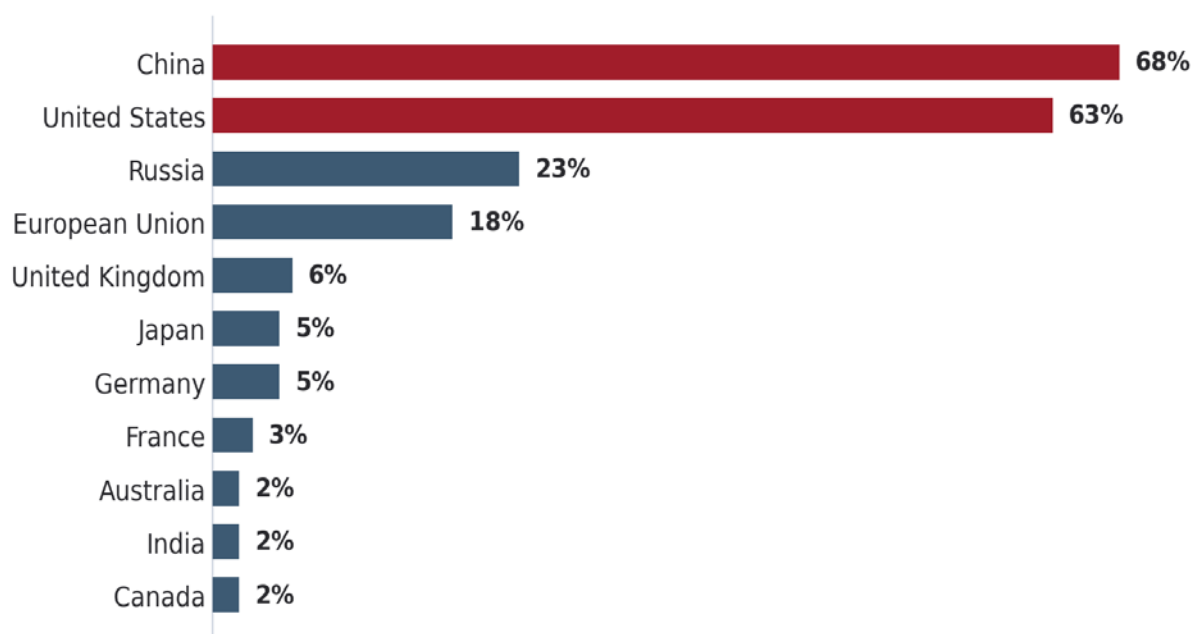


Figure 1. *Perceived global influence: share of respondents assigning each country the top score of 7.*

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR OUTSIDE OBSERVERS

The influence rankings confirm that Chinese citizens have internalized a bipolar view of global power. For diplomats and businesses, the practical implication is that China's public does not see a multipolar world of co-equal powers; it sees two giants and a long tail. Messaging that positions a middle power as a pivotal global actor may simply not land with an audience that ranks most of the world's democracies in the low single digits.

The United States is the only country in the same league. 63% award it the top influence score, closely tracking last year's 68%. Whatever Chinese citizens think of American intentions — and, as we will see, they think little of them — they have no illusions about American power. This clear eyed respect for U.S. capability, decoupled from any warmth toward U.S. conduct, is a recurring feature of the data and a useful corrective to the assumption that hostility and dismissiveness travel together.

Below the top two, the drop-off is steep. Russia (23%) and the European Union (18%) occupy a clear middle tier. The United Kingdom and Germany are recognized as significant but not dominant, each drawing the top score from roughly 5-6% of respondents. Japan presents a more layered picture: only 5% give it the maximum score, but a substantial share rate its influence in the upper range, reflecting its acknowledged economic and regional weight even amid hostility. India and Australia bring up the rear at 2% each — a notable underestimation of India in particular, whose rising global profile registers only faintly in Chinese public perception.

Who China Trusts and Who It Does Not

KEY TAKEAWAY

Russia remains China's most trusted partner by a wide margin. Japan and the U.S. are the least trusted — but the U.S. is still seen as indispensable.

If influence is about capability, trust is about intent, and here the rankings diverge sharply. Russia retains its position as China's most trusted partner, with 67% of respondents expressing above-neutral trust. That figure deserves a second look, however: it has slipped from 74% in 2025 and 81% in 2024. Russia's lead over every other country remains unambiguous, and trust runs highest among Communist Party members and older respondents, but the gradual erosion across three survey waves is one of the quieter trends worth watching. A 14 percentage point decline in two years is not a collapse, but neither is it nothing; it suggests that even the most stable relationship in the Chinese public's worldview is not immune to the friction of events.

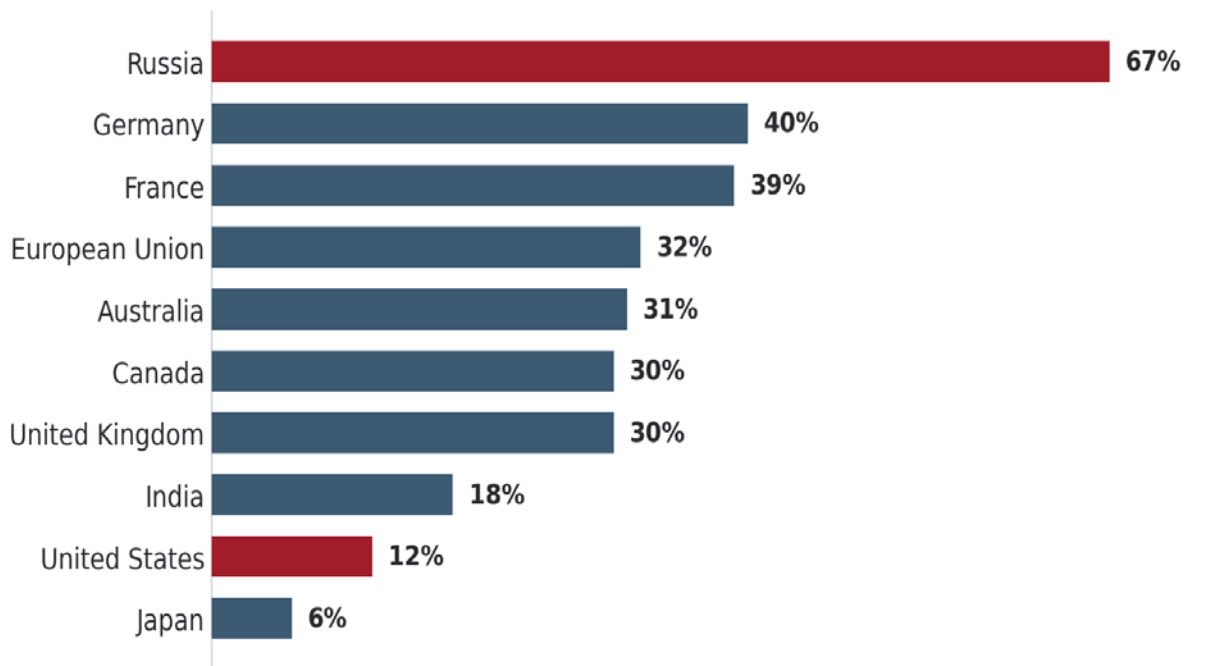


Figure 2. *Trust in global partners: share expressing above-neutral trust (scores 5–7) against the share assigning the lowest possible score of 1.*

At the other end of the spectrum sits Japan. A majority of respondents, 55%, give Japan the lowest possible trust score of 1. This is not mere unfamiliarity or indifference; it is active antipathy, rooted in unresolved historical grievances and ongoing territorial disputes. When more than half of a national sample selects the single most negative option available for one country, the survey is measuring something closer to settled conviction than passing sentiment.

Acknowledged superpower, deeply distrusted: the United States occupies the survey's most consequential contradiction.

The United States fares only marginally better, with 32% assigning it the bottom score and just 12% expressing above-neutral trust. That combination, acknowledged superpower, deeply distrusted, is one of the survey's most consequential findings, and the next sections show why it matters so much. A country can be feared and respected without being liked, and the United States occupies exactly that position in the Chinese public imagination.

European nations cluster in a moderate middle band. Germany (40%) and France (39%) enjoy the most favourable ratings, while the United Kingdom, Canada (30% each), and Australia (31%) form a tightly packed group. Interestingly, the European Union as a collective body draws somewhat lower trust (32%) than its leading member states, suggesting Chinese citizens distinguish between countries they can picture — with histories, cuisines and football teams — and institutions they cannot. For

middle-tier nations such as Canada, the data point to genuine headroom: trust is neither high nor poisoned, leaving room for cultural and educational engagement to move the needle.

Important by Choice or by Necessity

KEY TAKEAWAY

Russia and the U.S. are seen as China's most critical relationships — Russia by choice, the U.S. by necessity.

When asked which foreign relationships matter most to China, respondents answer like strategists. Russia tops the list, with 77% rating the relationship as highly significant — a slight moderation from 82% in 2025, but still commanding. The United States follows at 64%, and here the contrast with the trust numbers is the story: a country that only 12% trust is nonetheless seen as structurally indispensable by nearly two-thirds. Chinese citizens appear to hold both ideas at once — deep scepticism of American intentions, and clear-eyed recognition that the relationship cannot be wished away.

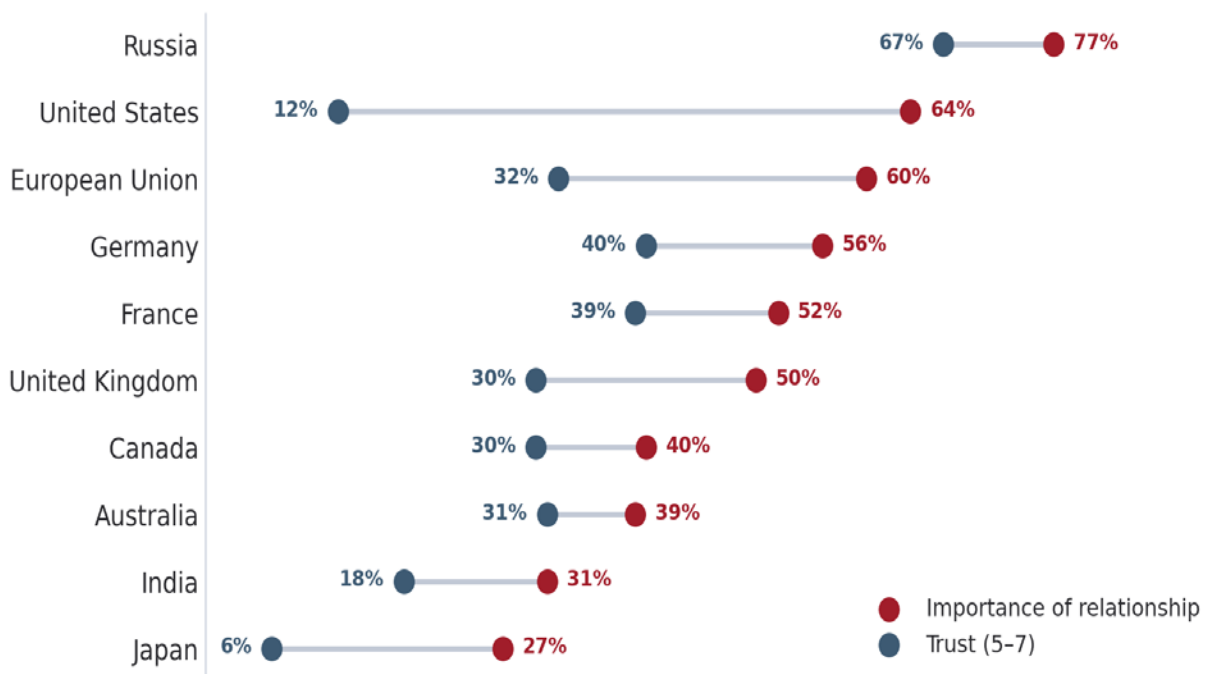


Figure 3. *Importance versus trust (share scoring 5–7). The United States shows the widest gap between how much the relationship matters and how much the country is trusted.*

The gap between the two dots for the United States in Figure 3 is the single most arresting image in the survey. Importance without trust describes a relationship that is managed rather than enjoyed — a partnership of necessity, conducted with one eye permanently narrowed. Russia's pairing is the mirror opposite: high importance and high trust travel together, the signature of a relationship the public embraces rather than merely tolerates.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE U.S.-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

The importance-trust gap is the central management challenge of the bilateral relationship as the Chinese public sees it. Since the relationship is rated indispensable, there is a durable floor under engagement: the public is not asking for decoupling. But because trust is so low, every interaction is read through a lens of suspicion, and goodwill gestures are easily discounted. The realistic objective for American actors is not to be liked but to be predictable.

The European Union ranks third at 60%, with Germany (56%) and France (52%) drawing considerable individual recognition. Canada (40%) and Australia (39%) sit in a secondary tier of Western partners — not central to the Chinese public's strategic map, but far from dismissed. Japan's position is the most striking: its importance score of 27% is the lowest in the survey, and paired with rock bottom trust, it suggests respondents view the relationship as not just troubled but relatively dispensable. This is a perception with real implications for regional stability, since publics that see little value in a relationship offer leaders little incentive to invest in it.

Who Might China Fight?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Japan has overtaken the U.S. as the nation Chinese citizens consider most likely to engage in military conflict with China.

Perhaps the most notable shift in the 2026 survey concerns perceptions of military conflict. Japan is now seen as the most likely adversary: 71% of respondents rate conflict with Japan as likely, and a full third select the maximum score of 7. In previous waves of the survey, the United States held this unwelcome distinction. The change reflects the combined weight of historical grievances and territorial disputes in the East China Sea, and it should register with anyone tracking security dynamics in Northeast Asia. A shift at the top of a threat ranking is rarely about a single event; it is the accumulated residue of many.

The United States follows closely at 57%, confirming that great power rivalry remains vivid in Chinese public consciousness — the U.S. is perceived as a formidable, if not inevitable, strategic rival. India registers moderate conflict expectations at 29%, consistent with ongoing border tensions that flare and subside but never fully resolve. Russia anchors the opposite end: 42% of respondents assign it the lowest possible conflict score, in keeping with its status as a strategic partner against whom conflict is nearly unthinkable.

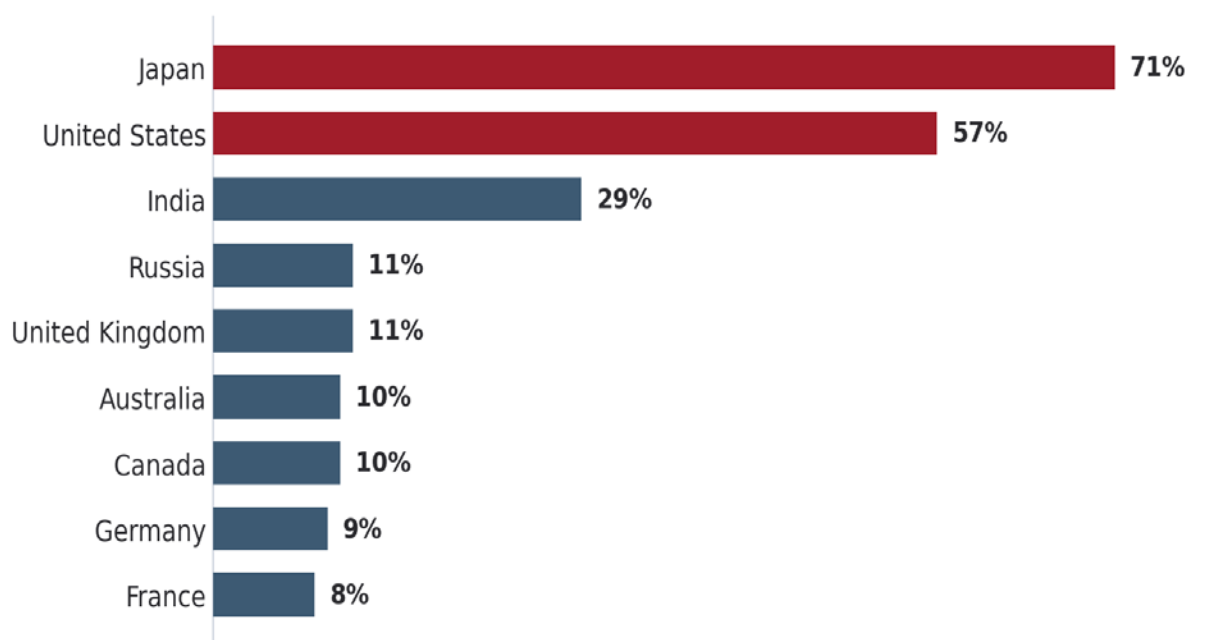


Figure 4. *Perceived likelihood of military conflict with China (share assigning scores 5–7).*

France, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia are all regarded as unlikely adversaries, with the vast majority of respondents placing them in the lowest range. Canada's conflict score is among the lowest of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing nations — a hint that Chinese citizens may view Sino-Canadian tensions as considerably milder than Western commentary sometimes assumes. The pattern is internally coherent: the countries seen as most likely to fight China are precisely those with the deepest historical grievances and the most direct strategic competition, while economic rivals without a security dimension are filed under competition, not conflict.

PART II

Where China Should Lead and With Whom

Beyond judging other countries, the survey asks Chinese citizens what they want their own country to do in the world: where it should lead, with whom it should cooperate, and how far its ambitions should reach. The answers reveal a public that backs an expansive global role, but on distinctly practical terms. If Part I is a map of how the world looks from China, Part II is a statement of intent about China's place in it.

The Public's Priorities for Global Leadership

KEY TAKEAWAY

Peace, security and technology top the public's priorities for Chinese global leadership. Exporting China's governance model has minimal support.

Asked which global responsibilities matter most, respondents put peace and security first: 65% assign it the highest importance score. This is no one year blip — the figure has stayed elevated across all four survey waves (61% in 2023, 68% in 2024, 70% in 2025). The sustained endorsement reflects a widely held expectation that China should play a proactive role in global stability, and it aligns with a broader perception among respondents that Western-led peacekeeping is in retreat, creating space for China to help redefine security frameworks. That the public ranks peace and security above even technology is itself revealing: the appetite is for China as a stabilizing presence, not merely a commercial one.

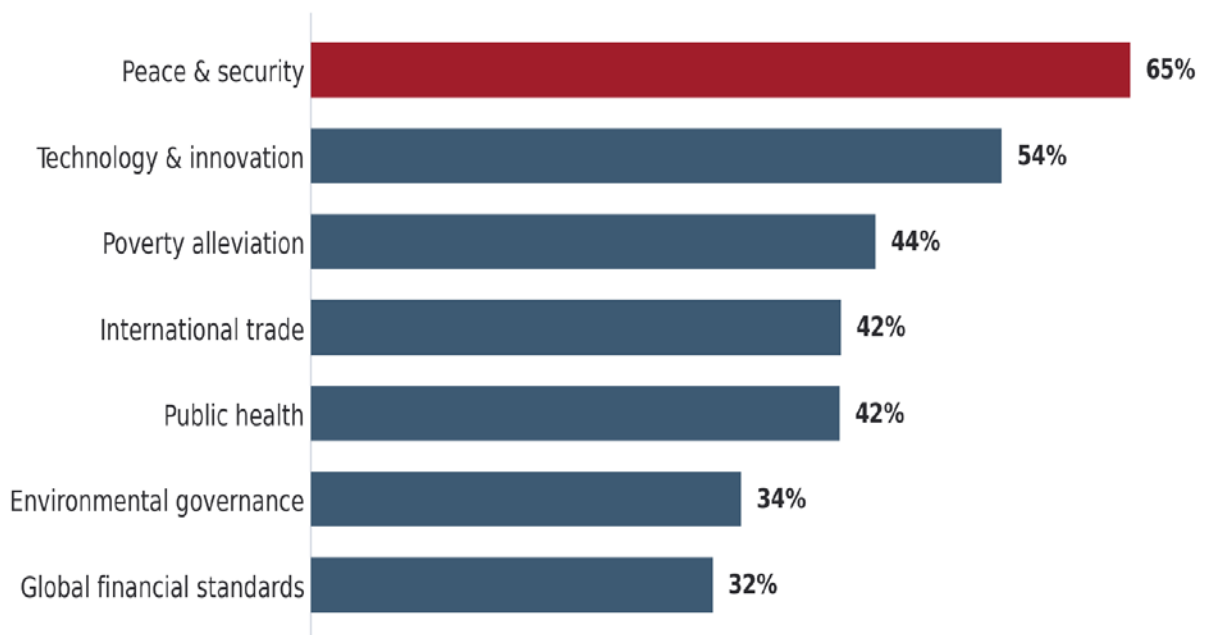


Figure 5. *Global leadership priorities: share assigning each role the maximum importance score.*

Technology comes second, with 54% assigning top importance to Chinese leadership in innovation. Public enthusiasm for the country's expanding capabilities in artificial intelligence, green energy, and advanced manufacturing is unmistakable — citizens clearly see technology as a core driver of China's international standing. Poverty alleviation (44%), public health (42%), and international trade (42%) each draw substantial support, while environmental governance (34%) and global financial standards (32%) round out the list. Even the lowest ranked priorities command roughly a third of respondents at the top of the scale, so this is a story of relative emphasis among broadly endorsed goals rather than of contested ones.

Read as a whole, the leadership profile describes a public that wants China to be a provider of public goods — security, technology, development, health — rather than an ideological standard bearer. The humanitarian and developmental items (poverty alleviation, public health) sit comfortably alongside the hard power and high technology ones, suggesting that the public's vision of leadership blends capability with a self-image of benevolence. This is soft power as the public imagines it: China as the indispensable problem solver.

Preferred Partners for Trade and Technology

KEY TAKEAWAY

Russia is the most valued partner for both economic and technological cooperation; Germany and the EU anchor European engagement. U.S. ties draw cautious but real support. Japan is last in every category.

When it comes to choosing partners, Russia dominates both major cooperation domains. 76% of respondents support deepening economic engagement with Russia — broadly consistent with 79% in 2024 and 80% in 2023 — and 74% favour closer technological collaboration. The resilience of these numbers, despite years of Western sanctions on Moscow, underscores how firmly Sino-Russian alignment has taken hold in public sentiment, extending well beyond trade into science and research. Crucially, support is strongest among urban and highly educated respondents, which means it is not a relic of an older or less cosmopolitan cohort, but a conviction held by precisely the demographic that drives China's economy.

Europe forms the second tier. Germany draws 63% support for stronger economic ties and an even higher 70% for technology cooperation, reinforcing its standing as China's most valued European interlocutor. The European Union as a whole follows at 62% and 65% respectively, with the United Kingdom close behind. France and Canada each attract support in the high 50s for economic cooperation, with Canada also drawing 56% for technology partnership. The picture for Europe is one of warm, business like regard: not the strategic intimacy reserved for Russia, but a settled belief that European technology and markets are worth courting.

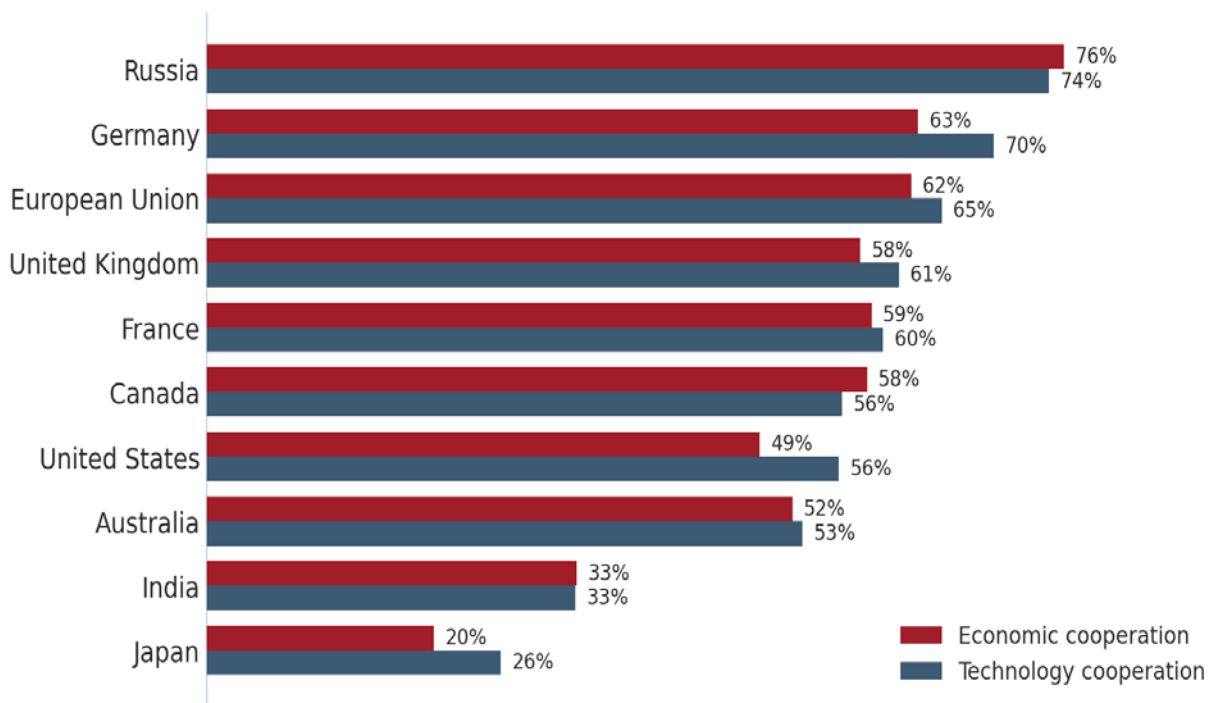


Figure 6. Support for deeper cooperation with each partner, in economic and technology domains (share scoring 5–7).

The American numbers tell a more complicated story. 49% of respondents favour expanded economic cooperation with the United States — a slight dip from the steady 53–54% recorded in each year from 2023 to 2025. Technology cooperation with the U.S. draws 56% support despite Washington's restrictions on Chinese technology firms, a pragmatic acknowledgment of American technological leadership. The gentle erosion on the economic side suggests that years of trade disputes and decoupling pressure may finally be wearing on public enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the headline remains that, even now, roughly half of Chinese citizens want more economic engagement with the United States, not less. For a relationship this distrusted, that is a remarkable floor of pragmatism.

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Japan, once again, sits alone at the bottom: just 20% support deeper economic cooperation and 26% support technology collaboration — by far the strongest resistance recorded for any country, and the only case where a plurality actively wants to restrict ties rather than maintain or expand them. India (33% on technology) and Australia face milder headwinds. The consistency of Japan's position across influence, trust, importance, conflict, and now cooperation makes it the survey's clearest outlier: on every dimension that matters, the Chinese public files Japan under adversary.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR TRADE AND TECHNOLOGY STRATEGY

For exporters and research institutions, the cooperation rankings are a readout of where public goodwill will lubricate engagement and where it will not. Russian and European partners enjoy a tailwind; American partners face a headwind but a navigable one, since the underlying appetite survives even acute political friction. Japanese firms and universities operate against the strongest public resistance in the survey — a structural disadvantage that commercial logic alone will struggle to overcome.

Ambition Without Ideology

KEY TAKEAWAY

The public supports expanding China's military and economic influence — but rejects both ideological projection and isolationism.

A series of attitudinal questions probes how far Chinese citizens want their country's ambitions to extend. The statement drawing the strongest agreement concerns military power: 43% of respondents strongly agree (scores of 6-7) that China should expand its global military presence, signalling a growing consensus behind a larger footprint for the People's Liberation Army. There is also significant confidence that the world benefits from China's rise — 36% strongly agree that deeper cooperation with China yields positive outcomes for partner nations, a belief that frames Chinese power as win-win rather than zero-sum.

The limits of public ambition are just as revealing as its reach. Only 13% strongly agree that China should promote its political and economic systems internationally. Isolationist sentiments fare no better: just 18% strongly endorse the idea that China should concentrate more on domestic affairs, and only 13% agree that the country is currently too open to foreign influence. The public, in short, wants neither to retreat behind its borders nor to convert the world to its model. It wants to be present, capable and respected.

Taken together, these numbers describe a public that wants China to be strong and influential, but not evangelical. There is a discernible gap between elite-level ambitions for ideological projection and a wider public that favours building national capability over exporting a model. For foreign observers who assume Chinese citizens uniformly back every dimension of their government's global agenda, this is a finding worth sitting with: the appetite is for stature, not for proselytism, and conflating the two leads to systematic misreading of where Chinese assertiveness will and will not go.

PART III

Where Chinese Citizens Want to Travel, Study, Work and Live

Geopolitics is one thing; personal plans are another. When the survey asks where respondents would most like to vacation, study, work or emigrate, it captures how Chinese citizens evaluate other countries in practical, lived terms — and the answers carry direct commercial stakes for tourism boards, universities, and immigration systems around the world. They also offer a revealing test of how far geopolitical hostility actually reaches into everyday aspiration. The short answer: less far than the headlines would suggest.

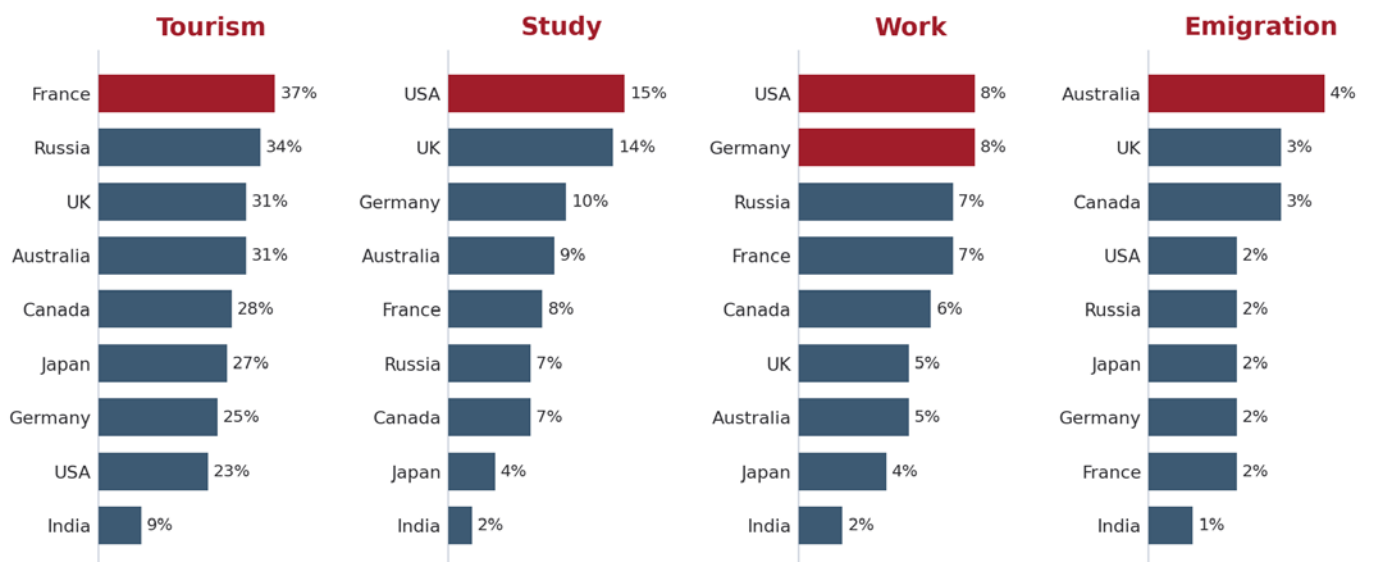


Figure 7. Preferred destinations for tourism, study, work, and emigration (share rating each likely in the next decade).

For tourism, France leads, its enduring status as a global cultural destination intact. The striking runner-up is Russia, whose appeal as a travel destination tracks the broader warmth in bilateral relations — a rare case where geopolitics and holiday planning point the same direction. Australia and the United Kingdom follow closely, with Canada and Japan close behind. The figure for Japan is the more revealing one: despite ranking as the most distrusted and most feared country in the survey, it remains a destination a quarter of respondents would happily visit. Hostility toward a government, it turns out, does not erase the appeal of its cherry blossoms, cuisine and convenience. The United States has moderated but remains a meaningful draw, while India ranks last by a wide margin.

For study, the picture inverts. The United States remains the single most sought after academic destination, followed by the United Kingdom and Germany. Whatever Chinese citizens think of

American foreign policy, the prestige of Western — and especially American — higher education endures, even amid visa and policy uncertainties. This is one of the survey's most policy relevant findings: the pipeline of Chinese academic interest in the West is held up not by warmth but by reputation, and reputation is stickier than sentiment. For work, Germany and the United States share the lead, with Germany's reputation for economic stability and advanced manufacturing a clear draw, and Russia and France close behind.

Hostility toward a government does not erase the appeal of its universities, its cuisine or its standard of living.

Emigration preferences reveal the most telling shift. Australia tops the list, valued for its standard of living, proximity to China and multicultural society. Canada and the United Kingdom follow. The United States registers just 2% — a notable decline from earlier years, when it commanded substantially higher emigration interest. Changing perceptions of long term settlement prospects in America, shaped by immigration policy and geopolitical friction, appear to be reshaping where Chinese citizens imagine building a life abroad. The distinction between studying in a country and settling in it is doing a lot of work here: the United States can remain the dream campus while ceasing to be the dream home.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND TOURISM BOARDS

The mobility data deliver an unusually clear commercial signal. For universities, American and British prestige is intact and largely insulated from political mood — but it cannot be taken for granted, since the same students increasingly do not picture themselves staying. For tourism boards, the lesson is that bilateral tension is not destiny: even the most distrusted destinations retain real visitor appeal, and warmth in relations (as with Russia) translates directly into travel intent.

Two broader patterns are worth drawing out. The first is that the survey's four mobility questions — visit, study, work, settle — form a ladder of commitment, and a country's position can change dramatically from one rung to the next. The United States is the clearest case: highly desirable to study in, far less so to settle in permanently. That divergence is precisely the kind of signal that aggregate “favourability” measures miss, and it is the rung-by-rung detail that matters most to the institutions making long term bets on Chinese talent and tourism. The second pattern is the quiet consistency of India at the bottom of every list, a reminder that perceived rivalry and limited familiarity compound: a country that is neither well understood nor warmly regarded struggles to attract interest even in the apolitical realm of holidays and study. For the world's second-most-populous country, that invisibility in the Chinese imagination is itself a strategic fact.

PART IV

The View of Canada

As the survey's host country, Canada receives a dedicated set of questions — and the four year record now available makes Canada a useful case study in how a middle power fares in the Chinese public imagination during a period of diplomatic strain. The answer is more encouraging for Canada than its recent bilateral headlines would predict, and the gap between official frostiness and public goodwill is itself one of the report's findings. Canada is, in effect, a test of a hopeful proposition: that a country can weather a difficult patch in state-to-state relations without forfeiting the regard of the other country's public. The 2026 data suggest the proposition holds, with important caveats about what public goodwill can and cannot deliver.

Support for Cooperation Keeps Climbing

KEY TAKEAWAY

Support for Canada-China cooperation has risen across all five measured domains since 2023, led by cultural exchanges at 80%.

Across every domain the survey measures — cultural exchanges, security, economic cooperation, global governance, and environmental cooperation — Chinese public support for working with Canada is higher in 2026 than it was in 2023. Cultural exchanges lead at 80%, the single highest cooperation figure for Canada in the survey, followed by economic cooperation and global security, with global governance and environmental cooperation close behind. The trend lines wobble year to year, as all opinion data do, but the four year direction is unmistakably upward.

What makes this trajectory notable is its insulation from diplomatic incident. The 2023-2026 period encompassed allegations of election interference, reciprocal diplomatic expulsions, and tariff disputes — the kind of friction that might be expected to depress public enthusiasm for cooperation. Instead, support rose. This durability suggests that Chinese public goodwill toward Canada rests on something more stable than the news cycle: a reservoir of positive association built on education, immigration, and a benign reputation that high profile disputes have not drained. For Canadian policymakers, the implication is that the public opinion foundation for re-engagement is intact even when the official relationship is not.

It is worth being precise about what these numbers do and do not show. They measure the appetite of the Chinese public for cooperation with Canada, not the appetite of either government to pursue it. A willing public does not guarantee a willing state. But public goodwill lowers the political cost of engagement and raises the payoff of cultural and educational initiatives, and on that narrower question the data are unambiguous: the Chinese public is more open to Canada now than at any point in the survey's history.

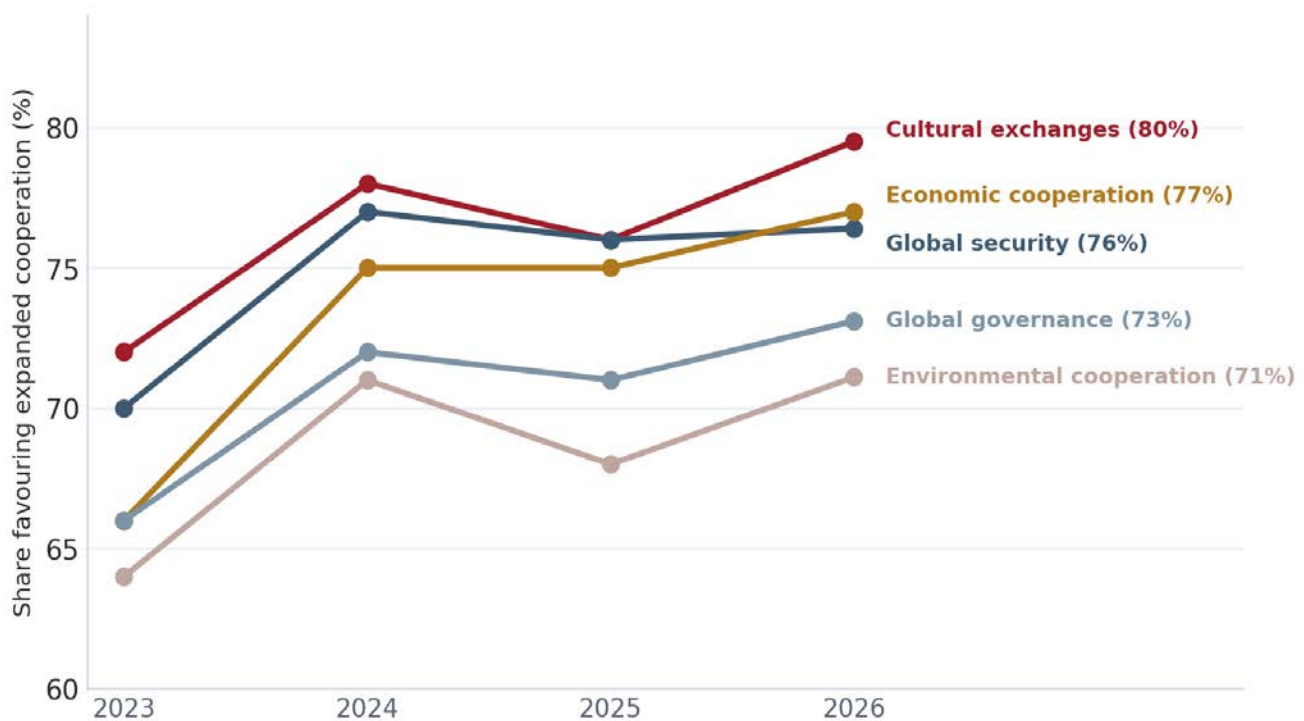


Figure 8. Support for Canada–China cooperation across five domains, 2023–2026 (share favouring expanded cooperation, scores 5–7).

What Actually Shapes the Relationship

KEY TAKEAWAY

Structural factors — China’s rising power and Canada’s ties to the U.S. — matter more than cultural or values differences.

When asked what most influences Canada-China relations, respondents point first to structure, not values. China’s expanding global influence tops the list, recognized by 83%, followed closely by Canada’s alignment with the United States at 78% — confirmation that Chinese citizens view Canada substantially through the lens of its relationship with Washington. Canada’s domestic political landscape ranks third at 74%, while cultural and political differences come last at 66%.

The ordering matters for diplomatic strategy. If Chinese citizens believe the relationship is shaped primarily by power dynamics and alliance structures rather than by clashing values, then reducing friction may depend more on structural reassurance than on values-based dialogue. Put bluntly, the Chinese public reads Canada’s China policy as substantially made in Washington — a perception that constrains how much credit or blame Canada can earn on its own account, and one that Canadian diplomacy ignores at its peril.

PART V

Information, Knowledge and Trust

How do Chinese citizens form the views documented in this report? The final section of the survey examines what respondents know about other countries, where they get their information, and how they understand the relationship between governments and their people. The answers illuminate not just what Chinese citizens think, but why — and they carry direct lessons for anyone hoping to be heard by a Chinese audience.

Does Knowing a Country Mean Trusting It?

KEY TAKEAWAY

More knowledge generally means more trust — but not for Japan and the U.S., where historical grievances override familiarity.

Respondents report knowing the most about the two countries they trust least. Japan and the United States top the self-reported knowledge rankings, with mean scores of 4.72 and 4.73 out of 7, reflecting their constant presence in Chinese media and public discourse. Russia follows at 4.63. The European Union (3.97), France (3.89), the United Kingdom (3.86), and Germany (3.85) occupy a middle band, while Canada (3.63) and Australia (3.53) rank lowest — surprisingly limited visibility given their substantial economic ties with China.

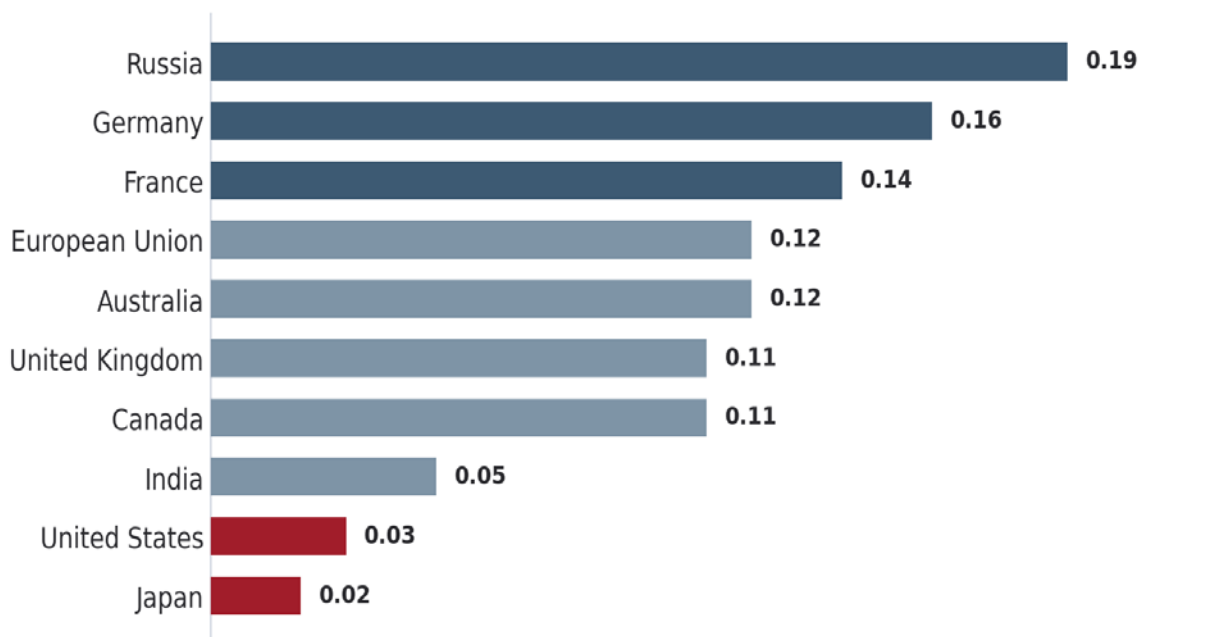


Figure 9. *Strength of the knowledge–trust relationship by country. Higher values mean knowing more about a country is more strongly associated with trusting it.*

Statistical analysis confirms that, across all ten jurisdictions, the more respondents know about a country, the more they tend to trust it — the relationship is significant everywhere. But its strength varies enormously. For Russia, knowledge and trust move together most tightly; Germany and France follow close behind. At the other extreme sit Japan and the United States, where the link is weakest by a wide margin. For these two countries, familiarity simply does not translate into trust: historical grievances and media framing dominate, and knowing more does little to soften views — and may, in some cases, harden them.

Canada lands in the moderate middle — which is, in its way, good news. Since the knowledge-trust link for Canada is reasonably strong and current knowledge is low, raising Chinese citizens' familiarity with Canada through cultural and educational engagement has measurable potential to raise trust. The same logic applies to Australia. This is the empirical case for exchange programmes, which respondents themselves strongly endorse: for countries where the link is intact but familiarity is low, visibility is not a vanity metric but a lever. For Japan and the United States, by contrast, the same lever is largely broken — more exposure will not buy more trust, because the deficit is rooted in history and grievance rather than ignorance.

A Hybrid Information Environment

KEY TAKEAWAY

Social media dominates how Chinese citizens consume information about the world, with sharp generational divides across the traditional channels.

Social media is, overwhelmingly, how Chinese citizens learn about the world. Its mean usage score sits near the ceiling across every demographic subgroup, with younger respondents the most engaged. Television remains widely used, though its audience is aging: respondents over 60 report the highest engagement while younger cohorts have largely moved on. Personal discussion remains a steady presence across all groups, while newspapers and radio continue their long decline. The generational split is stark enough that any single channel communication strategy will, by definition, miss a large share of the population.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

For governments and organizations trying to reach Chinese audiences, the central lesson is that outreach must be tailored by demographic because no single channel reaches everyone. A communication strategy built around any one medium will, by construction, miss a large share of the population.

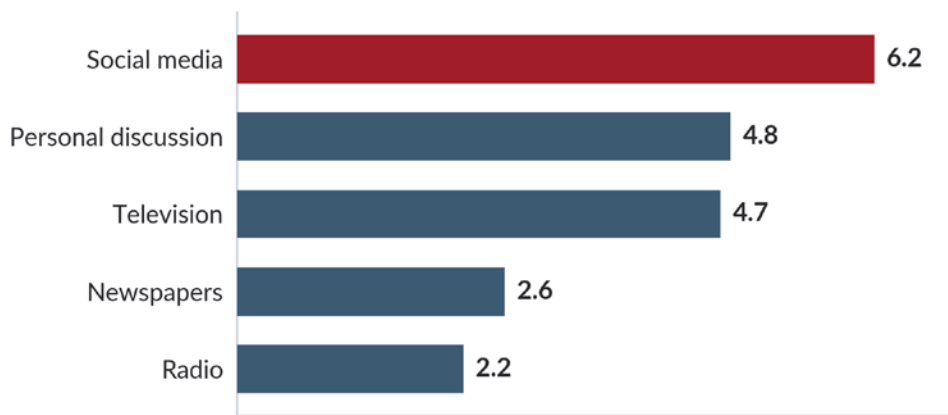


Figure 10. *How Chinese citizens obtain information about the world: mean usage score by source (1 = never, 7 = constantly).*

Do Governments Speak for Their People?

Finally, the survey asks whether respondents believe foreign government actions generally reflect the popular opinion of their citizens. In 2026, 75% agree — identical to 2025 and broadly stable across the entire 2023-2026 period. Chinese citizens, in short, hold a durable belief that governments, including their own, represent public sentiment.

This seemingly abstract belief has concrete consequences. If Chinese citizens assume that Western foreign policy genuinely reflects the views of Western publics, then hostile policies are read not as the choices of particular administrations but as expressions of what foreign populations actually think of China. That interpretive habit can harden bilateral attitudes well beyond what any single policy decision would warrant — and it is worth bearing in mind by anyone crafting messages intended for Chinese audiences. A tariff becomes evidence not of one government’s calculation but of an entire nation’s hostility, and the distinction between a state and its people — so central to how Western publics rationalize foreign conflict — is one the Chinese public is comparatively unlikely to draw.

The finding also closes a loop with the trust data in Part I. If governments are assumed to speak for their people, then the deep distrust of Japan and the United States is not aimed narrowly at Tokyo and Washington; it is, in the respondent’s mental model, distrust of Japanese and American society writ large. This helps explain why familiarity does so little to soften views of those two countries: more exposure to a population one already reads as the source of hostile policy is unlikely to generate warmth. It also clarifies the stakes of people-to-people engagement. Cultural and educational exchange works, where it works, precisely because it interrupts this logic — replacing an abstract, government-shaped image of a foreign people with concrete, individual encounters that the official narrative does not fully control. That is why the survey’s strong endorsement of exchanges is more than a feel good result: it points to one of the few mechanisms capable of loosening the tight identification between a foreign government and its public in the Chinese mind.

What It All Means

The fourth edition of the CCGPS portrays a public that has settled into confidence. Chinese citizens want their country to lead — on peace and security above all, and through technological strength — and they back the expansion of China's military capabilities as the natural accompaniment of great power status. Alongside this ambition runs a consistent pragmatism that complicates easy narratives about Chinese public opinion.

Three tensions stand out. First, despite intensifying geopolitical rivalry, Chinese citizens show a clear reluctance to embrace full economic and technological decoupling from the West. Half still want deeper economic ties with the United States; majorities favour expanded cooperation with Germany, the EU, and the UK. The public recognizes, in effect, that the West remains integral to China's development and global integration — a recognition that survives even acute political friction. Second, robust support for Russia coexists with closer Sino-Russian alignment, which may itself complicate the broader international engagement the public clearly values. Third, citizens back capability over ideology: they want a stronger China, not a China that exports its political model.

The survey's findings on familiarity and trust offer a practical roadmap. For countries like Russia, Germany, and France, being known and being trusted go hand in hand. For Japan and the United States, the link is broken: visibility without trust. But for lower profile countries like Canada and Australia, the connection is intact and underexploited: raising familiarity through trade, sustainability initiatives, and especially educational and cultural exchange has measurable potential to raise trust. The four year stability of cooperation preferences toward Canada — positive, rising, and insulated from diplomatic incidents — shows what that structural goodwill looks like in practice.

The Chinese information environment frames everything else. A public that consumes the world through social media will be reached — if it is reached at all — on its own terms. For policymakers, businesses, universities and media organizations engaging with China, these findings offer both a caution and an invitation: the channels are narrower than many assume, but the public on the other end is more pragmatic, more open to cooperation, and more interested in the world than the geopolitical headlines suggest. That is the throughline of four years of data — a public whose confidence is real, whose grievances are real, and whose pragmatism is more durable than either.

How the Survey Was Done

This report is based on the fourth annual Chinese Citizens' Global Perception Survey, a national survey examining mainland Chinese citizens' perspectives on China's relations with ten global actors: Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The survey contains 34 questions covering attitudes on foreign relations, global peace and security leadership, international trade and investment, preferences for education, emigration, and tourism, global social and economic governance, and research and technological collaboration. Most questions use 7-point scales. The survey also collects demographic information (age, gender, urban or rural residence, marital status, and Communist Party membership) and socio-economic information (education, language abilities, occupation, and individual and household income).

Working with a survey firm in mainland China, the CCGPS collected responses across urban and rural China in the first quarter of 2026 using a stratified, random sampling approach. The survey elicited 2,206 valid responses distributed across all 31 provincial-level divisions. The sample skews urban (39.2% are large-city residents), working-age (52% are aged 30–49), and moderately educated (60% hold at least an associate's or bachelor's degree) — characteristics typical of surveys in China.

Several limitations deserve mention. Responses were counted as valid only if complete, a standard practice that carries a small potential for bias. Preference falsification — the tendency of respondents to conceal their true beliefs under social or political pressure — remains a possibility in any survey conducted in mainland China; some respondents may align their answers with prevailing mainstream opinion, particularly on politically sensitive items. Readers should interpret the findings with these caveats in mind, and treat year-over-year movements of a few percentage points as suggestive rather than definitive.

About

Lead Author

Reza Hasmath (Ph.D., Cambridge) is a Full Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He has held faculty appointments in political science, sociology and management at the Universities of Toronto, Melbourne and Oxford. Beyond academia, he has advised global think tanks, consultancies, development agencies and civil society organizations. His award-winning research investigates how emerging Chinese state and non-state actors influence prevailing theories and practices in international affairs. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Civil Society*.

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