THE CARTER CENTER

EMORY UNIVERSITY
Department of Political Science

CHINA PULSE

Taiwan: No Mandate for War, Support for Coercion

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Cross-strait relations escalated at the opening of this year. In late December 2025, a large-scale drill by China's People's Liberation Army, titled "Justice Mission 2025," brought together naval, air, and rocket forces to rehearse a full maritime blockade of Taiwan. Rockets from the drill landed within 24 nautical miles of the island, contributing to the normalization of PLA presence in Taiwan's contiguous zone. In April 2026, Kuomintang Chairwoman Cheng Li-wun traveled through China on a widely publicized official visit that culminated in a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. At the meeting, Cheng called for the promotion of peaceful cross-strait relations while Xi repeated the common refrain that China and Taiwan are "one family" and warned against foreign interference in the strait.

U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to China in May caused concern among some American China experts that he would bargain away Washington's commitment to Taiwan in exchange for better trade relations with China. While no official bargain occurred, Trump has delayed the signing of a $14 billion arms sale to Taiwan, stating it was a "very good negotiating chip."

This survey's findings capture changes in Chinese public opinion across an eventful period in cross-strait relations. Many of the shifts in Chinese attitudes toward Taiwan occurred before the current survey was fielded, pointing toward the impact of Cheng's official visit. In other cases, the Trump-Xi summit appears to be an important hinge point. In all, Chinese continue to prefer a peaceful, diplomatic approach to cross-strait relations, but endorse the use of force should Taiwan declare formal independence. Further, while cultural and historical nationalist reasons for Taiwan's importance still have the most resonance, the

Chinese public has become more aware of the island's importance in semiconductor manufacturing and U.S.-China high-tech competition.

China Pulse is a twice-annual survey research project measuring Chinese public opinion on international relations conducted by The Carter Center and Emory University. The data in this brief come from a survey fielded between April 16 and June 26, 2026.

Key Findings

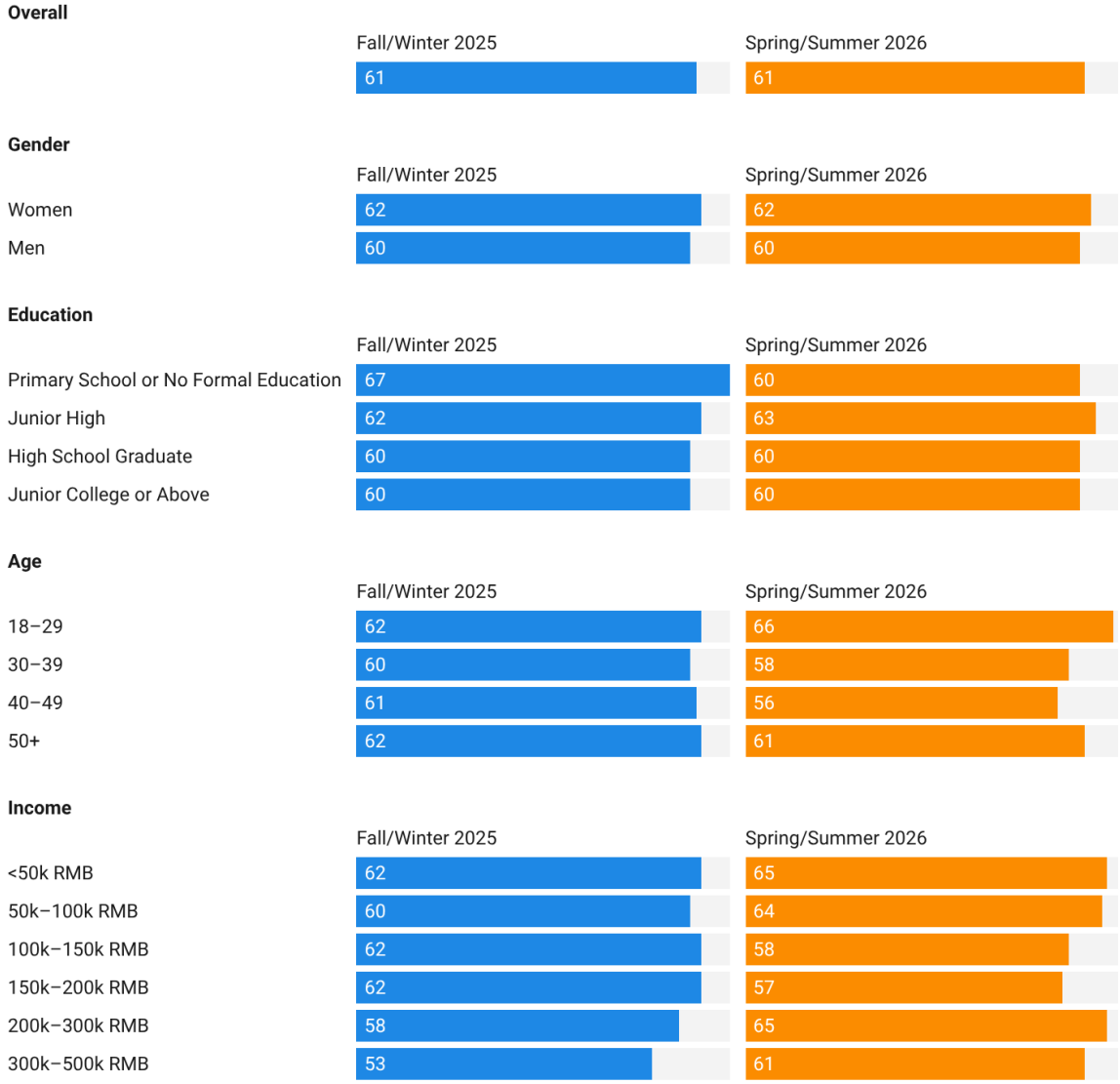
- Chinese favorability toward Taiwan is higher than any other country or region in this survey, averaging 61 out of 100 in the current wave and in late 2025.
- Opinion on unification by force remains split, but the gap between those who opposed the use of force (37%) and those who do not (46%) significantly widened.
- A narrow majority (51%) believe the use of force against Taiwan would only make the problem of cross-strait relations worse.
- Attacking Kinmen and Matsu islands is the most popular response to an official declaration of Taiwanese independence (77%), followed by a naval blockade (59%) and economic sanctions (56%).
- One quarter of Chinese support a full-scale military attack in response to a formal declaration of independence. Yet, while the least popular, support for this type of response increased after the Trump-Xi summit in May (from 21% to 29%). This increase was largely driven by Chinese under 40, whose support increased from 17 percent to 34 percent.
- Among non-coercive approaches to cross-strait relations, most Chinese support enhancing cultural exchange (83%), promoting trade (82%), and easier work and residence policies for Taiwanese living in the mainland (72%).
- Two-thirds of Chinese now support official negotiations for a peaceful settlement of Taiwan's status, a significant increase from slim majority support (52%) in late 2025.
- Unilateral concessions to Taiwan to ease cross-strait relations are generally unpopular (15%), but support for this option increased significantly among college-educated Chinese after the Trump-Xi summit in May.
- After the summit in May, two rationales for Taiwan's importance increased significantly: its semiconductor industry (46% to 58%) and its model as an open society (44% to 53%).

Taiwan's Favorability Remains Highest in the Region

Favorability toward Taiwan among the Chinese public remains the highest of all countries and regions in this survey. Overall, favorability toward Taiwan (61 out of 100) outranked Russia (59) and Singapore (49) in the current survey. While Taiwan's favorability decreased among China's least educated and increased among Chinese aged 18 to 29, there is no pattern among demographic categories for which Chinese favor Taiwan.

Attitudes Toward Taiwan Mostly Favorable Across All Demographics

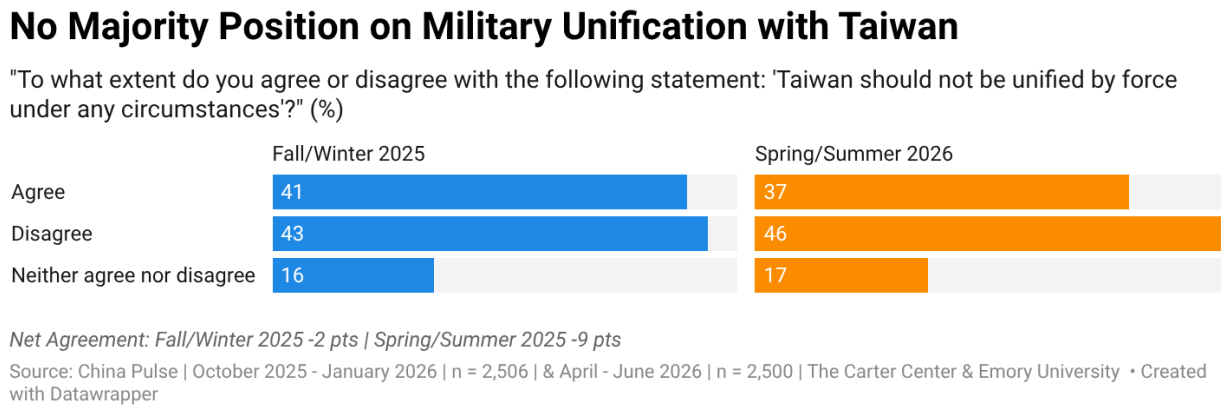
"We'd like you to rate how you feel toward each of the following countries/regions on a scale of 0 to 100, which we call a 'feeling thermometer.' On this feeling thermometer scale, ratings between 0 and 49 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable and cold (with 0 being the most unfavorable/coldest). Ratings between 51 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm (with 100 being the most favorable/warmest)." Taiwan only.



Source: China Pulse | October 2025 - January 2026 | n = 2,506 | & April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

Widening Gap on Attitudes about the Use of Force

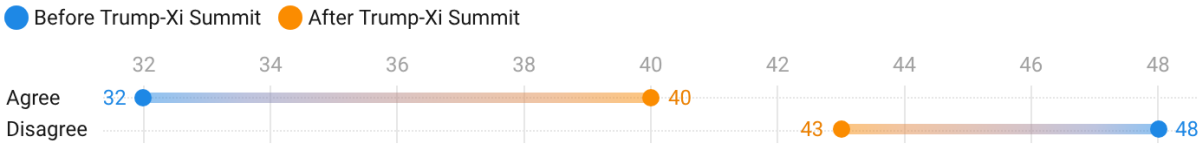
The remarkable favorability the Chinese public accords Taiwan does not, however, translate into a consensus opinion about the use of military force in settling the question of unification. In the most recent survey, 37 percent of Chinese agreed that Taiwan should not be unified by force under any circumstances while nearly half disagreed. The most significant change in this response compared to late 2025 is the increasing gap between those that oppose the use of force and those that do not. In the previous survey, 41 percent of Chinese agreed force should never be used for unification with Taiwan while 43 percent disagreed. The gap between these positions thus increased by 7 points, from 2 points to 9 points in the most recent survey. In short, the portion of Chinese willing to consider the use of force to unify with Taiwan remains below 50 percent, but those who oppose the use of force are on the decline for now.



Importantly, this survey found a significant increase in Chinese who opposed the use of force after the Trump-Xi summit in May, accompanied by a decrease among those who believed the use of force should be kept on the table. After the summit, those who opposed the use of force (i.e., “agree” below) increase from 32 to 40 percent. As with several findings in this survey related to attitudes toward the United States, analysis of Chinese public opinion before and after the summit reveal a moderating effect not necessarily visible when only looking at the overall figures.

Dovish Attitudes on Taiwan Increased After Trump-Xi Summit

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Taiwan should not be unified by force under any circumstances'?" (% before and after May 13-15, 2026)



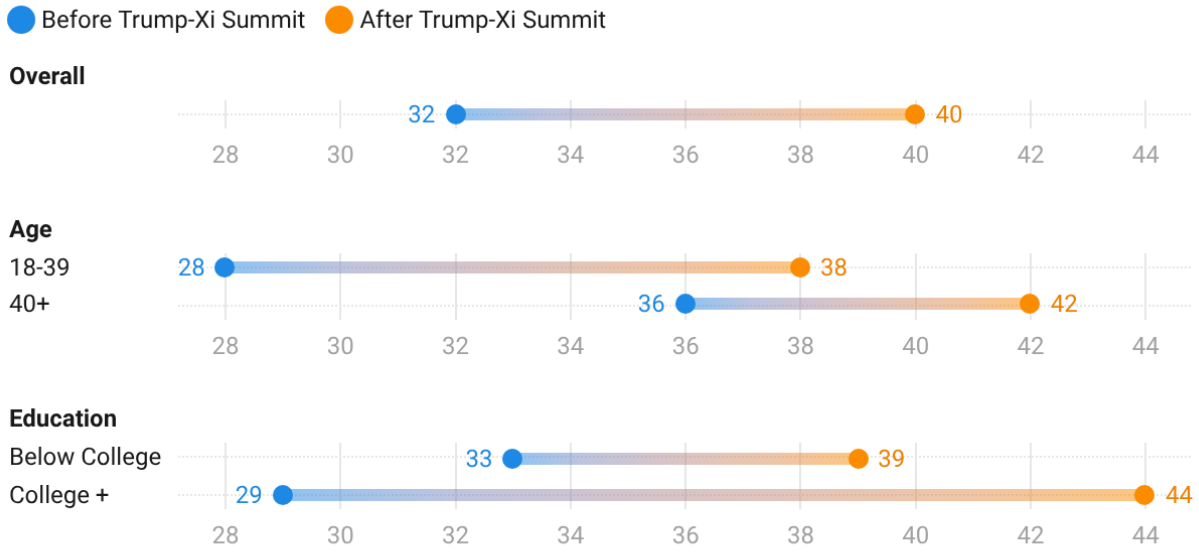
Net Agreement: Pre-summit -16 pts | Post-summit -3 pts

Source: China Pulse | April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

The most significant increases to post-summit dovishness on unification with Taiwan occurred among Chinese aged 18 to 39 years old (from 28% to 38%) and Chinese with a college education (29% to 44%). In both cases, pre-summit opposition to the use of force was below the overall average (32%), and college-educated Chinese opposition surpassed the post-summit overall average (40%). It is worth noting, then, that these changes were not only significant but occurred among some of the most hawkish demographics.

Younger and Better Educated Chinese Had Largest Increase in Dovishness Toward Taiwan After Summit

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Taiwan should not be unified by force under any circumstances'?" (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)

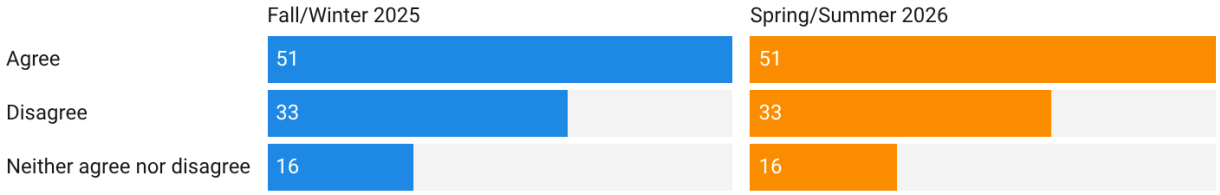


Source: China Pulse | April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

Declining opposition to the use of force for unification under any circumstances, however, does not offer a complete picture of the Chinese public's views on the issue. When asked whether violence will make the Taiwan issue worse, the results almost flip, rendering a small majority (51%) who think the use of force will create more problems than it solves. This figure, along with those who disagree (33%), remained static between late 2025 and the current survey.

Small but Steady Majority Believe Military Force Will Make the Taiwan Issue Worse

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'The use of military force only makes the Taiwan issue worse'?" (%)

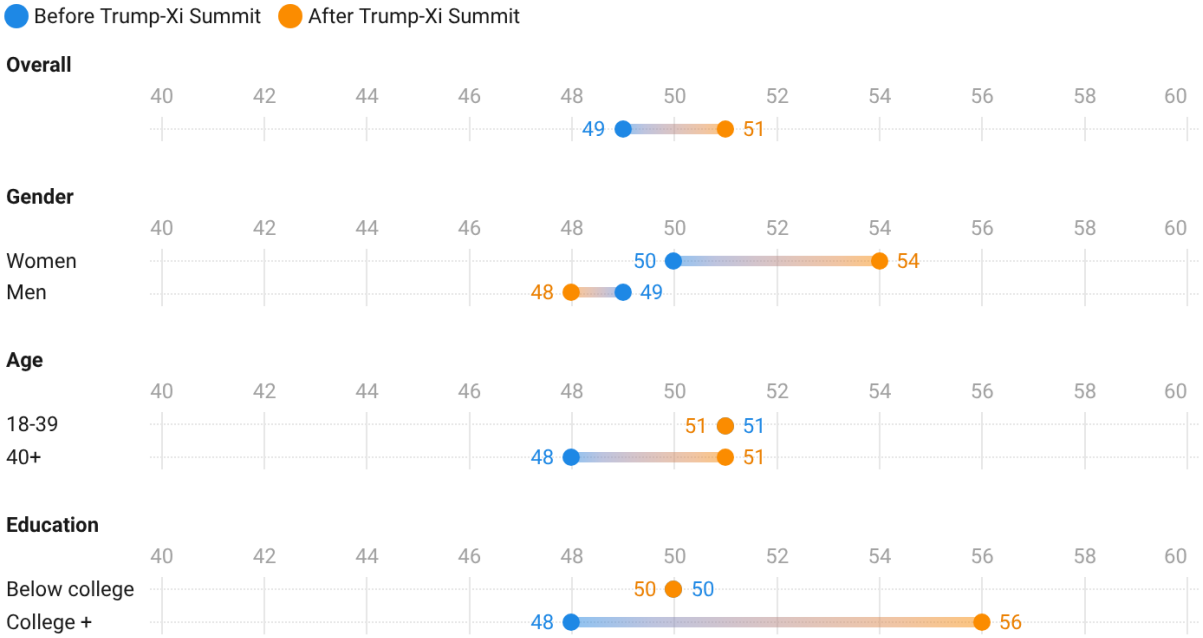


Source: China Pulse | October 2025 - January 2026 | n = 2,506 | & April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

In keeping with trends around the use of force above, comparison of attitudes before and after the summit regarding the efficacy of military force against Taiwan also trended in a dovish direction (toward “agree”). These modest rises after the summit brought the overall figure back in line with the results from our survey in late 2025.

Post-Summit Aversion to Military Force

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'The use of military force only makes the Taiwan issue worse'?" (% agree)



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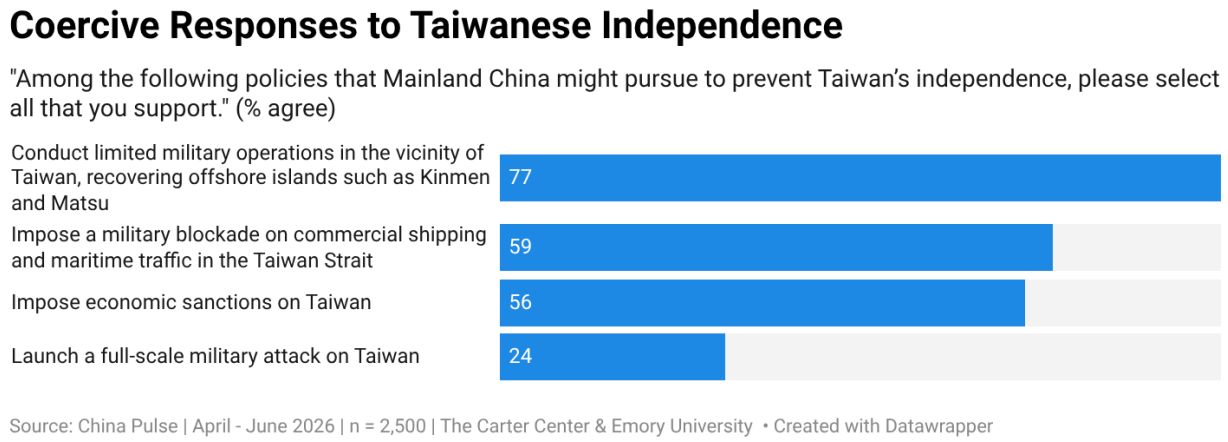
Coercive and Military Response to Taiwanese Independence

The Chinese government is very clear that a formal declaration of Taiwanese independence would cross a red line for Beijing and would be seen as an act of war. Regardless of opposing views outside China, this context is important for interpreting Chinese support for responding to de jure Taiwanese independence. In the context of political discourse within China, such a declaration from Taipei would initiate a war to which China would then be responding. Thus, it is analytically inaccurate to interpret preferences for how China should respond as support for pre-emptive coercion or use of force. From a Chinese perspective, the war would have already begun. Nonetheless, hawkishness increased during the current survey.

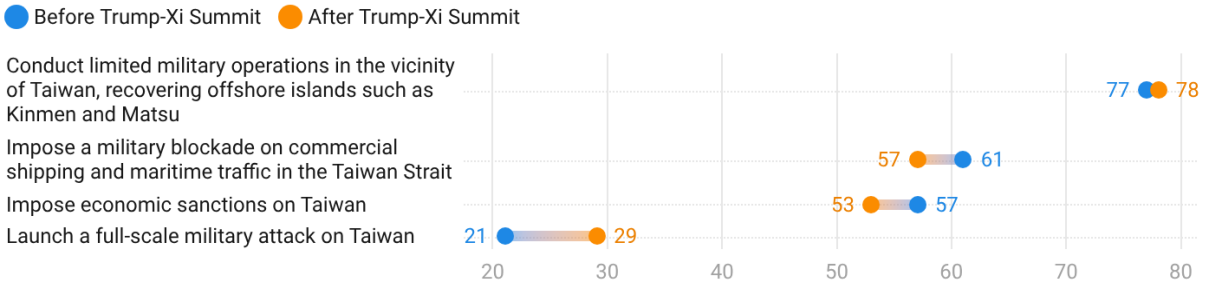
Three out of four Chinese support limited military operations against Kinmen and Matsu islands (territories governed by Taipei close to the mainland) in the event Taiwan declares independence. While this would presumably result in less total harm than an assault against the main island, Taipei (especially a hypothetical Taipei that declared formal independence) would certainly see this as an equal act of war. Majorities also support military blockade of the Taiwan Strait (59%) and economic sanctions (56%). One in four Chinese support a full-scale military attack.



In the current survey, comparing responses from before and after the Trump-Xi summit reveals only one significant change: the increase in support for a full-scale military attack (from 21% to 29%). Support for limited attacks on Kinmen and Matsu remained static while support for a blockade and economic sanctions decreased slightly.

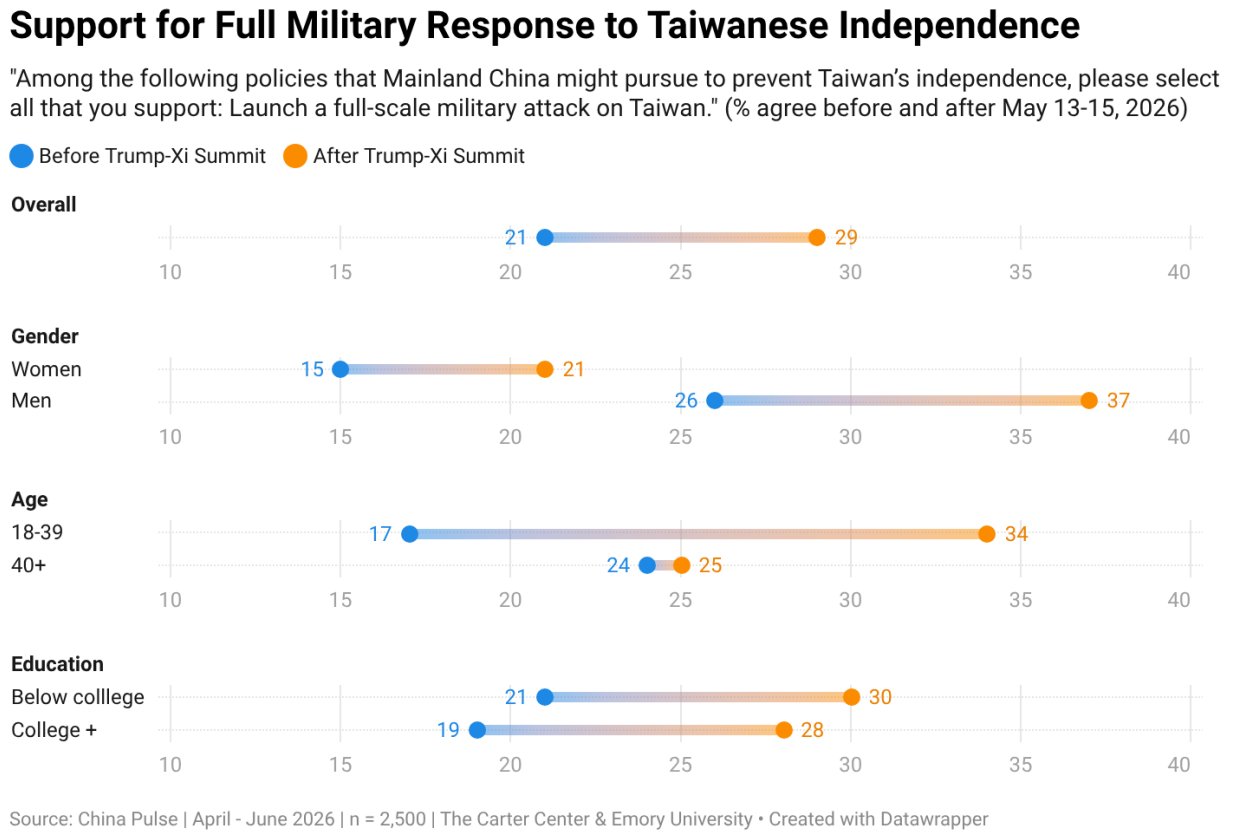
Post-Summit Support for Coercive Responses to Taiwanese Independence

"Among the following policies that Mainland China might pursue to prevent Taiwan's independence, please select all that you support." (% agree)



Source: China Pulse | April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

The increase in support for a full-scale military attack in response to a declaration of Taiwanese independence was driven primarily by a significant increase among Chinese aged 18 to 39 years old (from 17% to 34%). Increases also occurred among Chinese with a college education (19% to 28%) and those without (21% to 30%). Support among men increased from a figure already above the pre-summit average (26% to 37%). No gender, age, or education demographic decreased after the summit.

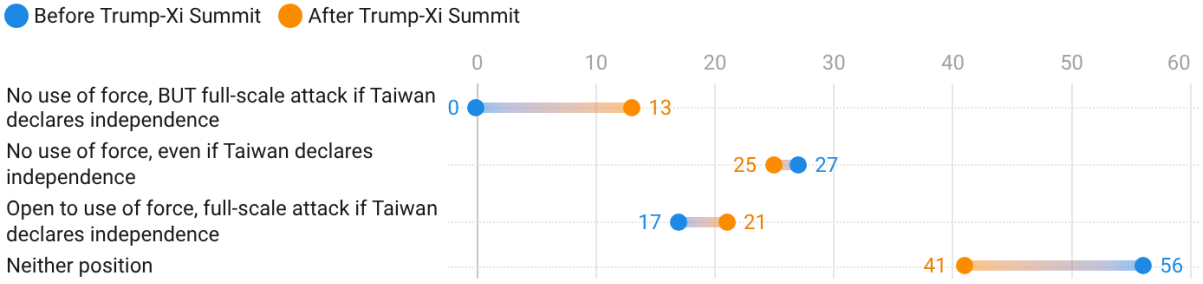


This result for Chinese aged 18 to 39 years old seems to contradict an earlier finding: this same age group also grew significantly more opposed to unifying Taiwan by force during the current survey. Comparing responses to these two questions for this age demographic alone reveals an important inconsistency. Before the summit, almost no respondents who opposed the use of force for unification also supported a full-scale attack against Taiwan if it declared independence. In other words, there were almost no respondents who opposed military option in one case and then endorsed the strongest military option in the other case. After the summit, 13 percent of respondents took this contradictory position. Those who indicated support for the use of force in both cases increased from 17 to 21 percent while those who opposed use of force in both questions decreased slightly from 27 to 25 percent. A plausible explanation for the 13 percent who answered inconsistently after the summit may be that

they oppose the use of force given the status quo (i.e., they oppose a preemptive strike on Taiwan) but see a declaration of Taiwanese independence as an act of war serious enough to warrant the strongest possible military response from Beijing.

Young Chinese Attitudes on Use of Force Against Taiwan Partly Inconsistent

"Taiwan should not be unified by force under any circumstances" and "Among the following policies that Mainland China might pursue to prevent Taiwan's independence, please select all that you support: Launch a full-scale military attack on Taiwan." (% Chinese age 18 to 39 years old, before and after May 13-15, 2026)



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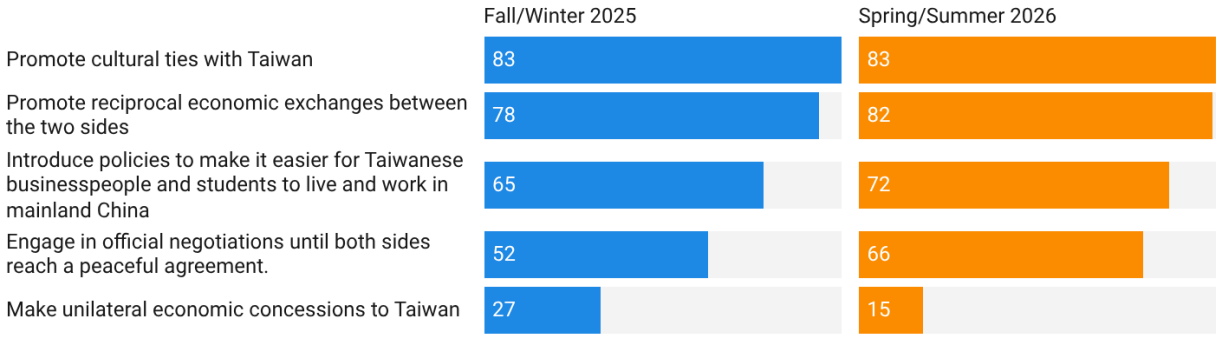
Non-Coercive Approaches to Cross-Strait Relations

While several coercive and military responses to a declaration of formal Taiwanese independence received majority support, four out of five proposed options for improving cross-strait relations also received substantial majority support. Comparing the current survey to late 2025, promoting cultural exchange remains the most popular option (83% in both waves). Support for reciprocal economic exchanges increased from 78 to 82 percent, and support for policies that make it easier for Taiwanese students and businesspeople to live and work in mainland China increased from 65 to 72 percent. The two most significant changes, however, were increased support for official negotiations for a peaceful agreement (from 52% to 66%) and decreased support for unilateral concessions (27% to 15%).

Broad Appeal of Non-Coercive Cross-Strait Relations

"Among the following policies that Mainland China might pursue to promote cross-strait relations, please select all that you support." (% agree)

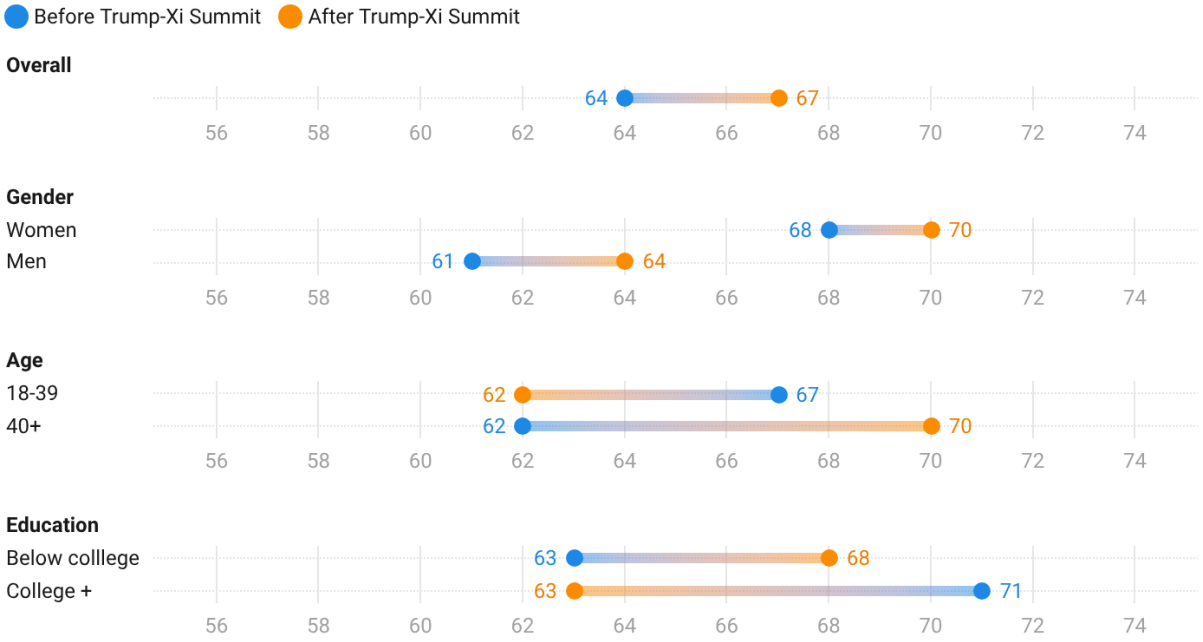


Source: China Pulse | October 2025 - January 2026 | n = 2,506 | & April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

Analysis of Chinese support for official negotiations with Taiwan reveals no pattern during the current survey. Both women and men increased in their support. Meanwhile, support for negotiations fell among younger and better-educated groups, and rose among the less educated and older Chinese. What is clear from the data is that the catalyst for the overall increase in support for negotiations occurred before the current survey was launched on April 16, 2026. It is plausible that the increase in support for negotiations is a reaction to the highly publicized visit to China by Kuomintang chairwoman Cheng Li-wun, which concluded only four days before this survey was fielded.

Higher Support for Negotiations Not Related to Summit

"Among the following policies that Mainland China might pursue to promote cross-strait relations, please select all that you support: Engage in official negotiations until both sides reach a peaceful agreement." (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)

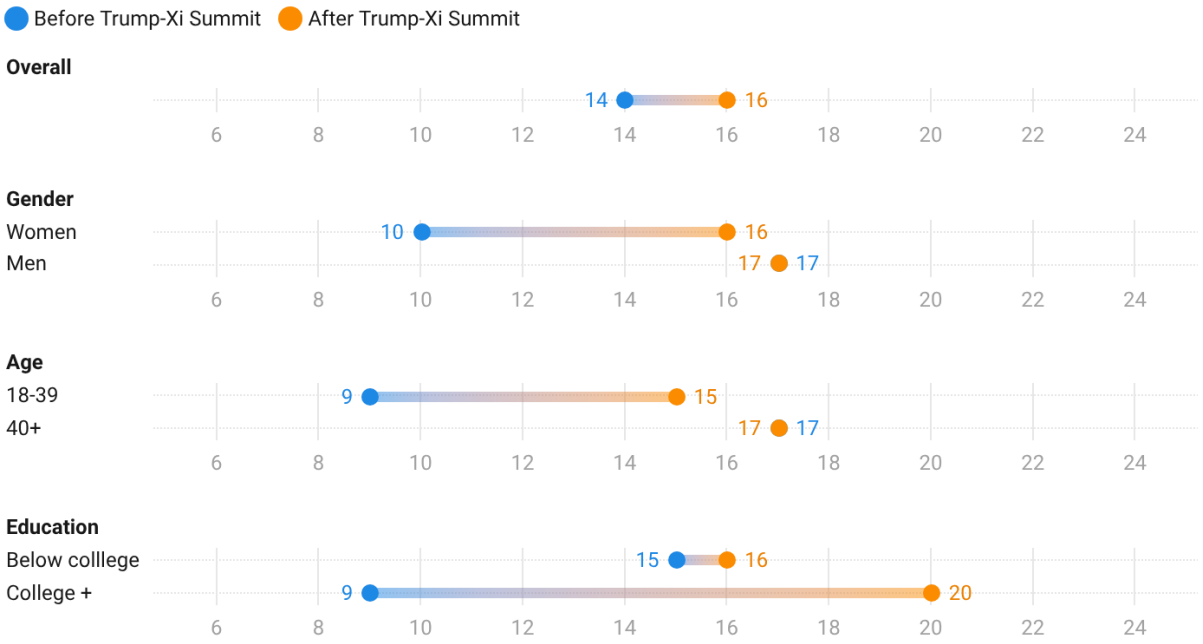


Source: China Pulse | April - June 2026 | n = 2,500 | The Carter Center & Emory University • Created with Datawrapper

Contrary to support for official negotiations, Chinese public support for unilateral economic concessions was already lower at the beginning of this survey than in late 2025. Before the Trump-Xi summit, only 14 percent of Chinese supported unilateral concessions, a figure that only rose to 16 percent after the summit. The most significant change occurred among college-educated Chinese (from 9% to 20%), whose support for concessions moved the opposite direction from their support for negotiations. Regardless, no individual demographic change was large enough to alter aggregate opinion.

Low Support for Unilateral Concessions Not Related to Summit

"Among the following policies that Mainland China might pursue to promote cross-strait relations, please select all that you support: Make unilateral economic concessions to Taiwan." (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)



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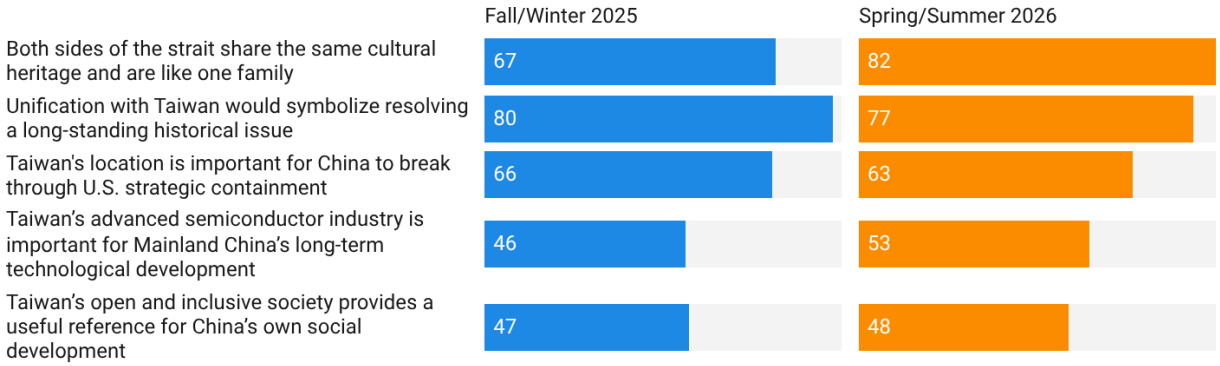
Why Taiwan Matters to the Chinese Public

The dominant reasons the Chinese public cites for Taiwan's importance are rooted in cultural and historical nationalism. Chinese see Taiwan as part of a singular Chinese cultural family (82%) and as an unresolved historical problem stemming from the end of the revolution in 1949 (77%). Among these, belief in a shared cultural heritage significantly intensified compared to late 2025. Geopolitical calculations rank only third out of five options provided in this survey. This indicates that while a security-focused discourse may dominate in some U.S. circles, geopolitics is not as prominent in popular Chinese thinking. It should also be noted, however, that in the most recent survey no given reason for Taiwan's importance falls below 48 percent agreement.

Taiwan's Importance is Historical, Cultural, and Geopolitical

"Many people in Mainland China believe Taiwan is important for different reasons. Please select all the statements below that reflect your views." (% agree)



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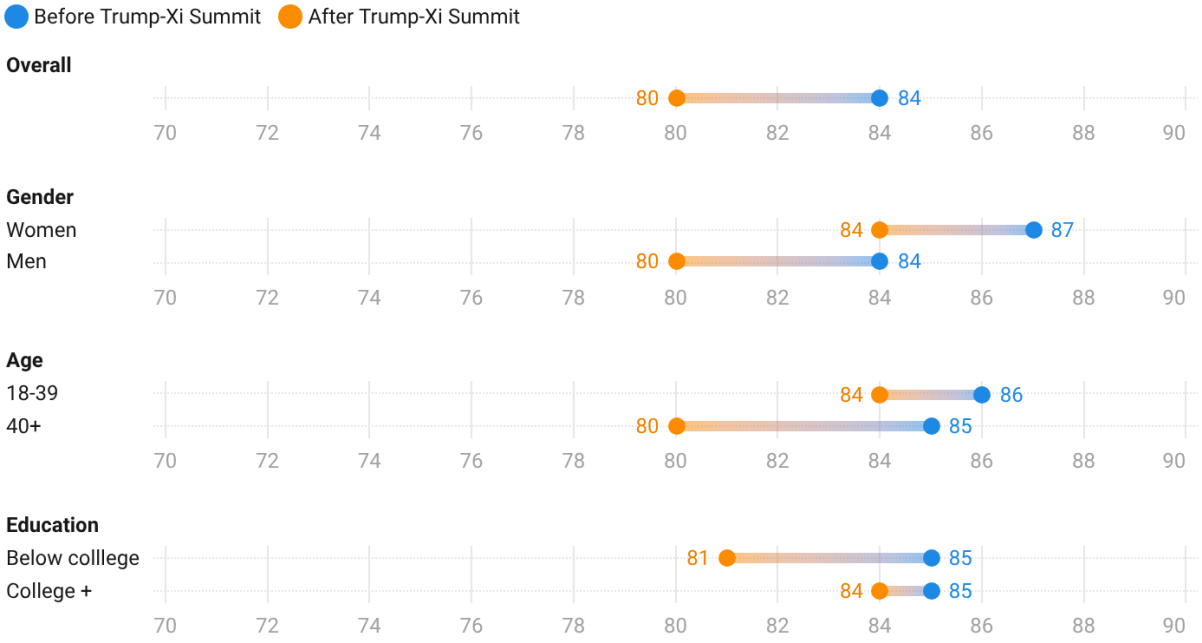
The two largest changes in the current survey's overall figures compared to late 2025 are 1) belief that China and Taiwan are one cultural family and 2) recognition of the importance of Taiwan's semiconductor industry. These changes occurred at different times and therefore, for different reasons. The portion of Chinese citing cultural connections to Taiwan before the Trump-Xi summit was already larger than the overall portion in late 2025, with slight reductions from mid-May to June. This increase is also likely an impact of Cheng Li-wun's visit in the days immediately prior to this survey.

Belief in Taiwan's Cultural Importance Not Related to Summit

"Many people in Mainland China believe Taiwan is important for different reasons. Please select all the statements below that reflect your views: Both sides of the strait share the same cultural heritage and are like one family." (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)



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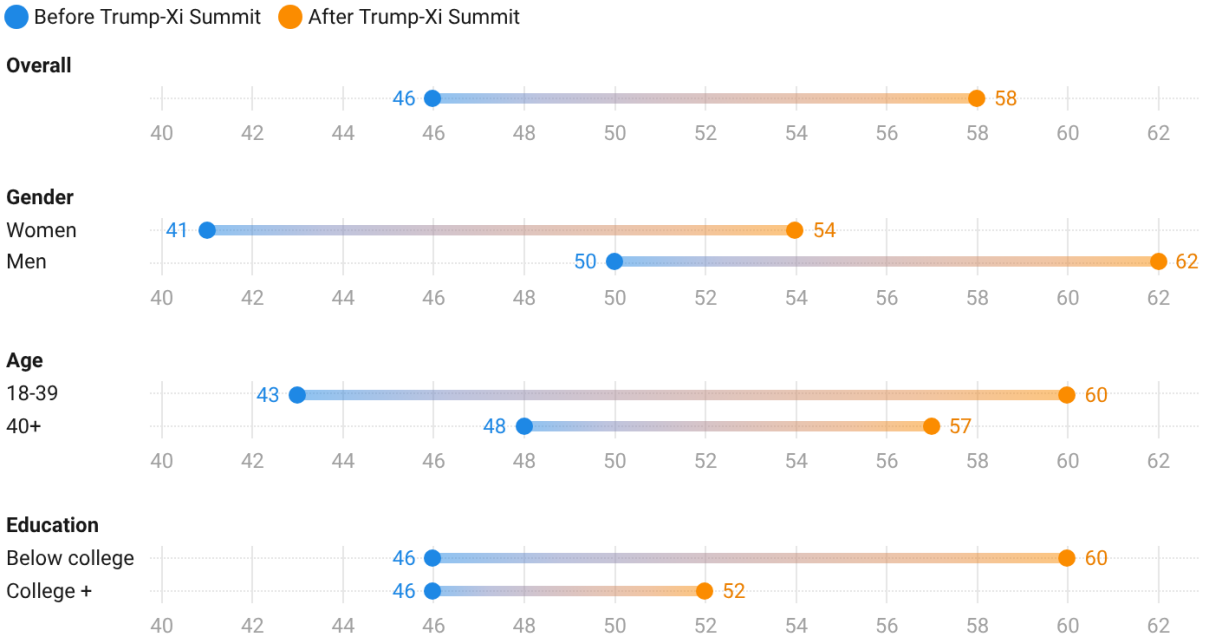
The importance of Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing, however, rose significantly after the Trump-Xi summit for all demographics except college-educated Chinese. This is an undeniable marker of the significance of the U.S.-China AI race among the Chinese public.

Importance of Taiwan's Semiconductor Industry Increased Across All Demographics

"Many people in Mainland China believe Taiwan is important for different reasons. Please select all the statements below that reflect your views: Taiwan's advanced semiconductor industry is important for Mainland China's long-term technological development." (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)



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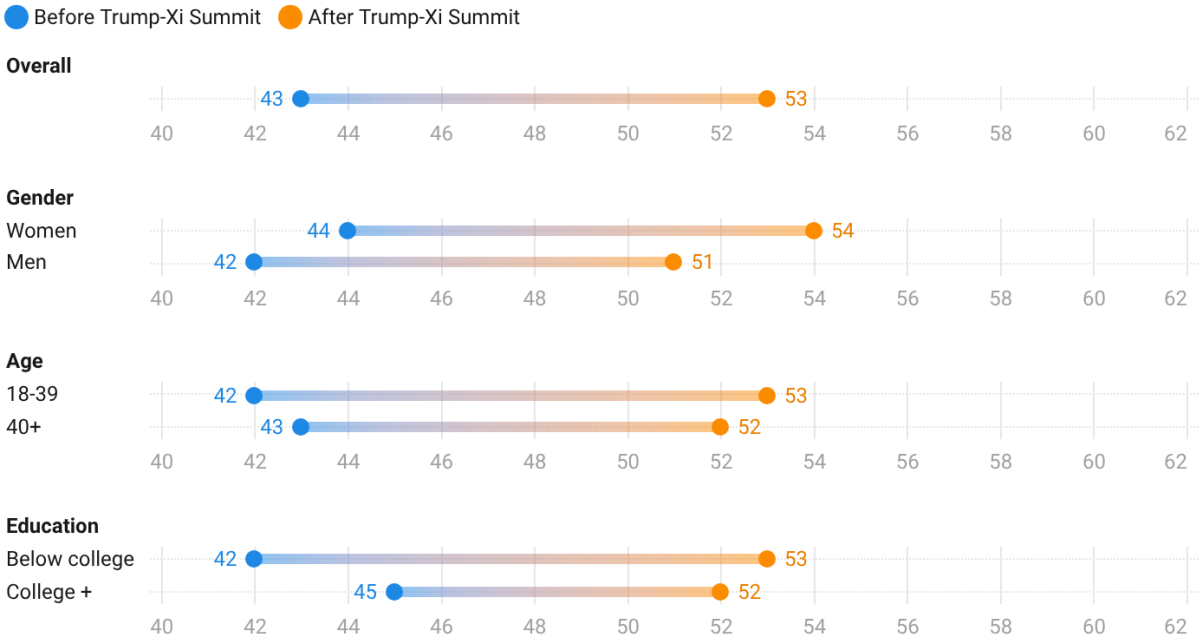
Finally, although there was no overall change in the importance of Taiwan's open society as a model for China between the current survey and late 2025, a significantly larger portion of the Chinese public indicated its importance after the Trump-Xi summit. As with semiconductors, the rise in importance of Taiwanese society was significant for all demographics except college-educated Chinese.

Importance of Taiwan's Open/Inclusive Society Increased Across All Demographics

"Many people in Mainland China believe Taiwan is important for different reasons. Please select all the statements below that reflect your views: Taiwan's open and inclusive society provides a useful reference for China's own social development." (% agree before and after May 13-15, 2026)



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Conclusion

This survey did not reveal a Chinese public eager for a preemptive attack on Taiwan to force unification. It did, however, reveal a widening gap between those who oppose the use of force and those who do not. It is important that the Trump-Xi summit appears to have had a moderating effect on this question. The data suggests that leader-to-leader diplomacy is an effective tool in ameliorating some of the more hawkish tendencies within the Chinese public.

Any increases in dovishness within the current survey should be weighed against our opposing finding that support for a full-scale military response to a declaration of formal Taiwanese independence increased, especially among younger Chinese generations. Paired with attacks on Kinmen and Matsu as the most favored response, the implication is that broad sections of the Chinese public do not support the use of force against Taiwan under the status quo. Should the status quo suddenly change, the Chinese public's support for a military response is clear.

In sum, for the Chinese public, improvement of cross-strait relations by diplomatic means is possible. The consequences for sudden action, however, could be severe as Chinese belief in cultural and historical nationalist positions on Taiwan is intensifying alongside a growing realization of the island's importance in U.S.-China AI and high-tech competition.

Methodology

This study employs a repeated cross-sectional design, conducted in collaboration with a China-based survey company maintaining a large respondent panel. The current wave was fielded from April 16 to June 26, 2026, and surveyed 2,500 Chinese adults. Quota sampling was used to enhance the representativeness of the respondents to the Chinese population, including age, gender, and geographic distribution across the North, East, Southwest, Northeast, South Central, and Northwest regions. Weights were applied to the survey sample after collection to further improve representativeness. The same weights were applied to the data from the fall/winter 2025 wave referenced in this report. For this reason, fall/winter 2025 data will not match exactly the figures reported when the raw data was originally published in March 2026. The 50-question survey yielded a median completion time of 8.5 minutes.

Survey weights for each wave were constructed using iterative proportional fitting (raking) to align the sample with population targets for gender, age, educational attainment, Chinese Communist Party membership, and geographic region. Targets were 51% male; 17%, 19%, 17%, and 47% for age brackets 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50+, respectively; 15% with a college degree or higher; 8.5% CCP membership; and regional shares of 12% North, 7% Northeast, 30% East China, 29% South Central, 15% Southwest, and 7% Northwest. We were able to achieve convergence with a maximum relative weight of 5.56 (95th percentile weight is 3.0). Results are not sensitive to dropping the highest weighted observations. Because each wave is adjusted to these demographic weights, differences are likely not attributable to compositional change between waves on these variables. However, unobserved compositional differences not captured by these demographics may remain, although many major sources of compositional change are likely to be absorbed by the listed demographics.

For the pre/post analysis of President Trump's visit to Beijing, we used a coarser common scheme, reflecting the smaller sample sizes of the two subgroups: male 51%, under 40 45%, college+ 20%, CCP member 9%, and the same six regional targets, raking the pre- and post-periods separately and dropping the May 13–15 during-visit respondents. As with the full sample, unobserved compositional differences may remain, although any resulting bias would have to arise from differences not absorbed by the demographic dimensions on which the two samples are balanced.

About the Authors

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About The Carter Center

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A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in over 90 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide.

About The Carter Center's China Focus

The Carter Center is an independent, nonpartisan organization. Through its China Focus initiative, the Center seeks to improve the U.S.-China relationship through a thoughtful assessment of the international records of both countries. We convene leading Chinese and American policy professionals and academics, conduct pioneering research in Chinese public opinion, support next generation foreign policy experts, and publish research-backed opinion. Our goal is to contribute to lasting international peace between the world's two largest powers, which is the foundation for solving the biggest problems facing humanity today.

About Emory University's Department of Political Science

The intellectual mission of the Department of Political Science is twofold. First, we seek to engage in knowledge-building through rigorous theoretical and empirical research that enables us to address urgent contemporary political challenges related to democratic institutions and governance, identity and difference, inequality, and political violence.

Second, we aim to train students who will become the next generation of scholars and practitioners through the skills we impart to them both in and outside of our classrooms. The rise of political polarization and populism in the United States and other countries make clear that democratic governance cannot be taken for granted. Global crises such as the COVID pandemic and climate change also demonstrate the need for solutions that are not only scientifically correct, but also politically feasible. More than ever, a greater understanding of the incentives and behavior shaping political life is necessary.