

# The Asian Barometer 2022

## Measuring the Swedish public's views of China, India and Japan

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## Contents

Executive summary .....	4
Introduction.....	5
General views on the three Asian countries .....	6
Swedish policy towards Asia.....	11
Knowledge about the three Asian countries .....	14
The National SOM Survey and the data used .....	15



## Executive summary

- This first-of-its-kind survey of Swedish public opinion on major Asian countries reveals a mix of views about nations in the region. There are generally positive views about Japan, both negative and more positive views about India and overwhelmingly negative views of China.
- A majority of the members of the Swedish public surveyed agreed that China, India and Japan will be important actors in the future, which probably reflects a general understanding among the public of the growing importance of Asia as a whole.
- The survey indicates that most of the Swedish public are supportive of Swedish cooperation with Japan and India, but only just over a quarter are supportive of cooperation with China.
- The Swedish public appears to have overwhelmingly negative views of China. The vast majority of respondents disagreed that it acts in a responsible way internationally and respects democratic rights.
- The proportions of respondents who said that they would not like to visit either China or India were higher than those who expressed a desire to visit these countries. The vast majority of respondents said they would like to visit Japan.
- The survey suggests that there is a lack of knowledge among the Swedish public of these three major Asian countries, particularly India. On average, one-fifth of respondents chose to answer “don’t know” when asked whether they agreed with statements about these countries.



## Introduction

Sweden's political and economic relations with Asia represent an increasingly important and much discussed aspect of its international affairs. What does the Swedish public think about the three major countries in the region? How do they think that Sweden should conduct its relations with China, India and Japan in the coming years? The aim of the *Asian Barometer* is to take a measure of Swedish public opinion on these three countries to provide a snapshot of what Swedes think about them and how Sweden should relate to them. In recognition of the need to better understand the public's views of Asia, the *Asian Barometer* has been prepared jointly by researchers from the Asia Programme and the Swedish National China Centre (NKK) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and the European Institute of Japanese Studies (EIJIS) at the Stockholm School of Economics.

To examine Swedish public opinion on Asia, we collaborated with the annual National SOM Survey (Den Nationella SOM-undersökningen) by including questions in the seventh wave of the survey, which was distributed across Sweden in the autumn of 2021, to gauge views about China, India and Japan. The wave of the survey in which the questions were included was completed by 1654 people aged between 16 and 85. The

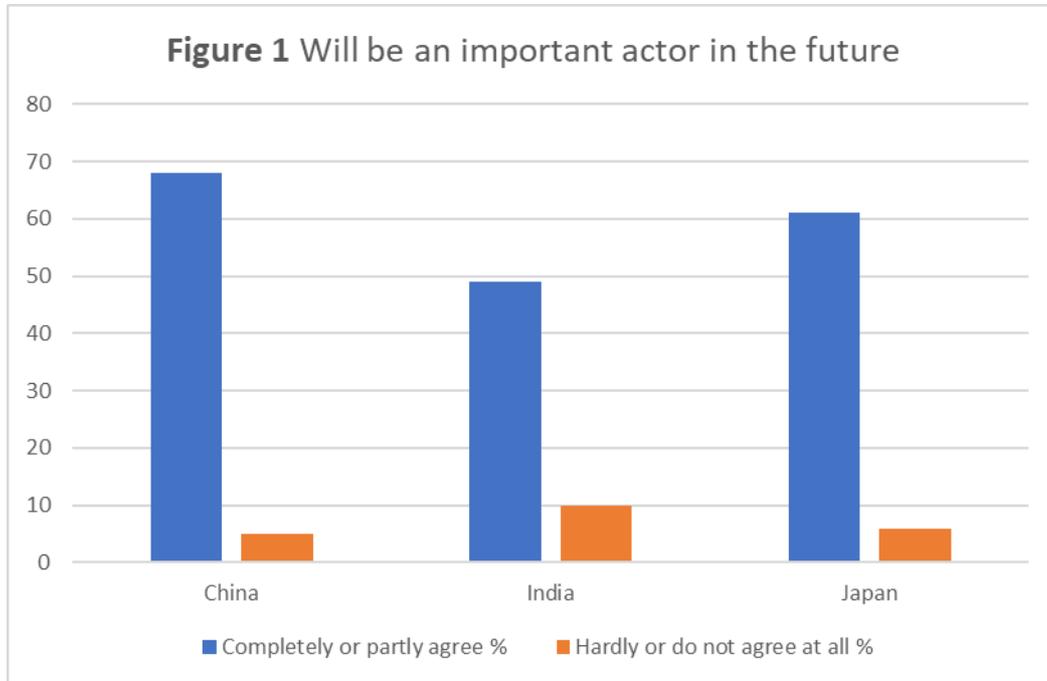
average (mean) age of respondents was 54. More details about the SOM survey and the specific questions asked are included at the end of this report. This overview discusses how the members of the Swedish public surveyed responded to these questions and analyses what might lie behind the opinions expressed.

When examining the results of this survey, the context in which it was conducted should be kept in mind. The survey was carried out approximately 18 months into the Covid-19 pandemic. It was conducted shortly after the Tokyo Olympic Games, which had been postponed for a year, were held in July and August 2021. At the time of the survey, the United Kingdom was hosting the 26<sup>th</sup> UN climate change conference (COP26) and there was extensive reporting on China's and India's participation in efforts to reduce global emissions. All these events could have affected Swedish public opinion on the three Asian nations and are referenced in the specific discussion of the responses to each statement.

The next section provides an overview of the responses. For clarity, in the Figures the percentages of people who responded "completely agree" or "partly agree", and the percentages of people who responded "hardly agree" or "do not agree at all" are combined into "agree" (blue) and "disagree" (orange).



## General views on the three Asian countries



This statement asked respondents whether they felt that each of the Asian countries would be an important actor in the future. The statement was intended to gauge the Swedish public's views about the current and future significance of the Asian region and the three major countries within this region.

The responses show recognition that the three main Asian states will be important in the future. This probably reflects a broader understanding that the entire Asian region is going to be increasingly important in the coming years. The Swedish government has also emphasised Asia's growing

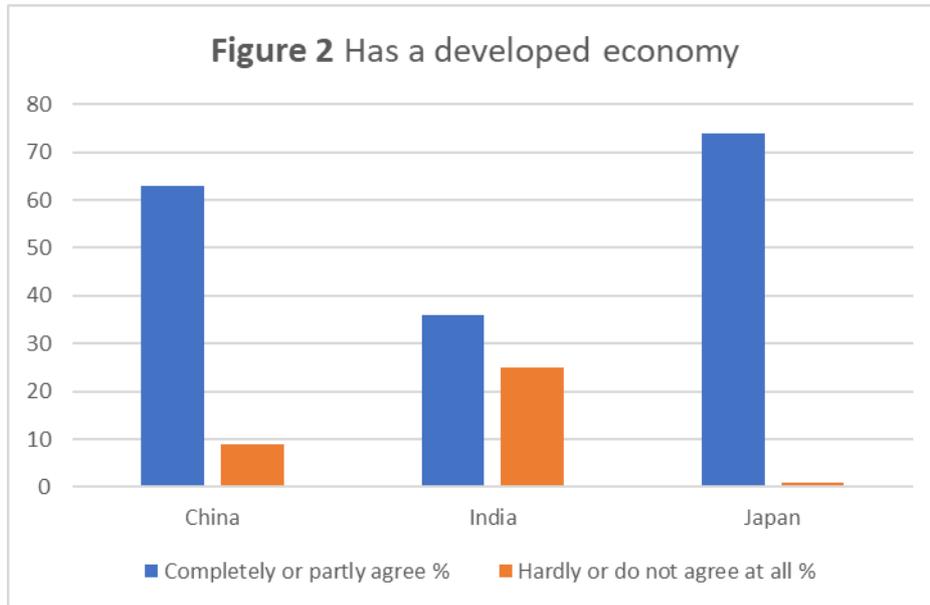
importance,<sup>1</sup> and international media have called the 21st century the "Asian century".<sup>2</sup>

Around two-thirds of respondents felt that **Japan** and **China** will be important actors in the future. The public's apparent recognition of China's growing importance is shared by the Swedish government, which expressed this view in its 2019 "Approach to matters relating to China".<sup>3</sup> A smaller proportion, or just under half, agreed that **India** will be important in the future, possibly reflecting the general lack of knowledge about **India** that is displayed in responses to almost all the statements in the survey.

<sup>1</sup> The 1999 report, *Our Future with Asia: A Swedish Strategy for 2000 and beyond*, for example, states that "Global developments in the coming century will be closely associated with the developments that take place in Asia", see <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2019/11/government-communication--20192018/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/520cb6f6-2958-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2019/11/government-communication--20192018/>



This statement asked respondents whether they agreed that each of the three countries had a developed economy. Although more people agreed than disagreed that all three countries had developed economies, the responses for **India** were more evenly split.

Just over one-third of respondents (36%) agreed with the statement describing **India** as a developed country, while a quarter (25%) disagreed. India is categorised as a “lower middle-income country” with over 22% of its population living in poverty,<sup>4</sup> but is also the world’s sixth-largest economy. This is a complex picture that may not be clear to the general public. Their views of India could also have been shaped by the media, which had recently reported on India’s struggles to contain Covid-19,<sup>5</sup> and reports fairly frequently on India’s development challenges and levels of poverty.<sup>6</sup> The results suggest that the

sizeable role of Indian businesses in the Swedish economy is not recognised by the public.<sup>7</sup> However, that 30% responded “don’t know” might indicate a lack of knowledge about the Indian economy.

For **China**, it is notable that so few people disagreed that it has a developed economy. This might suggest that, in Sweden at least, China will face difficulties maintaining the argument that it is still a “developing” nation, which it has continued to make in various international settings. In the eyes of the Swedish public, the country is clearly very much “developed”.

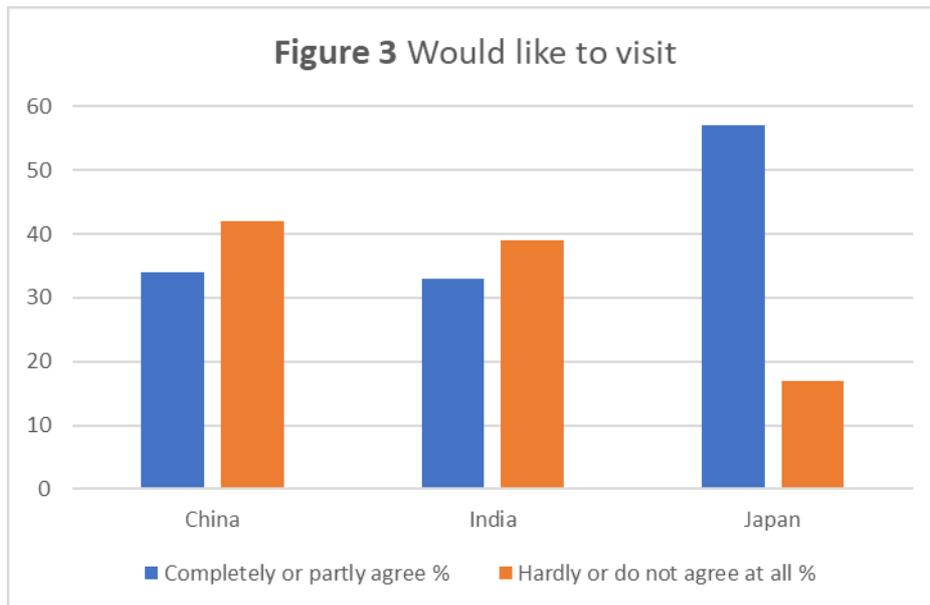
The result for **Japan** is expected since it is a mature economy. Japanese industrial and advanced consumer goods have been part of everyday life in Sweden for a long time.

<sup>4</sup> <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.svd.se/a/wezMK1/4,00000-virusdiagnoser-pa-ett-dygn-i-indien>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dn.se/varlden/extremvarmen-i-indien-slar-hardast-mot-fattiga/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.swedenabroad.se/globalassets/ambassader/indien-new-delhi/documents/business-guide-2019.pdf>



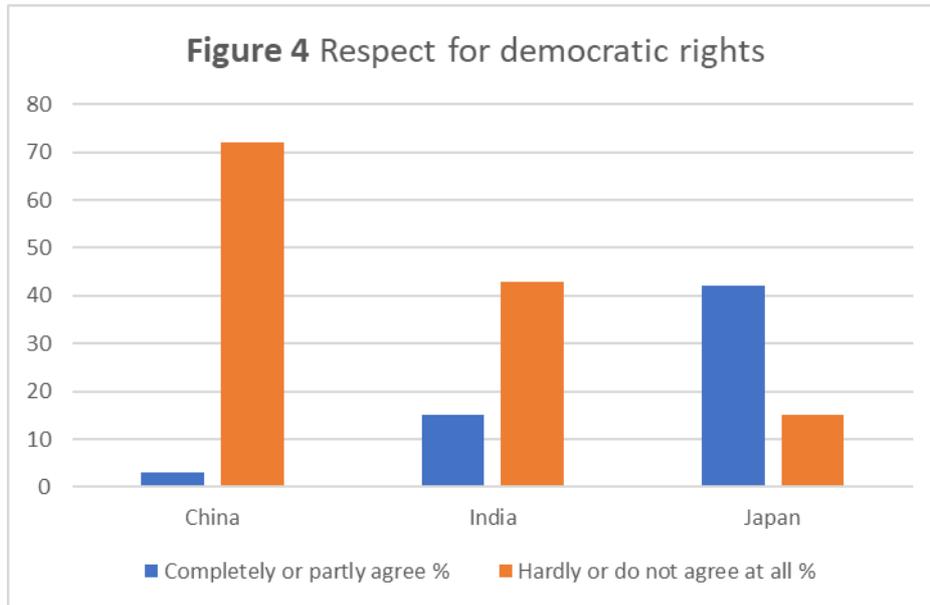
This statement asked whether members of the Swedish public would like to visit any of the three Asian countries focused on in the survey. It is perhaps surprising that so many respondents said they did not want to visit **China** or **India**. These two countries have fascinating histories, distinctive cultures and dynamic societies, so it might have been expected that a higher proportion would want to visit them. In contrast, the majority of respondents were enthusiastic about visiting Japan. This indicates that the high number of people saying they did not want to visit either China or India does not represent a general lack of desire to travel to anywhere in Asia.

The results could be connected to the negative views about the political systems of and respect for democratic rights in both India and China that responses to other statements demonstrate (see below). They

could also be the result of perceptions about the difficulty of visiting these countries, both of which require visas for example. However, it could also be that people do not want to visit either China or India for reasons distinct to each country.

There was a contrastingly large proportion of respondents who expressed a desire to visit **Japan** (slightly more than half), which indicates the overall attractiveness of this country. In 2020, the Swedish travel magazine *Vagabond* named Tokyo the year's best travel destination.<sup>8</sup> The results here correspond with the responses to other statements, which suggest that the Swedish public has generally positive views about Japan, sees it as a responsible international actor and a mature developed economy, and recognises it as a country that Sweden should cooperate with and seek more investment from.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.vagabond.se/asien/japan/allt-du-behover-veta-om-arets-hetaste-resmal-tokyo>



This statement asked whether respondents agreed that the three countries in the survey respected democratic rights.

The results for **China** show strongly negative opinions: 72% of respondents disagreed with the statement that the country respects democratic rights (9% chose “hardly agree” and 63% chose “do not agree at all”). This result is not surprising, given the attention the Swedish media and political debate pay to human rights issues in China, such as the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the treatment of protestors in Hong Kong, and how, as previous reports produced by UI have shown,<sup>9</sup> Sweden conceives of itself as a firm defender of democracy and human rights.

The results for **India**, although still negative, are slightly more divided. A higher number of respondents agree that it respects democratic rights. The public’s views on

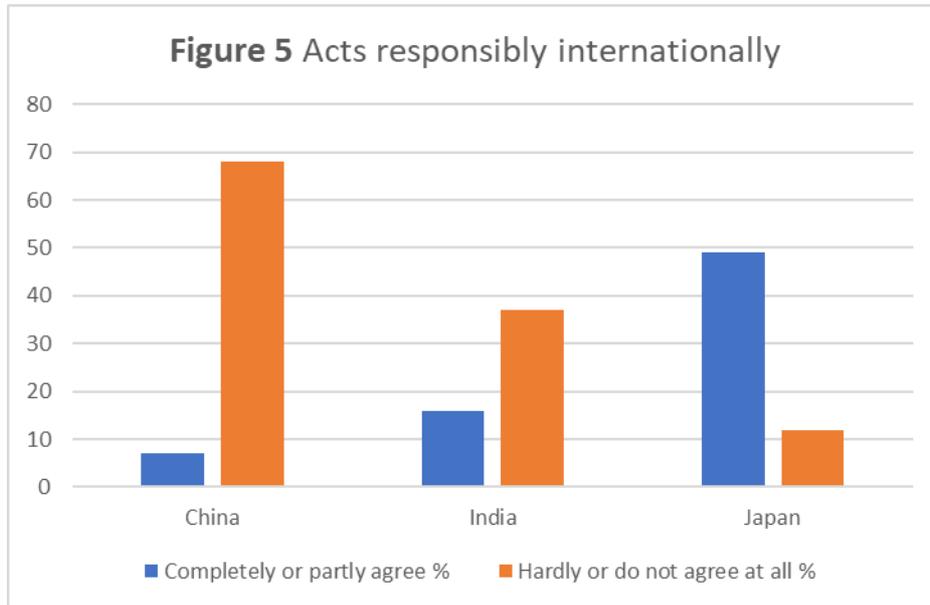
India may in part be based on an understanding that it is a democracy. However, members of the public could also have formed a more negative view because much of the reporting about the country in the Swedish media is negative.<sup>10</sup> It is notable that 33% of respondents chose “don’t know”, which could reflect a lack of knowledge about the democratic rights situation in India.

The results for **Japan** show that it is clearly ahead in terms of the Swedish public’s perceptions of its respect for democratic rights, compared to China and India. However, given the positive responses to other statements it might have been expected that even more people would agree that Japan respects democratic rights. Here 34% of respondents chose “don’t know”, which again could indicate a lack of knowledge about Japan.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/research/asia/full-report-web-version\\_updated\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/research/asia/full-report-web-version_updated_2019.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/indian-minister-accused-of-graft-by-swedish-media-amid-deepening->

[india-sweden-ties/https://www.svt.se/nyheter/granskning/ug/uppdrag-granskning-avslojar-scania-mutade-till-sig-kontrakt-i-indien](https://www.svt.se/nyheter/granskning/ug/uppdrag-granskning-avslojar-scania-mutade-till-sig-kontrakt-i-indien)



This statement asked respondents whether they agreed that the three countries acted in a responsible way internationally.

The negative response for **China** corresponds with other recent surveys. The 2021 “Sinophone Borderlands Survey” of European public opinion on China, for example, found that just 6% of Swedes said they trusted the country, the lowest level of trust among the 13 countries surveyed.<sup>11</sup> China’s role in the international response to the Covid-19 pandemic may have contributed to this, as it was criticised in the Swedish media for not providing information earlier.<sup>12</sup> Swedish media reporting on China’s participation in the Glasgow climate conference might also have affected evaluations of its responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

On **India**, a smaller majority of respondents disagreed but Swedes still have a negative view of its international responsibility. This could be related to understandings of India’s role in combating climate change, particularly if people were surveyed around the time of the November 2021 Glasgow climate summit when there was extensive reporting about **India**.<sup>14</sup> However, a very high proportion (38%) responded “don’t know”, which suggests a general lack of knowledge about its international actions.

There was a positive appraisal of **Japan**’s international responsibility. This might be a result of views of Japan as a rich and a pacifist country. Much less is written in Sweden about Japan’s international role than about China.

<sup>11</sup> <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ui-paper-no.-8-2020.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.svd.se/a/kJGomg/lakare-larmade-om-viruset-hotades-med-domstol>

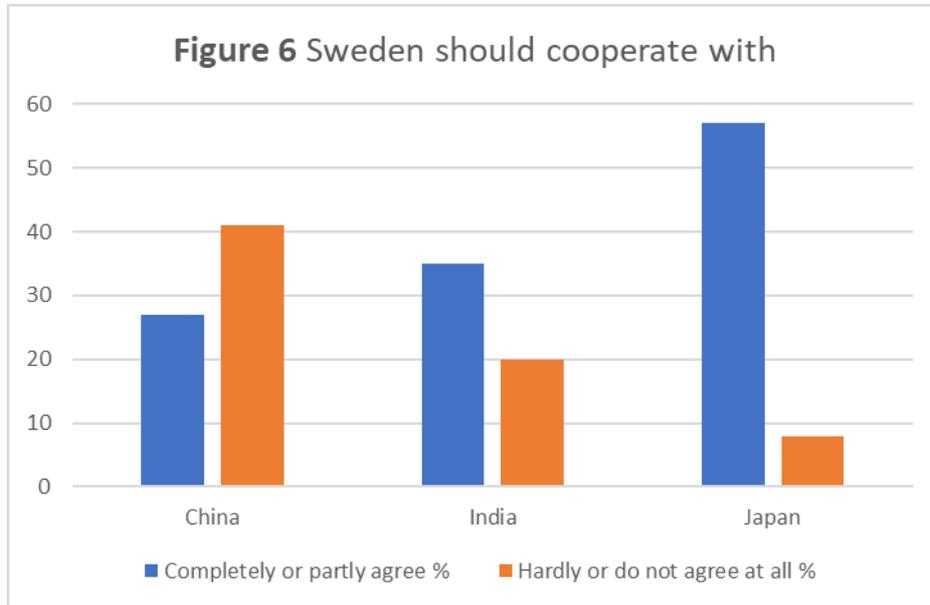
<sup>13</sup> [https://www.dn.se/vetenskap/kina-och-indien-vill-stryka-avgorande-avsnitt-i-klimatavtalet/;](https://www.dn.se/vetenskap/kina-och-indien-vill-stryka-avgorande-avsnitt-i-klimatavtalet/)

<https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/klimat/besvikelsen-over-nya-klimatavtalet-ledsen/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/sa-blev-det-fattiga-indien-varldens-klimatbov>



## Swedish policy towards Asia



This statement asked whether respondents agreed that Sweden should cooperate with each country. The respondents were supportive of Swedish cooperation with **India** and **Japan**, but not so supportive of cooperation with **China**.

A significantly larger proportion of respondents disagreed (41%) than agreed (27%) that Sweden should cooperate with **China**, suggesting a wariness about working with the country which is currently Sweden's largest Asian trade partner. Government policy aims to increase cooperation with China,<sup>15</sup> but only just over one in four Swedes agree that this is a good idea. A recent report found that regional governments in Sweden share the public's wariness about cooperation with China.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, when it comes to **India**, more people agreed than disagreed that Sweden

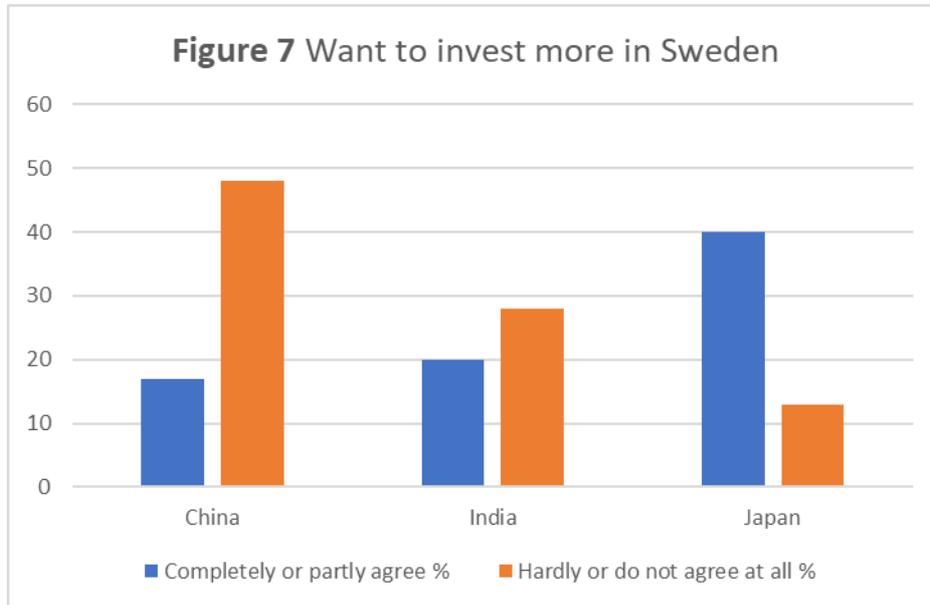
should cooperate. This is noteworthy, given that those surveyed responded with less positive opinions about the other statements. This response could indicate that the public believes cooperation with India is important despite its doubts about the country's democratic credentials, or that the public believes that working with India could positively influence it. The proportion of respondents choosing "don't know" was high at 36%.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Sweden should cooperate with **Japan**, which is currently its second biggest Asian trade partner. This could be linked to the fact that almost all the respondents agreed that Japan had a developed economy, as discussed above.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.government.se/4adb19/contentassets/e597d50630fa4eaba140d28fb252c29f/government-](https://www.government.se/4adb19/contentassets/e597d50630fa4eaba140d28fb252c29f/government-communication-approach-to-matters-relating-to-china.pdf)

[communication-approach-to-matters-relating-to-china.pdf](https://www.government.se/4adb19/contentassets/e597d50630fa4eaba140d28fb252c29f/government-communication-approach-to-matters-relating-to-china.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <https://kinacentrum.se/publikationer/lokal-frost-i-relationerna/>



This statement asked respondents whether they wanted the three Asian countries to invest more in Sweden.

A far smaller proportion of respondents agreed (17%) that they wanted **China** to invest in Sweden than disagreed (48%). This is probably because of the amount of ongoing media and political discussion of security concerns related to Chinese investments and research raising awareness about this.<sup>17</sup> China has recently pursued a number of new investments in infrastructure projects in Sweden.<sup>18</sup> Swedish government policy has been to encourage Chinese investments,<sup>19</sup> but there seems to be less appetite for this among the population.

There has been much less discussion about security and investments with regard to

**India**, which may explain why views are not as negative as those on China. Nonetheless, the Swedish public is still not supportive of India investing more in Sweden. This is interesting, given the longstanding investment in Sweden by India's IT sector. This may be because Indian companies are still relatively unknown. This lack of awareness is also suggested by the large proportion who answered "don't know" (43%).

For **Japan**, the majority of respondents supported more investment in Sweden. This view may have been influenced by positive reporting of Japanese investments.<sup>20</sup> It echoes how Swedish businesses have also expressed a desire for more cooperation with Japan.<sup>21</sup>

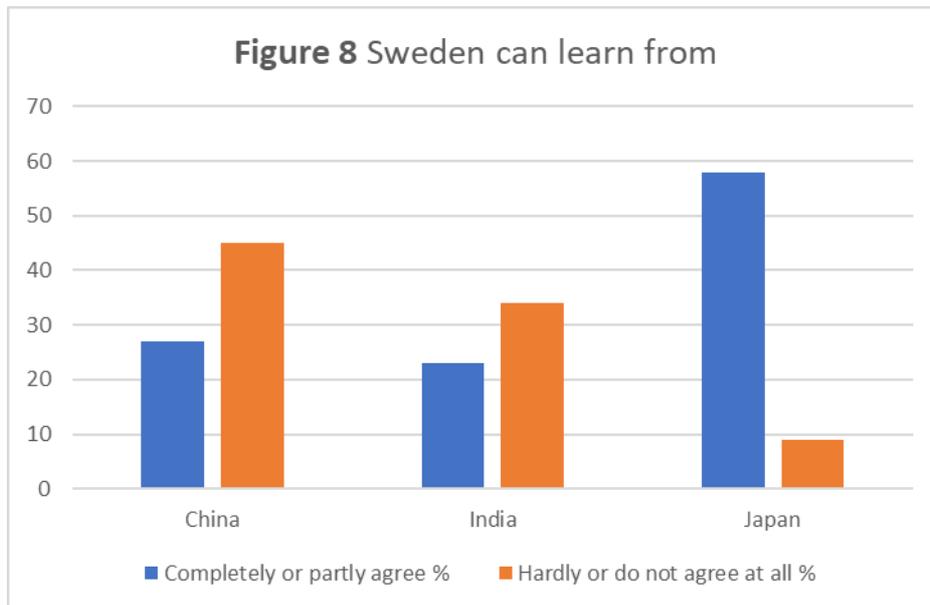
<sup>17</sup> <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%207466>

<sup>18</sup> <https://kinamedia.se/2022/05/05/sa-koper-kina-sakta-upp-svensk-infrastruktur/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.government.se/articles/2016/09/chinese-investors-visit-sweden/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.di.se/nyheter/jatten-jublar-efter-mangmiljardkontrakten-planerar-stora-nyaninstallningar-i-sverige/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.swedenabroad.se/sv/utlandsmyndighete r/japan-tokyo/aktuellt/nyheter/swedish-and-japanese-business-leaders-express-desire-to-co-operate-on-sustainability-energy-digitalization-food-and-fintech/>



This statement asked people whether they agreed that Sweden could learn from each of the countries. When interpreting these responses, it should be recognised that members of the public may have interpreted the statement differently. However, the results suggest that broadly speaking **Japan** is seen by the Swedish public as a country to learn from, but this is less the case for **India** and **China**.

On **China**, a much larger proportion of respondents disagreed than agreed with the idea that Sweden could learn from the country. This suggests that despite China's attempts to present itself as a model, and the way some argue that China is a place that Sweden can learn from,<sup>22</sup> the country is not perceived in this way by the majority of the public.

On **India**, too, more of the respondents disagreed than agreed that it is a country

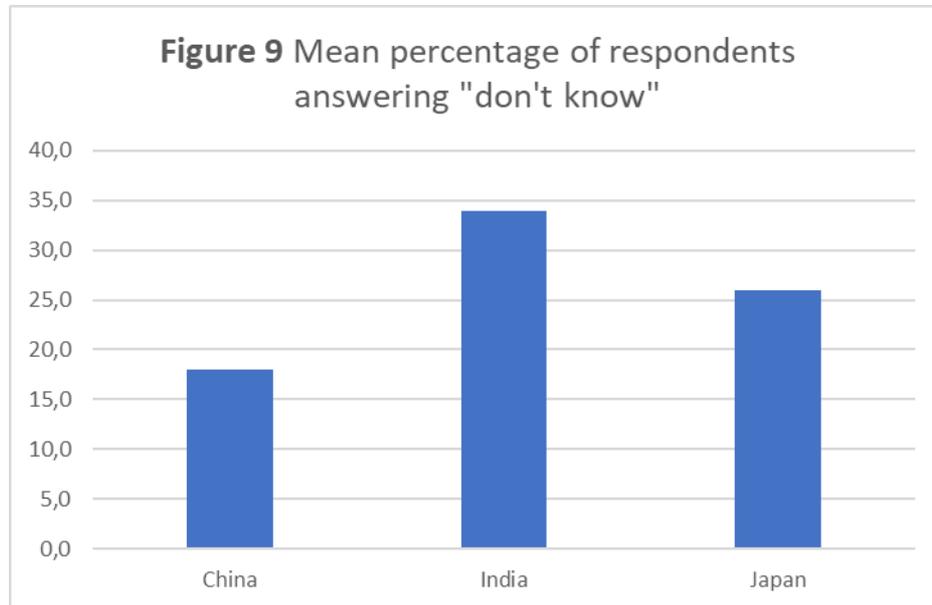
from which Sweden could learn. This is slightly surprising given India's strength in the IT sector, an area of the economy which Sweden is seeking to develop. This might be disappointing for the Indian government, which has sought to present India as a nation with a deep-rooted knowledge culture.

The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that **Japan** is a country that Sweden can learn from. This corresponds with the view of the country as economically developed and politically liberal, as demonstrated in the other responses. This suggests that Japan's economic decline following the crisis in the early 1990s (the so-called lost decades) has not really diminished Swedes' impression of it as economically successful, and can be viewed alongside the very large number of respondents who said they would like to visit Japan.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/other-publications/swedish-experiences-of-research-collaboration-with-china.pdf>



## Knowledge about the three Asian countries



From the number of people who responded to each statement with "don't know" it is possible to get a rough idea of the Swedish public's self-perceived knowledge about the three Asian countries. Figure 9 shows the average (mean) proportion of respondents who chose to answer "don't know", calculated from the proportion for each of the eight statements.

For **India**, the average proportion of people responding "don't know" rather than expressing a level of agreement very high (34%). This might mean that the Swedish public more generally feels less knowledgeable about India than they are

about the other Asian countries focused on in the survey.

The average proportion of people responding "don't know" to statements about **Japan**, while not as large as that for India, is also quite large (26%). This suggests that Swedes also feel that they have quite limited knowledge regarding this country.

In contrast, the average proportion of people choosing "don't know" in response to the statements about **China** was much smaller (18%), suggesting that the Swedish public feels more knowledgeable about this country overall.



## The National SOM Survey and the data used

The data for the *Asian Barometer* was collected in collaboration with the annual National SOM Survey (Den Nationella SOM-undersökningen), which was carried out in the autumn of 2021.<sup>23</sup> Each year since 1986, this nationwide study has asked members of the Swedish public over 100 questions. The survey is made up of seven waves sent to systematic probability samples of 3500 people aged between 16 and 85 years from across the country.

The *Asian Barometer* data was collected from questions inserted into the seventh wave of the survey. The questionnaires were sent out on 20 September 2021 and the collection of results was concluded at the end of 2021. In total, 1654 people completed the survey.

The questions, one each for China, India and Japan, presented respondents with eight statements about the country. For example, the first statement said: "India is a land that has a developed economy". The Survey respondents were asked in Swedish to choose whether they "completely agree", "partly agree", "hardly agree", or "do not agree at all" with each statement<sup>24</sup>. There was also an option to choose "don't know" (see Figure 10).

Not all of the 1654 people who completed the survey gave responses to all eight statements for each country. For the 24 statements in the three questions, the lowest number of people who provided a response to a statement was 1496 (China statements f and h) and the highest number was 1529 (India statement a).

*Figure 10* The question about India as it appeared in the survey, translated into English

**\* f76 The following are statements about India. To what extent do you agree with these statements?**

<b>India is a land that:</b>	Completely agree	Partly agree	Hardly agree	Do not agree at all	Don't know
a Has a developed economy	<input type="checkbox"/>				
b Acts responsibly internationally	<input type="checkbox"/>				
c Sweden can learn from	<input type="checkbox"/>				
d Sweden should cooperate with	<input type="checkbox"/>				
e Respects democratic rights	<input type="checkbox"/>				
f I would like to visit	<input type="checkbox"/>				
g I would like to invest more in Sweden	<input type="checkbox"/>				
h Will be an important actor in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>				
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

<sup>23</sup> <https://snd.gu.se/sv/catalogue/collection/national-som>

<sup>24</sup> In Swedish these were: "Instämmer helt", "Instämmer delvis", "Instämmer knappast", "Instämmer inte alls".



## About UI

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