



RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

Reagan National Defense Survey

Thirty years have passed since President Reagan left office, but his vision for “peace through strength” continues to define the American people’s worldview. Americans remain steadfast in their support for a strong military that both keeps the peace and advances the values of freedom and democracy abroad.

Americans are not isolationists. They want America to be more engaged in the world, not less. They want America to lead, not react. They want a strong U.S. military presence overseas, not retrenchment. They believe America should act to defend freedom, prevent human rights abuses, and stand against the actions of undemocratic regimes. And they believe America should eliminate threats and prevent attacks before they materialize.

These are not the views of a country that would eschew global leadership but rather a nation where President Reagan’s “peace through strength” vision is alive and well.

Engagement and Leadership

Americans believe the United States should be active in global affairs. Half (50%) of the country wants America to be more involved and take the lead in international events, while just one-third (33%) say the country should be less involved and react to events.

Likewise, Americans believe in a strong military presence around the world, with 65% saying it is better for the United States to maintain bases around the world to deter attacks and only 28% saying it is better to reduce our military presence overseas. Seventy-six percent (76%) would support increased military spending.

Indeed, when asked in what situations they would support U.S. military action, 3 in 4 Americans (76%) say defending freedom in other countries as well as preventing human rights violations in other countries.

Geopolitical Adversaries

In terms of geopolitical adversaries, the views of the American people align with the priority of strategic competition defined in the National Defense Strategy. China is seen as the country posing the greatest threat by the most Americans (28%), followed closely by Russia (25%). In the inaugural Reagan National Defense Survey last year, Russia topped the list at 30% and China came in second at 21%.

China and Russia are followed by North Korea (14%), Iran (9%) and Iraq (5%). More than any other countries, 4% of Americans see “ourselves” as the greatest threat to the United States.

China Ascendant

As China draws closer to outpacing the United States economically and sets its sights on doing the same technologically and militarily, American attention to the threat posed by an ascendant China is vital.

Today, most Americans' concerns about China are primarily economic. While economic anxieties are important and valid, increased awareness of the broader threats posed by China is important as national leaders emphasize the era of strategic competition.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) see China as more of an economic threat, while only 15% see it as more of a military threat and 15% say both. At 33%, the top China-related concern among Americans is China's holding U.S. government debt, followed by China becoming the world's number one super power (17%), technology theft (14%), and unfair trade practices (13%). The Chinese military buildup ranks fifth, with 10% of Americans rating this as their top concern.

Americans are split on the current trade war with China, with 49% expressing support and 46% opposing it. Importantly, 72% are concerned about the possibility that the trade war destabilizes relations between the two countries and increases the chances of conflict.

Again demonstrating Americans' support for democracy, 68% say the United States should support the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, even if it angers China. Only 14% want to support the Chinese government. And Americans favor more than rhetorical or moral support. If China escalates the use of its military in Hong Kong, 69% of Americans would favor imposing economic sanctions and 59% favor responding with security assistance or aid.

Americans also strongly support Taiwan. If China were to invade Taiwan, three-quarters of Americans (76%) would favor recognizing Taiwan as an independent nation, and 64% would support imposing economic sanctions. More than half (55%) would support moving U.S. military assets to the region.

Cyberattacks: What Keeps Americans up at Nights

Americans identify cyberattacks as the top near-term threat. Almost nine in ten Americans (89%) are concerned about cyberattacks on government computers and the grid, with a majority (57%) saying they are extremely concerned. The second most concerning threat is also in the cyber realm, with 87% of Americans concerned about cyberattacks on personal computers and accounts.

The third-ranking threat is an alarming tie between terrorist attacks on the homeland and political divisions in the United States leading to violence, with 84% of Americans expressing concern over both.

Concern over politically motivated violence exceeds concern for all other polled threats: an attack on our space assets, such as satellites (62%), thermo-nuclear war (58%), and conventional military attacks (56%).

Russia, Turkey, and Syria

More respondents (24%) are concerned about Russia sponsoring cyberattacks than they are about Russia aiding Iran and other rogue regimes (21%), interfering in our elections (20%), or launching a thermo-nuclear attack against the United States (16%), or invading other former Soviet republics (11%).

When it comes to Syria, where Russia is deeply involved, a slim majority of Americans do say they approve of the troop withdrawal (51%). But Americans also favor punishing Turkey's attacks on Kurdish forces—72% support sanctions and 60% favor military support to defend the Kurds.

Support for Allies

In the face of a revanchist Russia, support for NATO remains strong, with 62% of Americans expressing a favorable view and only 22% expressing an unfavorable view. At the same time, a majority (58%) say NATO allies should do more. Similarly, 51% say our Indo-Pacific allies—including Australia, Japan, and South Korea—should do more.

Americans also have a clear sense of who are and are not allies:

- 93% view Great Britain as an ally
- 93% view Australia as an ally
- 84% view Germany as an ally
- 83% view Japan as an ally
- 80% view India as an ally
- 60% view China as an enemy
- 71% view Russia as an enemy
- 72% view Syria as an enemy
- 82% view Iran as an enemy
- 83% view North Korea as an enemy

Trust in Military

The military remains a highly trusted institution in our society, with 86% of Americans having confidence in the military. Of those, 63% say they have a great deal of confidence. This trust extends to individual military servicemembers as well, with military officers ranking alongside doctors and teachers as the most highly trusted members of society.

As for confidence in the military's capabilities, Americans do not believe the U.S. military is the unquestioned leader. Just over one-third (36%) of Americans believe the U.S. military is the best in the world, with another 52% thinking it ranks among the best.

Reagan Endures

Of the past six presidents, President Reagan is viewed most favorably among Americans—more than three-fourths (76%) have a favorable view of President Reagan. Though the passage of time undoubtedly has an effect on the views of presidential legacies, it is notable that the presidents best-known for winning the Cold War are viewed the most favorably.

Over three decades, President Reagan’s values and world view have been put to the test—and they have withstood the test of time. Amid new technologies and emerging threats, coarsened domestic politics and geopolitical upheaval, extended conflicts and elusive adversaries, the values of Reaganism endure.

The belief in “peace through strength” and the commitment to being a beacon of freedom in the world—a “shining city upon a hill”—are cemented in the national psyche, unshaken by the forces that want to weaken the American resolve.

Leaders who seek to take up the Reagan mantle and believe in a more hopeful, more peaceful future will work to strengthen these beliefs even further in the minds of successive generations of Americans.