



EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To: Whom It May Concern

From: Daron Shaw & Chris Anderson

Date: February 26, 2021

Subject: Results from the Annual Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

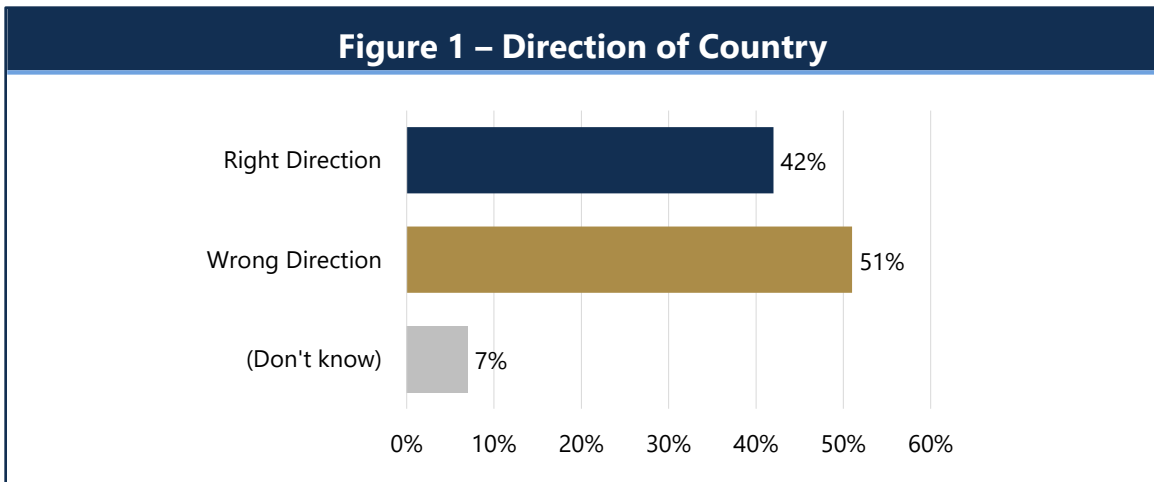
Overview

From February 4-14, 2021, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute (RRPFI) sponsored a national poll to assess the priorities and opinions of Americans across a wide array of defense, military, and foreign policy issues at the outset of a new administration. The 2021 poll is RRPFI's third such survey since 2018. The impetus behind the poll is straightforward: to provide politicians, policy-makers, and experts consistent and timely information about public opinion on these important issues.

Over these 11 days, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 2,500 adult citizens from across the states. The poll gauged opinions on a variety of issues ranging from trust and confidence in the U.S. military to assessments of domestic and international threats to appetite for U.S. global leadership. Notably, the survey included a battery of questions on our relationship with China.

Mood of the Country

Given the upheaval of the past year as well as the underlying tensions surrounding national politics, it is unsurprising that Americans are divided on where the country is headed and the nature of our challenges. A majority (51%) think the country is headed in the wrong direction while 42% think we are moving in the right direction. The right direction number is actually slightly improved from previous years (40% in 2019 and 37% in 2018). Historically, the "direction" question tends to produce slightly negative assessments overall, and the distribution we see here is fairly normal. As might be expected, there is a striking partisan divide on this item: 80% of Republicans think the country is headed in the wrong direction whereas 69% of Democrats think we are headed in the right direction. The partisan split was reversed last year (Republicans optimistic and Democrats pessimistic) with a Republican in the White House.



When asked about the most important issue facing the country, Americans say:

- COVID-19 (29%)
- Politics/Partisanship (17%)
- The economy and jobs (15%)
- Corruption and incompetent political leaders (8%)
- Systemic racism (6%).

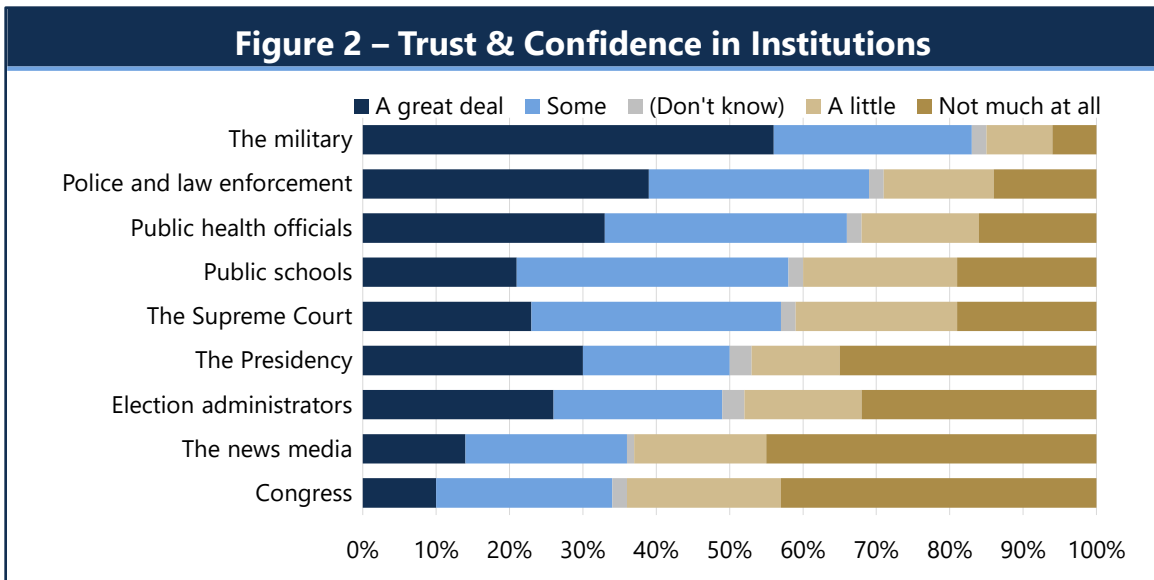
Although the pandemic predictably dominates our view of important issues, disaffection with the political system—especially among Republicans and independents—is not far behind. About one in four Americans selected partisanship or poor political leadership as the most important problem facing the country today. Thirty-four percent of Republicans chose one of these two items as the most important issue, as did 28% of independents. Despite controlling the presidency and Congress after the 2020 elections, 16% of Democrats also selected one of these items.

When it comes to other, more specific policy arenas, the main partisan divide is that Democrats are much more likely to cite the pandemic (41%, compared to 17% for Republicans) or systemic racism/white supremacy (11%, compared to 2%), while Republicans are more likely to say the economy and jobs (18%, compared to 13% for Democrats), immigration (6% to 1%), and socialism (3% to 0%).

Evaluations of U.S. Military

Confidence and Trust

In both relative and absolute terms, trust and confidence in the U.S. military remains high. Eighty-three percent of Americans say they have confidence in the U.S. military (56% say “a great deal of confidence”). This compares favorably to other well-regarded institutions: 69% have confidence in law enforcement; 66% have confidence in public health officials; 58% have confidence in the public schools; 57% have confidence in the Supreme Court. Moreover, it easily exceeds favorable sentiment towards more contentious institutions: 50% have confidence in the presidency; 49% have confidence in election administrators; 36% have confidence in the news media; 34% have confidence in Congress.



A closer look, though, reveals some slippage in the public’s trust and confidence in the military. In 2018, 70% said they have “a great deal” of confidence in the military; in 2021, that number dips to 56%. The main dynamic is that some citizens now say they have “some” confidence in the military, rather than “a great deal” of confidence. Furthermore, we do not see a comparable decline in confidence towards other institutions.

While most demographic groups have shown some slippage in the “great deal” number, it is particularly pronounced among independents (down 19 points since 2018), Republicans (-17 points) – and, perhaps surprisingly, in active-duty military households (-18 points)

The lowest ratings for the military come from those under 30 years of age (38% saying they have “a great deal” of confidence), Blacks (44%), Democrats (48%), and women (51%).

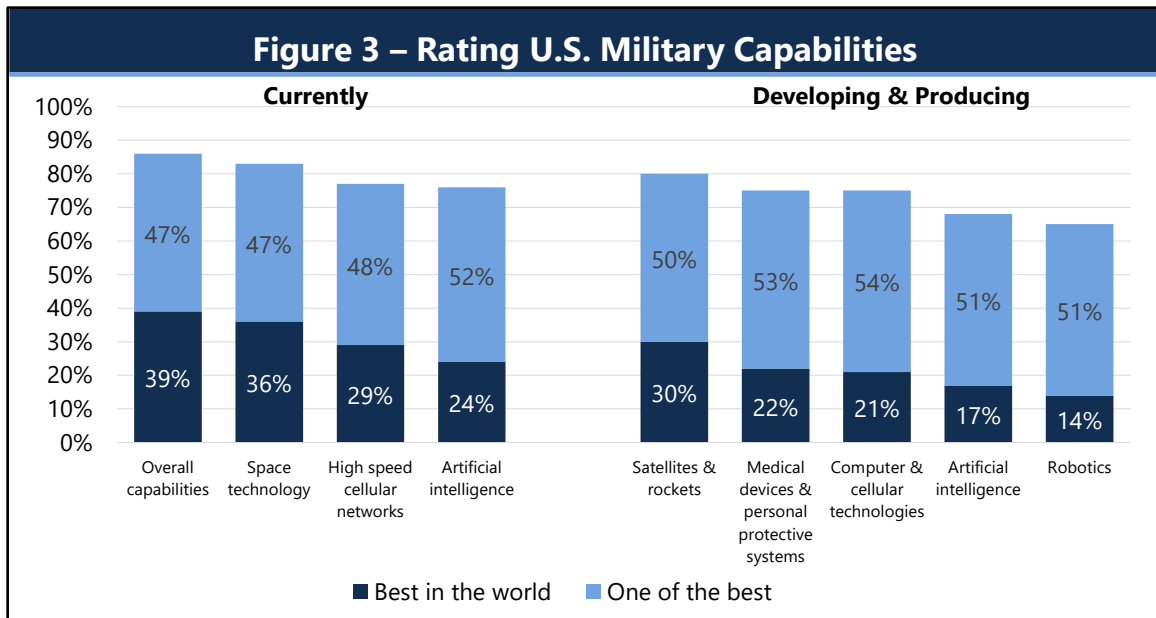
Effectiveness & Ability

Overall, 39% think the U.S. has the world’s best military capabilities, and another 47% think it ranks among the best.

What is it that the U.S. military does well? Eight-three percent rate our space technology as “the best” or “one of the best” in the world. Seventy-six percent give the military these high marks for artificial intelligence, as do 77% for high speed cellular networks, like 5G. However, most citizens do not see the U.S. military as the unquestioned leader in these arenas: slightly more than one-third (36%) see the U.S. as the outright best in space technology, and fewer still feel similarly about U.S. capabilities in AI (24%) and high-speed cellular networks (29%).

We drilled down and asked respondents how the U.S. is doing when it comes to developing and producing things that will be critical for national security and defense in the coming years. Broadly, there is some sentiment that we rely too much on non-allies for these sorts of things—55% hold this view. However, a large majority of the public rates the U.S. as the best in the world or one of the best across five different areas: satellites and rockets (80% “best in the world” or “one of the best”),

medical devices and personal protective systems (75%), computer and cellular technology (75%), artificial intelligence (68%), and robotics (65%).



Government Spending Priorities

This confidence in the military, along with an appreciation for their purpose, is manifest in broad public support for increasing government spending on the military. Seventy-four percent of Americans support increasing spending, with 47% strongly supporting. In fact, only education (83% support) and health care (81%) rival national defense as popular candidates for increased government spending. There is also support for additional funding for “promoting freedom abroad” (55% overall, 22% strong).

Still, when asked about their *top* spending priority only 11% say the military (31% say health care and 19% say education). Another 18% rate the military as their second-highest spending priority.

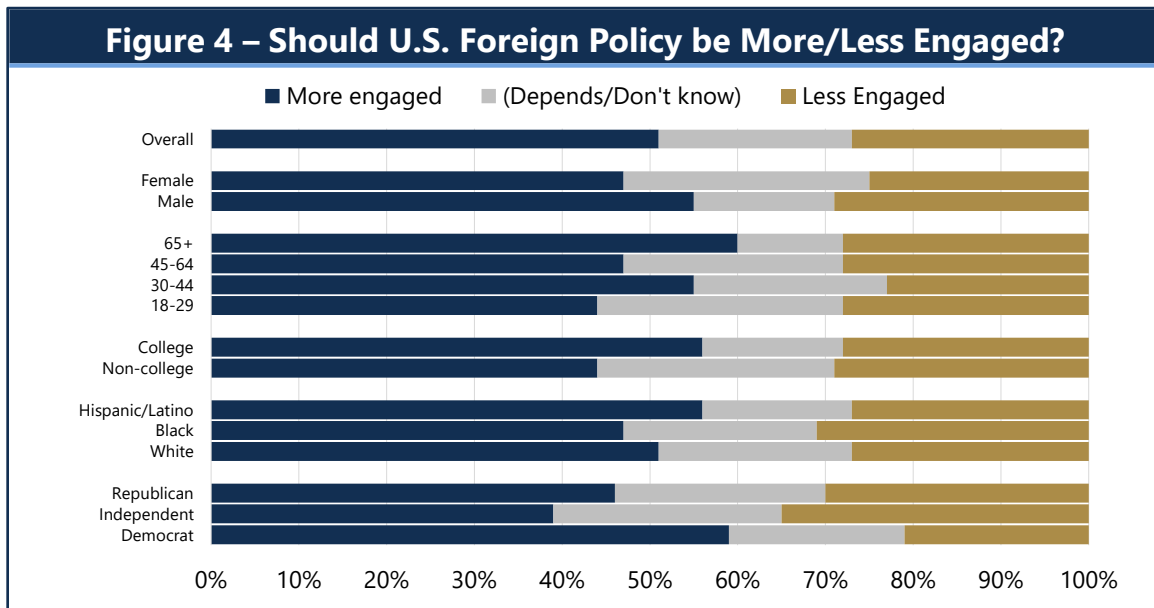
Furthermore, while support for increased defense spending is generally high, it varies across key demographic and political groups. Most notably, those under 30 years of age, those with a college degree, those with no religious affiliation, and Democrats are relatively less likely to support increased defense spending or to rate it as their top spending priority.

As suggested above, partisanship is especially relevant here. On the top spending priority question Democrats favor health care (46%), education (20%), and combatting systemic racism (13%) rather than border security (2%) or the military (3%). Republicans, on the other hand, are relatively more likely to favor spending on border security (32%), the military (20%), and education (17%).

Isolationism v. Engagement

Although pollsters have long noted the existence of isolationist sentiment in the U.S., the pervasiveness of this perspective is debatable. Here we find it to be very much in the minority. When asked about whether U.S. foreign policymakers should take leadership roles and be more engaged with world events—versus less engaged and more reactive—more than half of the public says more engaged. Only slightly more than one-in-four choose the less engaged option.

Those most likely to prefer a more engaged posture include men, those over 30 years of age, people with a college education, Hispanics, and Democrats.



Similarly, when asked about the efficacy of maintaining U.S. military bases overseas compared to reducing our foreign presence, Americans opt for maintaining bases by a 63% to 31% margin.

What Sort of Engagement?

With respect to the nature of American engagement, the plurality response (41%) is that the U.S. “strikes the right balance” between the use of the military and diplomacy. Thirty-four percent think the U.S. uses the military too much in situations where diplomacy would be better, whereas 16% think the opposite.

A military response is the preferred option for emerging terrorist or military threats to the U.S. (57%, compared to 13% for economic sanctions and 10% for diplomacy), and for attacks on freedom (29%, compared to 18% and 23%, respectively). For human rights violations, Americans split on whether economic sanctions (28%) or diplomatic pressure (28%) constitute the best response. Only 16% choose a military option. For attacks on free and fair elections, diplomatic pressure is preferred (32%), followed by economic sanctions (23%) and military force (15%).

Domestic Use of the Military

The turmoil, unrest, and (at times) violence the country has experienced over the past few years has clearly impacted public perceptions of threats. According to the 2021 poll, Americans are as

likely to see the greatest threats to the country as emanating from within our borders as outside of them. Thirty-six percent see the greatest threats as coming from within, while 35% see them as coming from outside and 25% see domestic and outside sources as equally likely to produce the greatest threat.

Furthermore, by a large margin people think the use of the U.S. military to address these domestic threats is appropriate. Seventy-one percent think it is appropriate to deploy the military when government buildings are being attacked (16% say it is inappropriate). Two-thirds say it would be appropriate to respond to domestic terrorism committed by U.S. citizens (19% say this would be inappropriate). Sixty-two percent say it would be appropriate to deploy the U.S. military if police are unable to control a violent protest (22% say this would be inappropriate). Fifty-eight percent believe that it is appropriate to deploy the U.S. military in the event of an insurrection by American citizens (22% say this would be inappropriate).

Less controversially, respondents also support the deployment of the U.S. military to help with natural disasters (82% appropriate), to help control a pandemic, by deploying hospital ships or helping with vaccine distribution (77%), or to help secure the border (64%).

Assessments of U.S. Enemies, Allies, and Threats

China as a Priority Threat

When asked where the U.S. should concentrate its military forces, 28% said East Asia – almost double the number from 2019 (16%). Conversely, the percentage choosing the Middle East dropped from 37% in 2019 to 21%.

Like Americans broadly, East Asia is the top area of focus for both veterans (34%) and those in active-duty military households (22%).

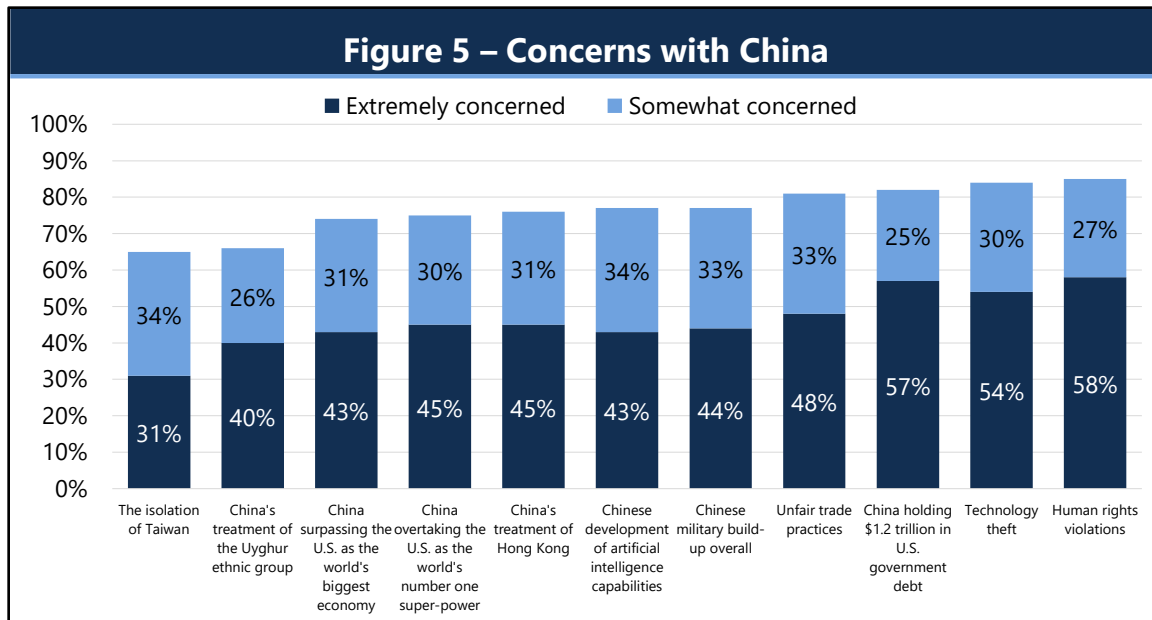
These views about regional threats are reinforced by assessments of the dominant player in East Asia—China. Only 21% view China as an ally, whereas 67% view it as an enemy. The net “ally-enemy” rating is thus -46; in 2019, it was -24 and in 2018 it was -17.

Furthermore, 37% chose China as the greatest threat to the U.S., compared to 16% for Russia, 15% for North Korea, and 8% for Iran. This number is up from 28% in 2019 and 21% in 2018.

When asked for their views about China’s political system, approximately three-quarters of respondents said they were “unfavorable,” compared to 12% choosing “favorable.” The Chinese Communist Party was evaluated similarly.

Americans see China as more of an economic threat (43%) than a military one (15%) – though fully a third (34%) think it presents a challenge in both arenas.

The duality of the perceived threat is evident in responses to questions about specific concerns. Two of the top four concerns are economic in nature—China’s holding of U.S. government debt (82%), and unfair trade practices (81%)—while another has economic and military/security implications technology theft (84% concerned). But the number one overall concern in China’s human rights violations (85%), and more than three-quarters of people say they are concerned by China’s overall military build-up.



To further plumb American attitudes towards China, we asked respondents about four specific topics in the news: (1) China’s military build-up in the South China Sea, (2) China’s moves to outlaw political dissent in Hong Kong, (3) China’s imprisonment of at least one million members of the Uyghur ethnic group, and (4) China’s governmental policy to achieve technological supremacy over the U.S. in artificial intelligence.

In the roughest terms, about half of those surveyed have very little knowledge about these topics. Only 47% know “quite a bit” or “some” about the military build-up in the South China Sea; 57% know at least “some” about the Hong Kong crack down; 44% know at least “some” about the Uyghur situation; 46% know at least “some” about China’s AI initiative.

But when acquainted with these topics, Americans express high degrees of concern:

- 83% are concerned (“extremely” or “somewhat”) about the Uyghurs;
- 82% are concerned about the South China Sea;
- 81% are concerned about Hong Kong;
- 79% are concerned about the AI strategy.

In short, China has eclipsed the Middle East, Russia, and North Korea as the greatest perceived threat to the U.S., and that threat is multi-faceted.

Secondary Threat: Russia

In 2018 and 2019, negative attitudes towards Russia appear to have been given urgency by partisan reactions to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Those sentiments are less obvious in 2021. So, while Russia is seen as more foe than friend (69% enemy, 19% ally), only 16% rate the Russian bear as our greatest external threat.

Concerns about Russia remain high, however. Eighty-two percent are “extremely” or “somewhat” concerned about Russia sponsoring cyber-attacks against the U.S.; 77% are similarly concerned about Russian aid to Iran and other rogue regimes; and 77% are similarly concerned about the poisoning of opposition leaders and the suppression of dissent in Russia. At the low end of the

“concern” spectrum, “only” 60% are concerned about Russia launching a thermo-nuclear attack on the U.S.

Having alluded to Russian election interference above, it is worth observing that 73% remain concerned about Russian interference in our elections. In the event of such interference, 35% favor responding with economic sanctions, 18% with diplomatic pressure, 9% with military force, and 18% with a “mix” of these responses. Notably, just 5% believe the U.S. should not respond at all, with similarly low levels among Biden supporters (3%) and Trump voters (6%).

North Korea has also faded from the news a bit, but 15% still rate the regime as the biggest threat to the U.S. (down from 18% in 2018 but up from 14% in 2019). Seventy-six percent of Americans see North Korea as an enemy, compared to 13% who see it as an ally.

Rogue States

In the event of an imminent attack from North Korea on the U.S. and its allies, South Korea and Japan, 78% would prefer that we work with our allies to prevent the attack, using force if necessary. Seventeen percent would prefer to wait until the attack is actually launched and then counter-attack.

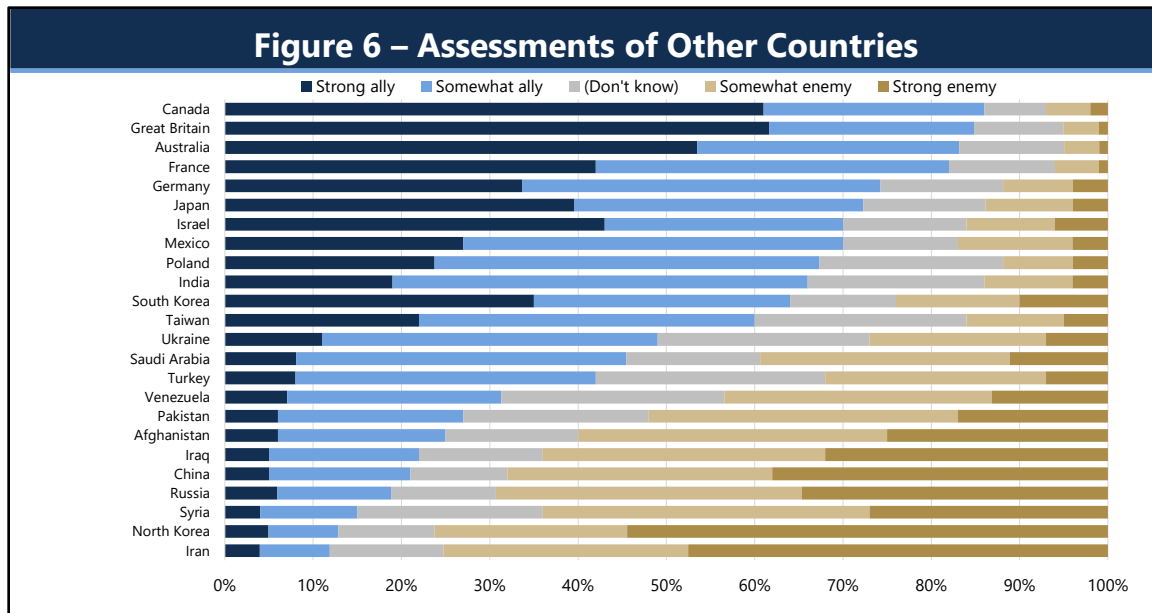
Beyond China, Russia, and North Korea, 8% viewed Iran as the greatest threats to the U.S. Although a plurality prefers that the U.S. reenter the Iranian nuclear deal, 46% also prefer that the U.S. is “more aggressive” with Iran, compared to 17% who would like us to be “less aggressive.”

Evaluations of Iraq and Afghanistan

Looking back at the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, more Americans see them as failures than successes. Failure beats success by 18 points for Afghanistan (50% failure, 32% success) and by 10 points in Iraq (46% failure, 36% success). Unsurprisingly, most Americans prefer keeping troops at the same levels or even drawing them down in Afghanistan (39% decrease, 35% keep the same, 15% increase) and Iraq (29% decrease, 41% keep the same, 19% increase).

This “pessimistic” view is reflected in the fact that more Americans see Iraq (22% ally, 64% enemy) and Afghanistan (25% ally, 60% enemy) as foes rather than friends.

Now that the dust has mostly settled in the Middle East, roughly one-in five (21%) think the U.S. should focus its forces in the Middle East. This is down from 27% in 2018 and 37% in 2019.



Allies & Partners

On the other side of the ledger, our comrades from the Great White North check in as the number one ally: 86% consider Canada an ally of the U.S. Americans also love our friends across the pond and from down under. Eighty-four percent consider Great Britain and Australia allies, followed by France (82%), Germany (75%), Japan (73%), Israel (70%), Mexico (70%), Poland (68%), India (66%), South Korea (65%), and Taiwan (60%). In addition, Great Britain was rated our most important ally when respondents were asked to rank them. It is worth noting, however, that on the whole the public’s willingness to rate these countries as allies is down roughly 8% from 2019.

As we saw in our 2018 and 2019 polls, attitudes towards our main allies are positive, though not entirely sanguine. Sixty percent, for example, are favorable towards NATO but 22% are unfavorable. Furthermore, 55% say our NATO allies should do more, compared to 29% who say they are doing enough. Similarly, 48% say our Pacific Rim partners—Australia, Japan, and South Korea—“should do more”, whereas 35% say they are “doing their fair share”.

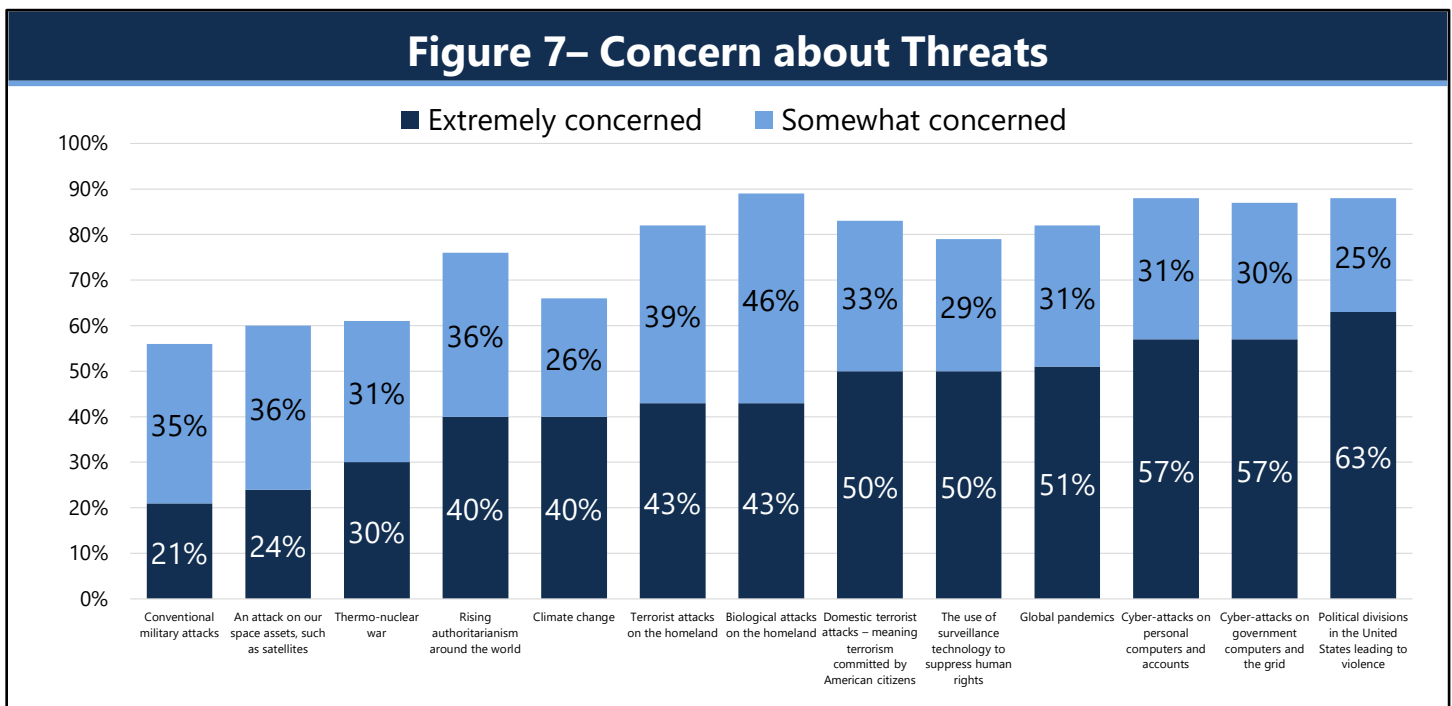
Threat Perceptions

Respondents were asked how concerned they are about specific threats that might occur over the next five years. Consistent with some of the sentiment about domestic partisan conflict noted earlier, 63% said they were “extremely concerned” about political divisions leading to violence in the U.S. The next most wide-spread intense concerns were associated with cyber-attacks on government computers and the grid and cyber-attacks on personal computers and accounts (57% extremely concerned each), followed by global pandemics (51%), domestic terrorist attacks (50%), and the use of surveillance technology to suppress human rights (50%).

Interestingly, 40% were “extremely concerned” about the threat associated with climate change. When coupled with the 51% who say they consider climate change to be a national security threat, it is clear that a substantial percentage of the American public sees the environment as a major existential threat.

As might be expected, this sentiment is particularly acute among Democrats (62% extremely concerned), those with a post-graduate degree (49%), those under 30 years of age (44%), Hispanics (53%), and Blacks (44%). Conversely, Republicans (15% extremely concerned) are relatively unconcerned with climate change.

Other potential threats are seen as less pressing. For example, only 21% say they are “extremely concerned” with conventional military attacks on the U.S. A similar number (24%) expressed this level of concern about an attack on our space assets.

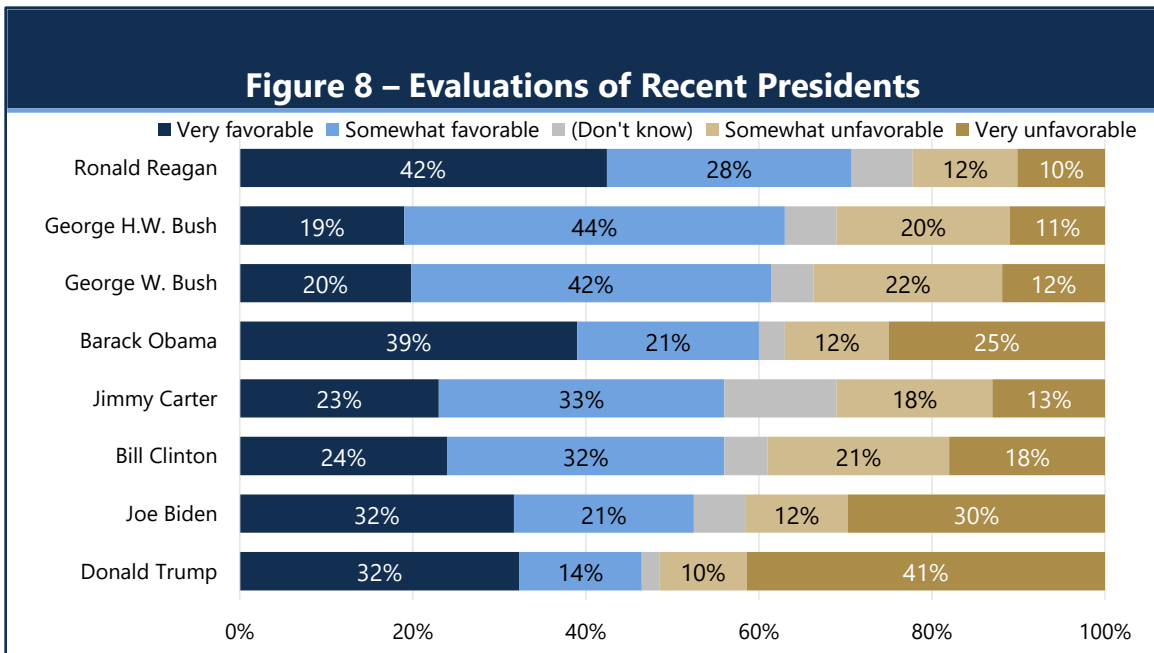


Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Seventy percent view the Gipper “somewhat” or “very” favorably. Reagan also has the highest percent viewing him very favorably (42%) and the lowest percentage viewing him very unfavorably (10%). Overall, Reagan’s rating is a net +48 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan is George H.W. Bush (63% favorable, followed by George W. Bush (62%), Barack Obama (60%), Jimmy Carter (57%), Bill Clinton (56%), Joe Biden (53%), and Donald Trump (46%).

Among Republicans, Reagan (88% favorable) narrowly edges Trump (84%) for the top spot. Reagan is also among the leaders in crossover appeal, as 55% of Democrats view him favorably – identical to the 55% who view George W. Bush favorably and a hair behind the 57% who hold a positive view of George H.W. Bush.



Conclusion

The bottom-line reveals both continuity and change in defense and foreign policy attitudes. On the one hand, compared to previous polls we see that a year of COVID-19 and social unrest has left the public slightly less enthusiastic about our military and defense posture, and a bit less sanguine about allies. In addition, the public in 2021 is concerned with new threats, both in terms of where they come from (domestic versus foreign; China versus Russia and the Middle East) and in terms of their fundamental nature (technological and environmental versus traditional military).

On the other hand, Americans remain confident in our military overall. Furthermore, they continue to back the notion that the U.S. ought to be a leader internationally, and that we should promote democracy and human rights abroad. As in previous years, the poll also suggests that age, education, and partisanship continue to shape defense and foreign policy opinions.

Methodology

This survey was conducted from February 4-14, 2021. It features a mixed-mode design, with 1,011 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,516 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Forty percent of the calls were completed via landline and 60 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. To ensure that results accurately reflect the demographics of the country, they were weighted by age/gender, race/region, and education targets drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2019 American Community Survey. The probability sample was then used to calibrate the non-probability online sample (conducted over the same dates) by key demographic and attitudinal variables. For the full sample of 2,527 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 1.96 percentage points. Many items are split-sampled, however, so that the relevant margin of error is +/- 2.77 percentage points. In addition, the margin of error for sub-groups is larger.