



## EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To: Whom It May Concern  
From: Daron Shaw & Chris Anderson  
Date: November 16, 2021  
Subject: Results from the 2021 Annual Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

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### Overview

From October 25-November 7, 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 fourth 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 14 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.

### Ratings of the Military

One of the most striking findings of this survey is that the American public's confidence in national institutions has ebbed considerably since our inaugural 2018 poll—and opinions about the U.S. military were no exception. The percent saying they have "a great deal of confidence" has decreased by 17 points for police and law enforcement (50% to 33%), 9 points for the presidency (28% to 19%) and Supreme Court (27% to 18%), 6% for the news media (16% to 10%), and 7% for public health officials (33% to 26%). Confidence in the U.S. military has taken an even greater hit, as the percent saying they have "a great deal of confidence" has fallen 25 points (70% to 45%).

Still, general confidence in the military remains high, with 78% saying they have "some" or "a great deal of confidence" and only 21% saying they have "little" or "no confidence at all." And when asked about their confidence in the particular abilities of the military, 83% say they have "a great deal" or "some" confidence that the military can keep the country safe, while 73% express this level of confidence in their ability to deter foreign aggression, 72% in their ability to win a war overseas, and 71% in their ability to act in a professional and non-political manner.

What is it that Americans think their military does especially well? Eighty-eight percent rate us as "best in the world" (43%) or "one of the best" (45%) with respect to overall capabilities. Eighty-

seven percent give us “best” or “one of the best” marks for conventional weaponry (e.g., tanks, battleships, and airplanes), 84% for high tech weaponry (e.g., AI, missile technology), 82% for traditional manpower, 75% for military leadership, and 73% for cyber-technology and cyber-security.

### **China Emerges as a Major Concern**

When asked which country is the greatest threat to the U.S., more than half (52%) said China, far eclipsing Russia (14%) and North Korea (12%). Only 21% rated China as the greatest threat in 2018. Moreover, only 23% of Americans consider China an ally, whereas 65% consider it an enemy. This -42 net “enemy” rating far surpasses the 2018 rating of -18 “enemy.” Seventy-one percent say they are “concerned” about war with China in the next five years (33% are “very” concerned).

Consistent with these opinions, the public thinks that the U.S. should concentrate its military forces in East Asia: 37% choose this location from an array of options around the globe; this number is more than double the number from 2019 (16%). Conversely, the percentage choosing the Middle East dropped from 37% in 2019 to 17%.

Views on the nature of the threat from China are decidedly mixed. Twenty percent say China’s economic practices concern them most, while 19% say its military build-up, 17% say its human rights abuses, and 13% say its foreign policy activities. On a separate item, 23% said China’s progress in artificial intelligence is their top concern, with another 23% citing supply chain vulnerability as their greatest concern.

Three issues perhaps best capture the frustration and concern of the U.S. public towards China: (1) Taiwan, (2) the origins of the COVID-19 virus, and (3) the upcoming Winter Olympics.

- Against the backdrop of increasingly aggressive moves by the Chinese Communist Party towards Taiwan, we asked what measures respondents would back should China invade the island country. Almost three-quarters of Americans (71%) would support officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, 66% would support economic sanctions against China, 55% would support moving U.S. military assets into the region, and 50% would support establishing a no-fly zone over the area.
- Close to three-quarters of respondents think it is likely that the coronavirus was developed by scientists working in a lab in Wuhan, accidentally leaked, and that the Chinese government then hid the leak and lied about it to international public health officials. Seventy-six percent of people think that the Chinese government should pay reparations to other countries as a penalty if this is indeed what happened.
- When asked what actions the U.S. should take in response to a State Department report documenting China’s human rights violations against the Uyghur population, 60% support the IOC delaying and relocating the games while a similar number supports an advertising and sponsorship boycott by U.S. corporations. Slightly less than half support a full boycott by the U.S. Olympic team or a diplomatic boycott by the U.S. government (where our athletes would still compete).

## **Greatest Threats: Cyber-Attacks and Terrorism**

As noted above, we asked respondents how concerned they are about specific threats that might occur over the next five years. Almost ninety percent (88%) said they were concerned about “cyber-attacks.” This was followed by terrorist attacks on the homeland (82%), global pandemics (81%), the use of surveillance technology to suppress human rights (80%), domestic terrorist attacks (79%), biological attacks on the homeland (78%), rising authoritarianism in the world (75%).

## **U.S. Leadership in the World**

While our perception of threats is evolving, Americans remain committed to engagement and are generally supportive of our current force posture. By about 12 percentage points, the public thinks it is better for the U.S. to be more engaged and take the lead rather than being less engaged and reacting to events (42% more engaged, 30% less engaged). Sixty-five percent say that it’s better for the U.S. to maintain military bases around the world rather than reduce our military presence (27%). And a plurality (33%) say the U.S. strikes the right balance between the use of military and diplomacy (32% too reliant on the military, 19% too reliant on diplomacy).

### Afghanistan

With this broader context as backdrop, it is unsurprising that the public views recent events in Afghanistan as weakening the U.S. When asked specifically about removing all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, a solid plurality (40%) say that the decision weakens America, compared to 14% saying it strengthens us and 35% saying it makes no difference. Similarly, although about half of the country thinks that we should have withdrawn all of our troops from Afghanistan, roughly two-in-five thinks we should have left troop levels the same (27%) or increased the number (10%).

## **More Ambivalence towards Allies**

As the world order shifts and shuffles, the “special relationship” between the U.S. and the U.K. persists. Eighty-six percent say the Brits are our allies, just topping Australia (84%), France (84%), Germany (76%), and Japan (70%). In addition, the United Kingdom was rated our most important ally when respondents were asked to rank them (39%, with Canada rated second at 9%). 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.

More generally, the data indicate that Americans are 5-10 points less likely to rate our traditional partners as “allies.”

One specific trend worth noting is the decreased percentage saying that Israel is an “ally.” In 2018, 80% offered this rating, whereas in 2021 it drops to 66%. The percent saying that Israel is an “enemy” has remained constant, but the percent saying “don’t know” has increased from 7% to 17%.

## **Evaluations of Presidents**

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Sixty-nine percent view our 40<sup>th</sup> president “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 +47 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan is George H.W. Bush (62% favorable, followed by Barack Obama (59%), George W. Bush (57%), Bill Clinton (55%), Jimmy Carter (50%), Donald Trump (50%), and Joe Biden (44%).

Among Republicans, Trump (87%) and Reagan (86% favorable) hold the top spots. Reagan is also the leader in crossover appeal, as 51% of Democrats view him favorably – slightly above the 50% who view George H.W. Bush favorably and a few points ahead of the 45% who hold a positive view of George W. Bush.

### **Methodology**

This survey was conducted from October 25-November 7, 2021. It features a mixed-mode design, with 998 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1525 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Forty-nine percent of the calls were completed via landline and 51 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 2,523 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 1.96 percentage points. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger.