

RONALD REAGAN
INSTITUTE

Reagan National Defense Survey



Conducted November 2021

Polling Conducted by Beacon Research and Shaw & Company Research

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. This November 2021 poll is RRPFI's fourth such survey since 2018.

This survey was conducted from October 25-November 7, 2021 by the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R). 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.

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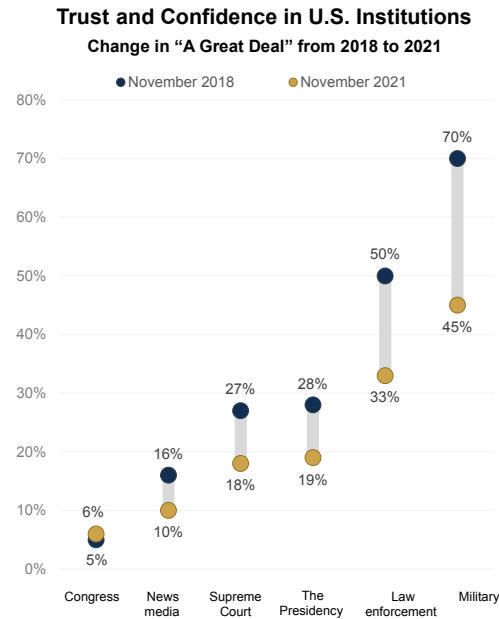
Introduction

Almost a year into the Biden Administration and a few months removed from the Afghanistan withdrawal, the American people are equivocal and unsure about U.S. global leadership and military capabilities. The latest Reagan National Defense Survey reveals the continuation of many trends that emerged in previous surveys, such as declining trust and confidence in the military. Across a number of different questions, though, respondents were more likely to indicate that they were unsure, that they did not have an opinion, or that their opinion depends on the circumstance—revealing a growing ambivalence about America’s role in the world. However, despite uncertainty among the American people about whether or how the United States should lead in the world, there is a significant bipartisan consensus that China is the greatest threat we face.

Amid this environment, leaders should seek to inspire the American people, as President Reagan did, to believe in a United States that leads in the world, advances the values of freedom and democracy abroad, and maintains the peace through its strength.

1. Sharp Decline in Trust and Confidence in the U.S. Military

For the first time in our survey, a minority of Americans—only 45%—report having a great deal of trust and confidence in the military. Alarming, this is down 25 points in the last three years. Increasing numbers of Americans say they have little or not much confidence in the military, which is up 15 points in the last three years. Those reporting some confidence have grown by 10 points.



Trust and confidence in the military is down across the major demographic subgroups, including age, gender, and party identification. Since 2018, those reporting the highest level of confidence in the military have fallen among Republicans by 34 points to 53%, Democrats by 17 points to 42%, and Independents by 28 points to 38%. The highest level of confidence is down 25 points among both men and women. And it is declining among all age groups as well, down 25 points among those over 65, by 26 points among those ages 45- 64, and 28 points among those 30-44.

Perhaps most troubling for recruitment in the all-volunteer force is that only a third (33%) of adults younger than 30 have high confidence in the military, which is down 20 points since 2018. Confidence is lower among young Americans than any other demographic subgroup, including ideological, religious, ethnic, economic, or geographic region.

While the military continues to top the list of trusted institutions, the trend of declining trust is occurring more rapidly for the military than it is for other public institutions (Figure 1). The military has declined in trust by 25 points since 2018, while law enforcement has declined by 17 points from 50% to 33%. Those who say they have a great deal of confidence in the presidency declined by 9 points, from 28% to 19%, since 2018. The Supreme Court has also declined by 9 points, from 27% to 18%. Congress and the news media have had generally stable levels of trust and confidence since 2018.

Reason for Declining Confidence in the Military

To understand more about the trend, a new survey question this year asked respondents to identify the main reason for their level of confidence in the U.S. military. Among those with high confidence, 29% said the reason for their level of confidence has to do with servicemembers; 15% said it has to do with the military protecting our nation and keeping us safe; and 11% said it has to do with our military capabilities, including equipment, weapons, or technology.

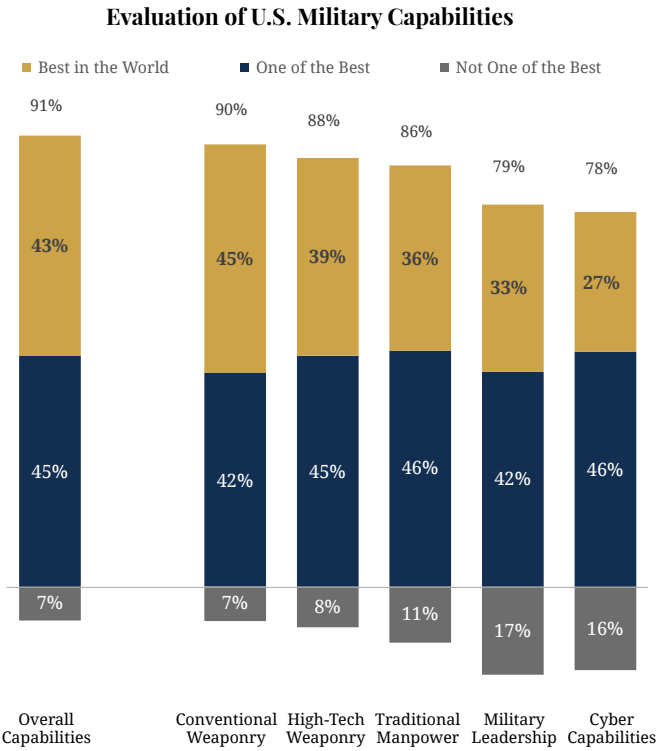
Among those with little or not much confidence in the military, their answers were more mixed. The most common answer was political leadership, at 13%, followed by servicemembers and anything related to scandals within the military, both at 9%. Close behind at 8% were the military leadership and the concept that the military is too expensive or has the wrong priorities. While high trust and confidence seems to attribute to our men and women in uniform, the lack of confidence in our military seems to be more about a general negative sense than a predominate or precise reason.

Perceptions of Military Capabilities

Americans are also unsure about the military's ability to perform its core responsibilities. Only slightly more than half (57%) have a great deal of confidence in the U.S. military's ability to keep the country safe, while a quarter (26%) report some confidence and 14% have a little or not much confidence. Regarding its ability to win a war overseas, even fewer (42%) have a great deal of confidence, while 30% have some confidence and 23% have a little or not much confidence. Roughly the same numbers have a great deal of confidence (40%) in the military's ability to act in a professional and nonpolitical manner, while 31% have some confidence and 25% have a little or not much confidence.

In 1976, Ronald Reagan admonished, “[W]e are number two in a world where it is dangerous, if not fatal, to be second best.” The American people believe we are now in that same dilemma. Overall, Americans are split between believing the U.S. military has the best capabilities in the world and that the military is only one of the best in the world (Figure 2). When asked how they think the U.S. military is doing compared to other militaries, 43% believe the U.S. military is the best in the world in overall capabilities, whereas 45% think it is only one of the best. The answers to this question track closely with trust and confidence in the military, as those with greater confidence in the military tend to think more highly of its capabilities. Still, when asked to identify which country has the best military, 69% named the United States. The second most common answer was China at 17%.

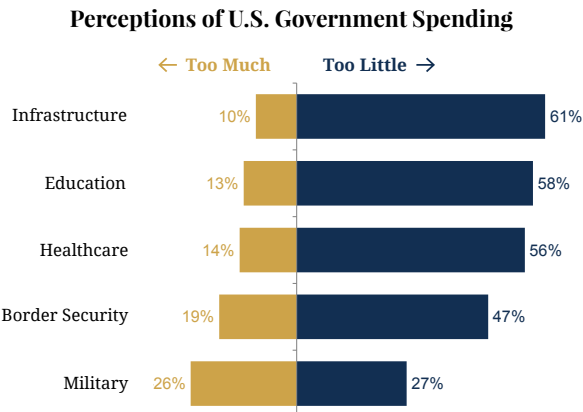
On specific capabilities, Americans are more likely to think the U.S. military is the best in the world when it comes to conventional weaponry, such as tanks, battleships, and airplanes (45%) compared with only 27% who think it is the best in the world at cyber capabilities. There is particularly low belief in the relative strength of America’s military leadership and manpower. Only one-third (33%) think that the U.S. military leadership is the best in the world, whereas 42% think it is one of the best. There are slightly higher numbers for traditional manpower, such as enlisted servicemembers, with 36% believing the U.S. military is the best in the world, while 46% think it one of the best.



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey November 2021

Figure 2

Only one-third (33%) believe the United States strikes the right balance between the use of the military and diplomacy. A roughly equal number (32%) believe America uses the military in too many situations where diplomacy would be better.



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, November 2021

Figure 3

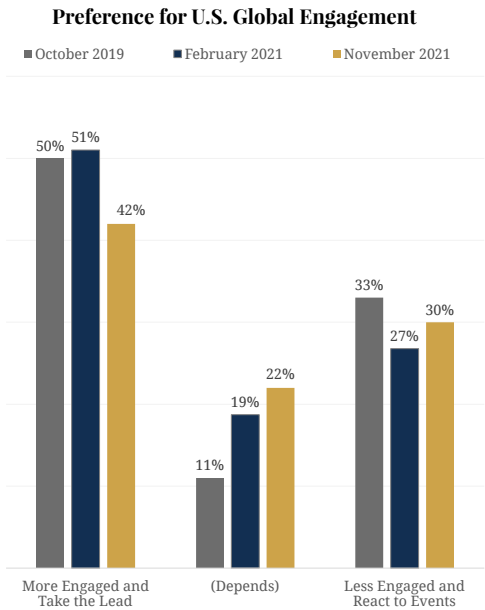
In terms of military funding (Figure 3), a plurality (39%) think the U.S. government spends about the right amount on defense, whereas roughly equal percentages think it spends too little (27%) or too much (26%). Among Republicans, equal percentages (42%) say the U.S. government spends too little or about the right amount on the military, with only 11% saying it spends too much.

Among Democrats, 45% say it spends too much, while 37% say it spends the right amount, and only 13% say it spends too little. When asked what the highest priority for increased funding should be, the military ranks fifth as a priority at 11%, behind healthcare (23%), border security (17%), education (15%), and infrastructure (14%). However, when asked what the next-highest priority for increased funding should be, the military jumps to the third position at 19%, behind only education (24%) and healthcare (21%). There is some partisan split on funding priorities, as Republicans rank the military second on their funding list, while it comes in lower for Democrats.

While 65% of Americans report being concerned about the threat of climate change, fewer (50%) support the U.S. military using part of its budget to address climate change—and 39% oppose it. There is a huge partisan gap on issue, with 78% of Democrats supporting and 67% of Republicans opposing. There is also an age gap on military funding to address climate change, with 66% of those under 30 supporting it, while 56% of those 65 or older opposing it.

2. Growing Ambivalence about U.S. Leadership in the World

Americans are becoming more ambivalent about the U.S. role in the world, as fewer people express support for active global leadership. Less than half of Americans (42%) think it is better for the United States to be more engaged and take the lead when it comes to international events, which is down by 9 points since February (Figure 4). Almost a third (30%) think that it is better for the United States to be less engaged and react to events—while 28% responded “it depends” or “don’t know” which is an increase of 6 points since February (Figure 5). Therefore, despite waning support for global engagement, this may not indicate a growing preference for isolationism overall. There does, however, seem to be a notable shift among Democrats. Those voters have moved from 59% believing the United States should be more engaged in February to only 46% in November. Correspondingly, the number of Democrats preferring less engagement jumped 100%. Among Republicans, the preference for global engagement now matches Democrats at 46%, with 30% preferring less engagement. The preference for internationalism grows among the more educated and among those ages 65 or older.

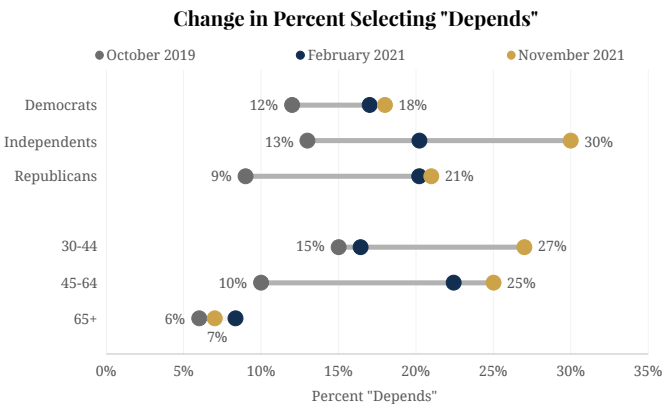


Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, October 2019 and November 2021 *Figure 4*

When it comes to the greatest threats we face, Americans are most concerned about cyberattacks (88%). Violence as a result of political division in the United States (85%) follows close behind, then terrorist attacks on the homeland (82%). Americans are also concerned about domestic terrorist attacks, as in terrorism committed by American citizens (79%). When asked if they think the greatest threats we face come from outside of the country or from within the country, 41% think they come from within, which is up 5 points since February 2021. Another 30% believe we face equal threats at home and abroad, which is also up 5 points since February. Only one in four (25%) think the greatest threats come from outside the country, which is down 10 points since February. Democrats are more likely to say that the greatest threats come from within (at 49%), while Republicans are relatively evenly divided between believing the greatest threats come from

within the country (35%), from outside (31%), and from both equally (31%). Independents align more with Republicans on this point.

Despite this growing ambivalence about U.S. leadership and greater concern about threats from within, Americans still overwhelmingly support a forward-deployed military presence abroad. Nearly two-thirds (65%) believe it is better for the United States to maintain military bases around



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, October 2019, February 2021, and November 2021

Figure 5

the world to deter attacks and respond quickly if something happens. Only 27% would prefer to reduce our military presence overseas and only deploy troops in response to aggression. This is generally consistent with the survey data over the last three years. There is bipartisan consensus on this point as well, with 59% of Democrats, 56% of Independents, and 75% of Republicans support maintaining bases overseas.

3. Increased Understanding of the China Challenge

For the first time in our survey, a majority of the American people identify a single country as the greatest threat facing the United States: China. Fifty-two percent of Americans now name China when asked which country they see as the greatest threat to the United States, while only 14% say Russia (Figure 6). This is a marked change since 2018, when only 21% said China while 30% said Russia. China tops the list for Republicans (64%) as well as Democrats and Independents (both 44%), making this our first survey to reveal cross-partisan consensus on this question. That is a shift just since February 2021, when only 20% of Democrats named China, while 28% saw Russia as the top.

When asked in general whether China is an ally or an enemy, 65% now say enemy, which is up 10 points over the last three years. In 2018, 38% of Americans saw China as an ally; that is now down 15 points to 23%. Seven in ten Americans (71%) are concerned about a war between the United States and China, including 66% of Democrats and 79% of Republicans.

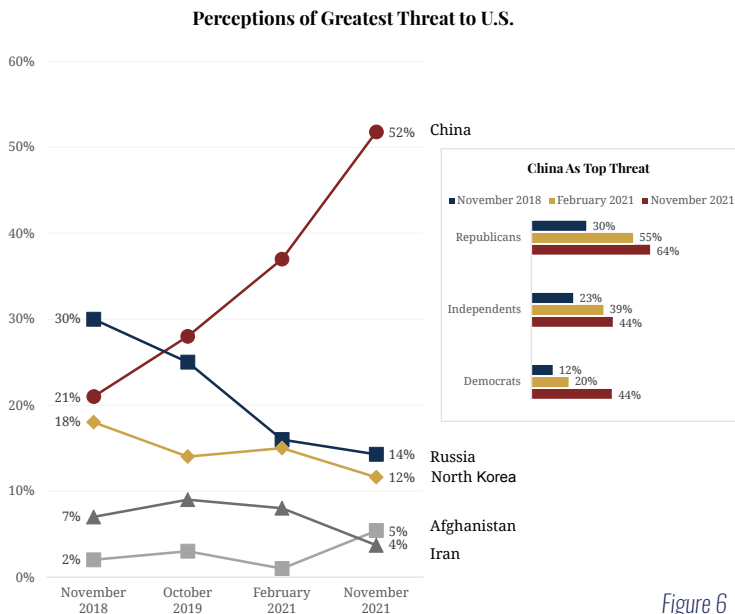


Figure 6

There has also been a shift over the last three years on the question of where the United States should focus its military forces. Overall, a plurality (37%, which is up 9 points since February) now say East Asia, while only 17% say the Middle East. Even among those who named Russia as the greatest threat, 24% believe the United States should focus its military forces in East Asia, compared to 19% who focus in Europe. Merely two years ago in our 2019 survey, a plurality of 37% said that the United States should focus in the Middle East whereas now, that amount has dropped by 20.

A plurality in both parties (43% of Republicans and 37% of Democrats) now agree on this question, making this the first time in our survey there is bipartisan consensus on this point, with East Asia topping this list for both parties. As recently as the February survey, Democrats selected the Middle East above East Asia by a margin of 22% to 19%. Since then, the percentage of Democrats selecting East Asia increased 18 points. While there has been for years a bipartisan consensus among national security experts to shift U.S. focus to China in the context of strategic competition, that bipartisan consensus is now present among everyday Americans as well.

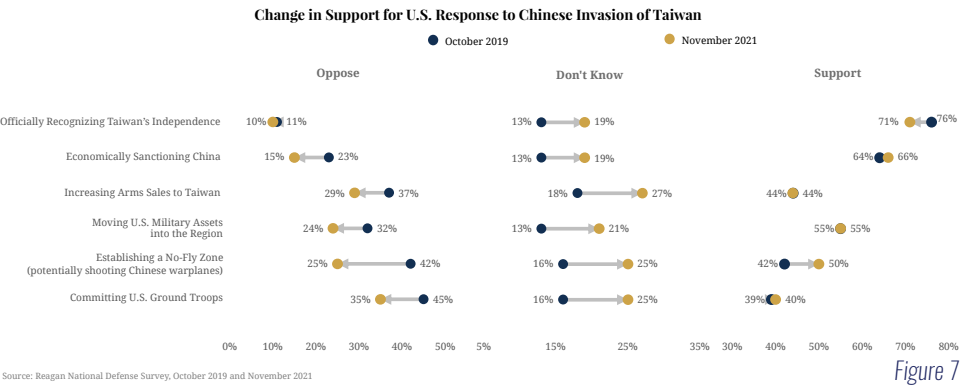
Americans are also beginning to recognize the multifaceted nature of the China challenge. When asked about their single greatest concern regarding China, Americans are almost evenly divided among three options: China's economic and trade practices (20%), its military build-up (19%), and its human rights abuses (17%). There is only modest partisan disparity on this question, with Republicans more likely to prioritize the military buildup and

Democrats more likely to highlight human rights abuses. Members of both parties are equally likely to select economic practices as their top concern, at 22% of Democrats and 20% of Republicans.

Taiwan

As policymakers continue to debate how the United States can deter an increasingly aggressive China from invading Taiwan, it is worth exploring American public opinion on the cross-strait relations. On the question of the single greatest concern regarding China, of five options given, the prospect of invading Taiwan ranked at the bottom of the list of concerns, at 7%. Over six in ten (62%) Americans do recognize Taiwan as an ally. However, this is down 9 points since 2018.

A series of questions in the survey first provided respondents with the information that although official Chinese policy is that Taiwan is part of China, Taiwan has operated relatively independently for decades. They were then asked if they would support or oppose the United States coming to Taiwan’s defense in a number of specific ways if China invaded Taiwan (Figure 7). Compared to the responses from 2019, overall levels of support for any of these measures has remained about the same. However, fewer people said they are opposed to many of these measures and instead report indecision or confusion, responding that they do not know. This may reflect that Americans are wrestling with these scenarios and are perhaps open to persuasion.



The potential response to a Taiwan invasion that garnered the greatest support was officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent country (71%), with 19% of respondents saying they do not know and only 10% opposing. Within this option, Independents in particular have shifted over the last two years, with an 8 point reduction in opposition and an 11 points increase in indecision. Two-thirds (66%) of Americans would support imposing economic sanctions against China, with 19% saying they do not know and

15% opposing. Since 2019, opposition is down 8 points, and uncertainty is up 6 points.

In terms of a U.S. military response to a Taiwan invasion, 55% support and 24% oppose moving U.S. military assets, such as aircraft carriers, into the region; 21% say they do not know. Overall, opposition has diminished by 8 points while uncertainty has increased by 8 points since 2019. For Democrats, opposition dropped 8 points, even split between a 4-point increase in support a 4-point increase in uncertainty. For Republicans, opposition decreased by 10 points, with a 2-point increase in support and an 8-point increase in indecision.

Half (50%) of Americans support establishing a no-fly zone over the area in response to a Taiwan contingency, while a quarter (25%) opposes, and a quarter (25%) does not know. Here too, over the last two years, support is increasing slightly but indecision is rising faster, with opposition waning. Fewer Americans (44%) would support dramatically increasing arms sales to Taiwan, while 29% oppose and 27% do not know. Since 2019, opposition has dropped 8 points while those saying they don't know grew by 9 points.

Only four in ten (40%) would support committing U.S. ground troops to the defense of Taiwan, while 35% would oppose and one in four (25%) do not know. Since 2019, opposition is down by 10 points, and uncertainty is up by 9 points. This shift is primarily the result of opinion among Republicans, for whom opposition is down 16 points, with a 5-point increase in support and an 11-point increase in uncertainty.

Coronavirus

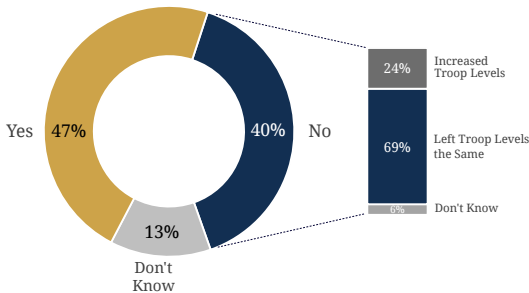
When asked about the theory that the coronavirus was developed by scientists working at a lab in Wuhan and accidentally leaked, and that the Chinese government then lied about it, nearly three quarters (72%) of Americans believe it is likely, with 42% saying it is very likely. Majorities of each party believe it is likely: 86% of Republicans, 67% of Independents, and 61% of Democrats. More than two-thirds of Americans across all levels of education believe the theory. If the theory was proven, 76% of Americans think China should pay reparations to other nations as a penalty, including 82% of Republicans and 72% of both Independents and Democrats.

Overall, concern about global pandemics stands at 81%, and 78% report being concerned about biological attacks on the homeland, both of which are consistent with our February survey. Despite their prominence throughout the vaccination phase of the pandemic, only 56% of Americans report having a great deal or some confidence in public health officials, which is down 10 points since February.

4. Reactions to the Afghanistan Withdrawal

After 20 years of American involvement in Afghanistan, almost 6 in 10 (59%) believe the war there was a failure, up almost 10 points since February. Almost half (48%) consider the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan to be a major threat to U.S. national security, whereas about a third (34%) consider it a minor threat. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to see the Taliban takeover as a threat.

Should the U.S. Have Withdrawn Troops From Afghanistan?



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, November 2021

Figure 8

A plurality of Americans (40%, including 64% of Republicans) believe the decision to remove all U.S. troops from Afghanistan weakens the United States with a similar number (35%, including 50% of Democrats) saying it does not make much difference either way. Relatively few (14%) believe the withdrawal strengthens the United States.

Overall approval of the decision to withdraw itself stands at 47% (Figure 8). This includes 67% of Democrats, 44% of Independents, and 30% of Republicans. In contrast, only 27% say the United States should have left troop levels the same, including 47% of Republicans, 21% of Independents, and 11% of Democrats. There has been a partisan shift on this issue since February. Two months prior to President Biden's announcement of a full withdrawal from Afghanistan, 47% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats wanted to decrease troop levels in Afghanistan, while 46% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats wanted to either increase troop levels or keep troop levels about the same.

Nonetheless, a majority of Americans (62%) say that, regardless of how they feel about the decision to withdraw troops, they disapprove of the way the withdrawal was handled. This includes 83% of Republicans, 60% of Independents, and 42% of Democrats. As for who is to blame, overall nearly half of Americans (49%) believe the problems associated with the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan were mostly the fault of President Biden's poor judgement. There is partisan split on this issue, with 82% of Republicans and 50% of Independents blaming President Biden's judgement but only 14% of Democrats. Overall, 20% of Americans blame poor military planning (including 32% of Democrats but only 9% of Republicans) and the actions of the Taliban, which was the most common response for Democrats at 38%.

Terrorism

Americans’ level of concern about terrorism has been relatively consistent since 2018. This year, 82% report being concerned about terrorist attacks on homeland. Regarding Afghanistan in particular, 87% are concerned about possible terrorist plots or terrorist training facilities emerging in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Additionally, 74% are concerned about the production and trafficking of opium and other drugs.

However, when asked about the effectiveness of an “over the horizon” approach to counterterrorism, there was considerable disagreement along partisan lines (Figure 9). Overall, 37% believe the U.S. needs military forces on the ground to effectively monitor and disrupt terrorist groups, including 53% of Republicans, 31% of Independents, and only 25% of Democrats. A plurality (47%) believe the United States can effectively monitor and disrupt terrorist groups through intelligence gathering and drone strikes from outside Afghanistan, including 60% of Democrats, 44% of Independents, and only 35% of Republicans.

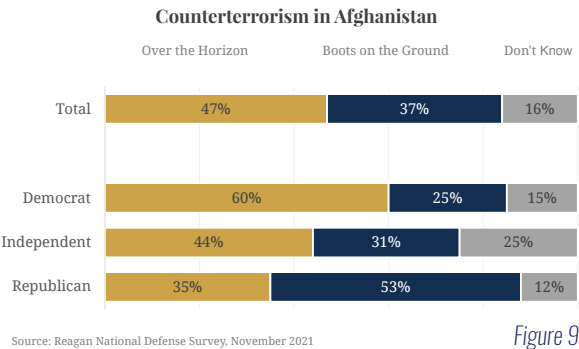


Figure 9

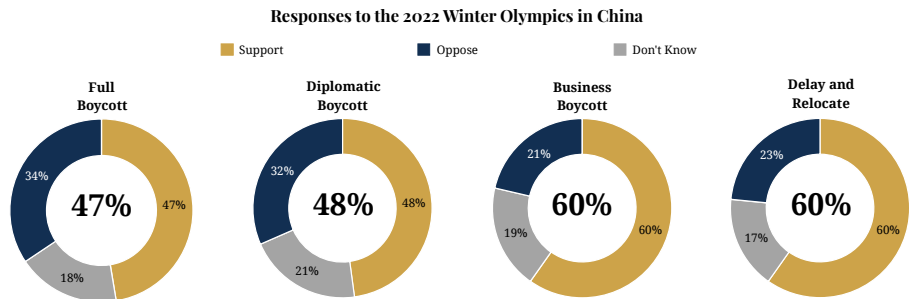
Current service members are evenly divided: 42% believe we need forces on the ground, while 43% believe we can operate from outside Afghanistan.

5. Support for Defending Freedom and Democracy

Despite the growing ambivalence around U.S. global leadership, Americans still care about the plight of those who live under repression and fear. Three-fourths (75%) are concerned about rising authoritarianism around the world, and 80% are worried about the use of surveillance technology to suppress human rights. Regarding Afghanistan in particular, almost nine in ten (88%) are concerned about human rights violations and the repression of women’s rights in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. On China, when asked to identify their single greatest concern, human rights abuses, including the treatment of Hong Kong and the Uyghur ethnic group, rank near the top alongside economic and military concerns. Notably, one-third (33%) of Americans under the age of 30 prioritized Chinese human rights abuses as their greatest concern regarding China.

Regarding U.S. government spending, Americans are more likely to support funding for promoting freedom abroad than more generally, “foreign aid.” While 51% of Americans say the United States spends too much on foreign aid, opinion is mixed when it comes to funding for promoting freedom around the world, with 30% saying it spends about the right amount, 30% saying it spends too much, and 22% saying it spends too little. Republicans (38%) are more likely to say that it spends too much, while Democrats (37%) are more likely to say that it spends about the right amount. However, significantly more Republicans say the U.S. government spends too little or about the right amount on promoting freedom (45%) than say it does on foreign aid (23%).

Beijing Winter Olympics



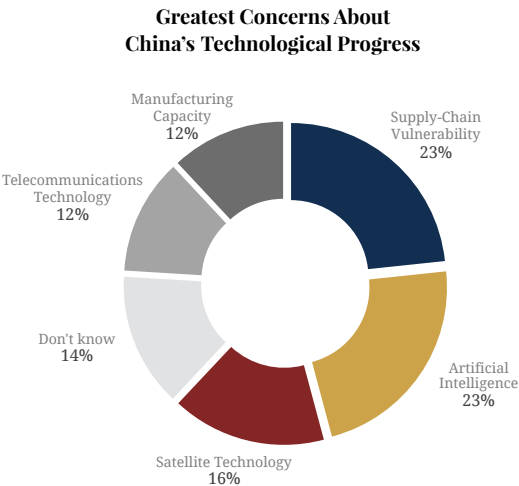
Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, November 2021

Figure 10

After providing some information regarding the Chinese government’s human rights violations, genocide against the Uyghur ethnic group, respondents were asked about calls for a boycott of the upcoming 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing (Figure 10). A majority (60%) of Americans support the International Olympic Committee delaying and relocating the games. The same number (60%) support a business boycott, where U.S. corporations would refuse to sponsor or advertise during the Beijing Olympics. Both of these options have more than 60% support among both Republicans and Democrats. There is also plurality support (48%) of a diplomatic boycott by the U.S. Government, where American athletes would still compete, with only 32% opposing. About the same number (47%) support a full boycott by the United States Olympic team and its athletes, including 45% of Democrats and 53% of Republicans, while 34% overall oppose. Democrats are more likely to support a diplomatic boycott than a full boycott, whereas Republicans are more likely to support a full boycott rather than a diplomatic boycott.

6. Winning the Technological Competition and Preventing Cyberattacks

Americans increasingly see national security through a high-tech lens and understand in particular that technology is a central aspect of competition with China. Regarding the possibility of the United States falling behind China technologically, almost three quarters (73%) report being concerned, including 38% who are extremely concerned. This includes 79% of Republicans, 70% of Democrats, and 67% of Independents.



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey November 2021

Figure 11

When asked about their single greatest concern regarding China's progress in specific areas of technology (Figure 11), supply-chain vulnerability and artificial intelligence were at the top of the list, both at 23%. Younger people were more likely to prioritize China's artificial intelligence technologies, while supply chain concerns were more common among those over 44. Satellite technology is next on the list at 16%, followed by telecommunications technology and manufacturing capacity, both at 12%.

Cybersecurity

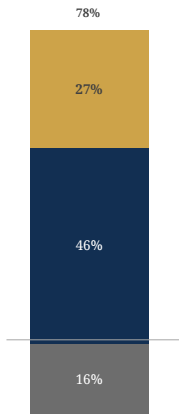
With the SolarWinds hack and the Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack grabbing headlines this year, Americans remain intensely worried about cyber threats. Cyberattacks again topped Americans' overall list of concerns, at 88%; cyberattacks have been the top concern in each of our four surveys since 2018. This includes 90% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats, and 84% of Independents. Furthermore, cyberattacks are the potential threat that attracts the greatest intensity, with 56% reporting that they are extremely concerned.

When asked in particular about their single greatest concern regarding Russia, cyberattacks on the United States top the list at 25%.

Unified in their concern about cyberattacks, Americans are divided on the appropriate response. If a country conducts a cyberattack against

**Perception of U.S.
Military's Cyber
Capabilities**

■ Best in the World
■ One of the Best
■ Not One of the Best



Source: Reagan National Defense
Survey, November 2021

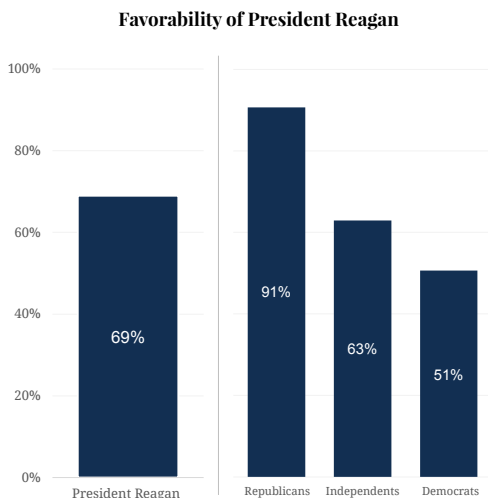
Figure 12

the U.S. government or major U.S. corporations, 35% of Americans believe we should respond with economic sanctions and 17% with diplomatic pressure. Republicans are more likely to support economic sanctions, while Democrats are more likely to support diplomatic pressure. One in four Americans (24%) believe the United States should respond with military force, including 20% of Democrats, 24% of Independents, and 28% of Republicans.

On this issue, there is a tremendous gap between Americans' high level of concern about cybersecurity and their confidence in our military capabilities in this domain (Figure 12). Only 27% of Americans confident that the U.S. military is the best in the world in cyber-technology, cyber-security, and cyber-warfare, compared with 46% who believe it is only one of the best.

7. Reclaiming President Reagan's Approach: A Call to Action

The American people continue to view President Reagan positively, with a 69% overall favorability. Notably, a majority of Americans of all political stripes view President Reagan favorably: 91% of Republicans, 63% of Independents, and 51% of Democrats.



Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, November 2021

Figure 13

Perhaps similar to how they felt on the eve of President Reagan's first inauguration, Americans today see an increasingly dangerous world amid pessimism about their situation at home. Nearly two-thirds (59%) of Americans believe things in the United States are heading in the wrong direction, where only 33% believe they're going in the right direction. In 1981, the crisis required, as Reagan explained, "our best effort, and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront

us." Today, the American people need a reminder of our country's potential and its unique role in the world.

Americans' concern about human rights abuses abroad demonstrate their continued commitment to America as a "shining city upon a hill" and a beacon of freedom in the world. However, their reaction to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, overall perception of U.S. leadership, and declining confidence in the U.S. military indicate the need to reiterate the importance of "peace through strength"—the centerpiece of President Reagan's foreign policy.

Today's coarsened domestic politics and geopolitical upheaval, emerging threats and new technologies, extended conflicts and elusive adversaries all necessitate the values and principles of Reaganism. Leaders who aspire to a more peaceful future are obliged to make the case for that Reagan-style approach to today's generation of Americans.

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