



EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To: Whom It May Concern
From: Chris Anderson, Daron Shaw, Andrew Schwartz & Rob Moser
Date: November 28, 2022
Subject: Results from the 2022 Annual Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

Overview

From November 9-17, 2022, 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. The 2022 poll is RRPFI's fifth such survey since 2018. The impetus behind the poll is straightforward: to provide politicians, policymakers, and experts consistent and timely information about public opinion on these important issues.

Over those 9 days, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 2,500 adult citizens from across the United 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 the appetite for U.S. global leadership. The survey includes a particularly comprehensive exploration of American public opinion on key foreign policy issues such as the U.S. relationship with China, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Ratings of the Military

Overall confidence in the military ticked up very slightly compared to last year, reversing a 4-year trend. Forty-eight percent said they had "a great deal" of confidence in the U.S. military, compared to 45% in 2021. However, the current number is down 22 points from 2018, when 70% expressed a great deal of confidence.

In addition to the general decline in confidence, there are some other warning signs with respect to public opinion towards our armed forces. Most notably, the survey shows a slight decline from last year in confidence in the military's ability to keep the country safe (50% this year versus 57% last year) and act in professional and nonpolitical manner (35% this year versus 40% last year).

The perceived politicization of military leadership looks like the top item decreasing confidence in the armed forces. Over one-third (34%) cite this factor as decreasing their confidence in the military "a great deal." About the same say "the performance and competence of presidents" has decreased their confidence a great deal, although—with a Democrat in the White House—this

assessment is almost wholly driven by Republicans. Also contributing to decreased confidence in the military are perceptions of “woke” politics (30% say it has contributed a “great deal” to their lower confidence), the performance and effectiveness of the military’s civilian leadership (27%), the military’s potential to win a future war (24%), far-right or extremist individuals serving in the military (23%), the military’s performance in Iraq and Afghanistan (22%), and the performance and competence of uniformed military leadership (21%).

Ratings of the specific competencies of the American military—while still high—are down from last year’s survey. Almost two-thirds (65%) think the U.S. has the best military in the world; this is down from 69% last year (China comes in second, with 15%, Russia is third with 4%). Respondents were most bullish on the U.S.’s conventional military capacity, with 43% rating it “the best in the world”. Forty-five percent offered the “best in the world” rating for our conventional forces in 2021. Another 40% say our “overall military capacity” is “the best in the world,” down from 43% in 2021. Thirty-seven percent give the top rating to our high-tech weaponry, down from 39% in 2021. Curiously, the biggest drops come from ratings of the men and women in uniform. Thirty percent rate our service members as “the best in the world,” and 25% rate our military leadership similarly (down from 36% and 33%, respectively, in 2021). The lowest ratings are for our cyber-technology, with just 25% rating us as “the best in the world” (down from 27% in 2021).

Still, as noted above, general confidence in the military remains high, with 81% saying they have “some” or “a great deal of confidence” and only 18% saying they have “little” or “no confidence at all.” And when asked about their confidence in the particular abilities of the military, 79% say they have “a great deal” or “some” confidence that the military can keep the country safe, while 71% express confidence in their ability to deter foreign aggression, 73% in their ability to win a war overseas, and 67% in their ability to act in a professional and non-political manner.

By way of comparison, confidence in other institutions has also declined over the past five years, though (for the most part) not as substantially. The percent saying they have “a great deal of confidence” in police and law enforcement has decreased by 17 points (50% to 33%), 12 points for the presidency (28% to 16%), 11 points for the Supreme Court (27% to 16%), and 7% for the news media (16% to 9%). Confidence has declined by 6% for election administrators over the past year (26% to 20%).

U.S. Leadership in the World

In terms of overall posture, slightly more think we should be engaged in world events (40%) than think it’s time to take a step back (32%) —but the margin has narrowed from 24 points in Feb 2021 to just 8 points now. Put more broadly, there is still an isolationist strand to American attitudes, but it is a minority opinion. The real question is how much treasure and support to commit to causes, movements, and people aboard?

The answer is that Americans want to do at least what we are currently doing, and perhaps a bit more. Roughly one-quarter of the country (24%) would like the U.S. to increase support for democracy advocates abroad, while about half (48%) want to keep supporting these people at current levels. About 18% want to cut this aid. In response to another item on budget priorities, there has been a substantial increase in the percentage of Americans who say they want to increase federal spending in foreign policy areas. For example, when asked about spending priorities 53% favor increasing spending on foreign aid (up 12 points from 2021, when only 41% wanted to increase spending). Along the same lines, 62% want to spend more on promoting democracy

abroad (up 7 points from 2021, when 55% wanted to increase spending). The bulk of the increase in support for foreign aid spending comes from Republicans and may be tied to foreign *military* aid (e.g., to Ukraine) rather than humanitarian or pro-democracy foreign aid initiatives.

Tackling the question of engagement from a slightly different angle, 65% prefer the U.S. keep its foreign military bases rather than reducing our presence overseas, a number that has been remarkably stable over the past five years.

Major Threats from Within and Abroad

When asked how concerned they are about a set of possible threats occurring within the next five years, Americans put “political divisions within the U.S. leading to violence” at the head of the list (85% “concerned,” with 52% “extremely” concerned), along with cyber-attacks (85% “concerned,” with 48% “extremely” concerned). These threats were followed by “rising authoritarianism in the world” (81% concerned), “the use of surveillance technology to suppress human rights” (80%), “domestic terrorist attacks by U.S. citizens” (77%), “expansion of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine” (77%), terrorist attacks on the homeland” (76%), and “biological attacks on the homeland” (73%). In the next tier, you have “China invading Taiwan” (70% concerned), “global pandemics” (70%), “war between the U.S. and China” (69%), “thermo-nuclear war” (69%), “attacks upon our space assets, such as satellites” (66%), “climate change” (65%), and finally “conventional military attacks” (57%). The biggest movers on this list include thermo-nuclear war (8% increase over November 2021) and global pandemics (11% decrease from November 2021).

Forty-three percent of Americans identify China as the top threat to the U.S., but that’s down from 52% last year. Unsurprisingly, Russia is now seen as the second greatest threat, with 31% choosing it. That’s up from 14% in 2021. No other country garnered double digits (North Korea was selected by 7% and the next greatest threat—at 3%—was “ourselves”).

Moreover, only 19% of Americans consider China an ally, whereas 75% consider it an enemy. This -56 net “enemy” rating far surpasses the 2018 rating of -18 net “enemy.” Sixty-nine percent say they are “concerned” about war with China in the next five years (33% are “very” concerned). And 70% are “concerned” about China invading Taiwan (31% “very” concerned). Only 13% consider Russia an ally, whereas 82% consider it an enemy. This net -69 net enemy rating is even worse than 2018, when it was -54 “enemy.”

Consistent with these opinions, the public thinks that the U.S. should concentrate its military forces in East Asia: 31% choose this location from an array of options around the globe; this number is roughly double the number from 2019 (16%). The percent choosing Europe, including Russia, has also risen, from 5% in 2018 to 18% now. Conversely, the percentage choosing the Middle East dropped from 37% in 2019 to 11% in 2022.

Views on the nature of the threat from China are decidedly mixed. Twenty-two percent say China’s economic practices concern them most, while 18% say its military build-up, 17% say its human rights abuses, 13% say its China invading Taiwan, and 11% say its foreign policy activities. It is therefore unsurprising that 54% say the U.S. does not have a clear strategy for managing its relationship with China. The same percentage—54%—support reducing U.S. trade with China.

Americans are also quite concerned about specific threats from Putin's Russia. At the top of the list is Russia sponsoring cyberattacks against the U.S. (84% "concerned," 52% "extremely" concerned), followed by Russia invading other former Soviet republics (83% "concerned," 55% "extremely"), aiding Iran and other rogue regimes (79% "concerned," 41% "extremely"), poisoning opposition leaders and suppressing dissent within Russia (74% "concerned," 40% "extremely"), launching a thermo-nuclear attack against the U.S. (71% "concerned," 37% "extremely"), and interfering in our elections (67% "concerned," 37% "extremely").

China-Taiwan

Given the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing interest in reclaiming Taiwan, we asked what measures respondents would back if China were to invade the island country. Almost three-quarters of Americans (73%) would support officially recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, 60% would support economic sanctions against China, 56% would support sending more military equipment to Taiwan (like the U.S. is currently doing with Ukraine,), 52% would support moving U.S. military assets into the region, 46% would support establishing a no-fly zone over the area, and 43% would support committing U.S. ground troops to the defense of Taiwan.

When respondents are made aware that Taiwan is one of the world's largest producers of advanced semi-conductors, 46% are more likely to support committing U.S. ground troops to the defense of the island. That includes 36% of those who initially opposed the idea and 40% of those initially unsure.

When asked if they support specific actions to deter China from invading Taiwan, 61% support increasing the U.S. military presence near Taiwan, and another 58% support increasing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Russia-Ukraine

On balance, Americans think we are sending the right amount of aid to Ukraine, though a quarter think we are sending too much, and a quarter thinks we are sending too little. The majority (57%) thinks we should stand with Ukraine to protect democracy and prevent further Russian aggression. One-third (33%) thinks we have enough problems at home and should not spend more on the conflict at the risk of further provoking Russia. This latter sentiment is more prevalent among political independents and Republicans, and among those who have less confidence in the US military.

Almost seven in ten Americans (68%) think Russia is to blame for the conflict, while all other factors (the United States, Ukraine, NATO or EU expansion) are each blamed by less than 10% of respondents. This is in line with the growing sense that Russia is one of America's biggest international threats as highlighted above in its -69 net enemy rating.

Despite (or perhaps because of) general support for U.S. engagement supporting the Ukrainians, there is concern over the war. At the top of the list (77% concerned) is the possibility that Russia will use a nuclear weapon. Other concerns include the war expanding to other Eastern European countries, which would draw America into the conflict (74%), the Russian invasion inspiring other authoritarian regimes to invade their democratic neighbors (71%), the war distracting U.S.

policymakers from the threat posed by China (70%), Russian victory in the war (67%), and the U.S. depleting its weapon stockpile (59%).

NATO Expansion

Obviously related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the question of U.S. commitment to NATO and to NATO expansion. Unlike changing opinions across many other foreign policy issues, support for NATO has been consistent since 2018. Sixty percent have a favorable view of the alliance, while 23% have an unfavorable view.

With respect to the current debates about NATO expansion, wide majorities support NATO expansion. Seventy-one percent support adding Finland and Sweden to the alliance, whereas 61% support adding Ukraine. Almost three-quarters (72%) would support the U.S. responding with force if Russia were to attack a NATO ally in Europe.

Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Sixty-seven percent view our 40th president “somewhat” or “very” favorably. Thirty-five percent view Reagan “very favorably” and only 9% view him very unfavorably. Overall, Reagan’s rating is a net +41 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan is George H.W. Bush and Barack Obama (60% favorable), followed by George W. Bush (57%), Jimmy Carter (57%), Bill Clinton (55%), Donald Trump (48%), and Joe Biden (43%).

Methodology

This survey was conducted from November 9-17, 2022. It features a mixed-mode design, with 984 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,554 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Thirty-eight percent of the calls were completed via landline and 62 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 2021 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 2,538 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 2.0 percentage points. Most questions were asked of half the respondents, with an associated margin of error of +/- 2.8 points. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger.