RONALD ✶ REAGAN
INSTITUTE

Reagan National Defense Survey

About the Reagan National Defense Survey

The Ronald Reagan Institute, the Washington, DC office of 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, foreign policy, and national security matters. This is RRPFI's sixth such survey since 2018. It was conducted by Beacon Research and Shaw & Company.

This survey was conducted from October 27-November 5, 2023. It features a mixed-mode design, with 945 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,561 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Fifty-one percent of the calls were completed via landline and 49 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. For the full sample of 2,506 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.

About the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute is the nonprofit organization created by President Reagan himself and specifically charged by him with advancing his legacy and principles of limited government, individual liberty, economic opportunity, freedom and democracy, peace through strength, civility, and national pride. The Foundation is a non-partisan organization which sustains the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, CA, the Reagan Center for Public Affairs, the Presidential Learning Center, The Air Force One Pavilion and the award-winning Discovery Center, as well as the Reagan Institute, which carries out the Foundation's work in Washington, D.C. The Reagan Library houses over 55 million pages of Gubernatorial, Presidential and personal papers and over 60,000 gifts and artifacts chronicling the lives of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. It also serves as the final resting place of America's 40th President and his First Lady. www.reaganfoundation.org.

Introduction

For five years, the Reagan National Defense Survey has gauged Americans' perspectives on key issues in defense, national security, and foreign policy. This survey has consistently found that Americans believe the United States should be engaged abroad and exercise strong leadership in the world. They support an active U.S. role across different domains of international affairs, from a strong military to trade and economics to defending human rights and advancing freedom. There has been particularly consistent support for maintaining U.S. military bases overseas and increasing defense spending.

This year's survey reveals concerns that congressional budget cuts will lead to reduced military capabilities and support for increasing military spending on cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence. Americans broadly recognize the need for boosting domestic manufacturing capacity to produce what is needed for our national defense.

Amidst increasing conflict around the world, Americans want the United States to serve as the arsenal of democracy. They support providing security assistance to those fighting to defend their freedom, with strong majorities for assisting Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan.

When it comes to how the United States stacks up to its adversaries, the survey reveals a pervasive but perhaps overconfident belief in the superiority of the U.S. military compared to the People's Republic of China.

Table of Contents

Global Security Challenges

War in Ukraine

Support for the United States sending military aid to Ukraine has been remarkably consistent across Reagan Institute polling. In November 2023, overall support stands at 59%, with Democrats at 75% and Republicans at 49%. Those numbers overall and among partisans have not changed since the Reagan Institute Summer Survey asked the same question in June 2023—nor from the last Reagan National Defense Survey one year ago in November 2022. Despite many in the media speculating about "Ukraine fatigue" and much debate in Washington, strong majority support for militarily aiding Ukraine has not wavered.

Also consistent with previous findings, 76% of Americans believe it is important to the United States that Ukraine win the war. But Americans are not sure who is winning:

Consistent Support for Ukraine

Overall — Democrats — Republicans

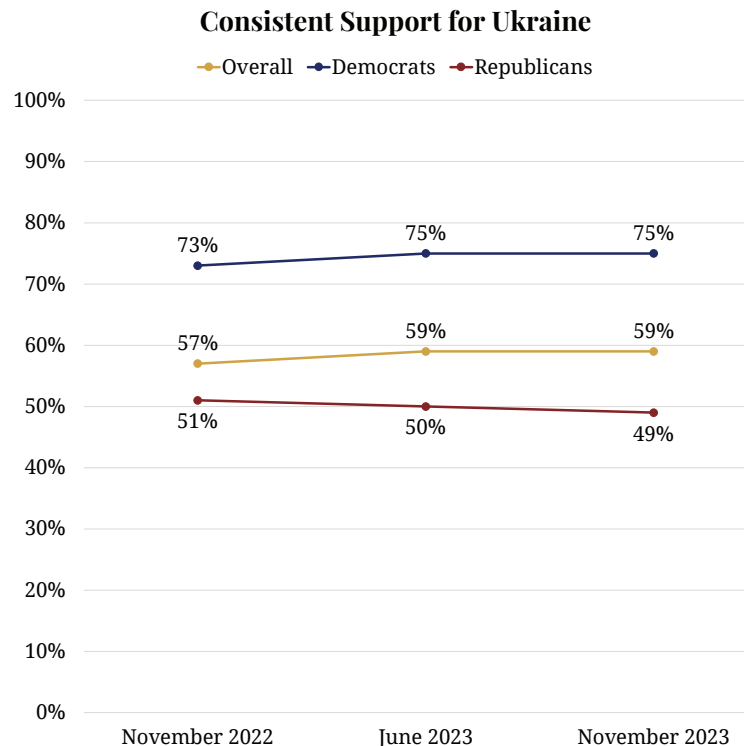|	November 2022	June 2023	November 2023
Democrats	73%	75%	75%
Overall	57%	59%	59%
Republicans	51%	50%	49%

there is almost an even split between those who believe Russia is winning (31%) as those who think Ukraine holds the upper hand (27%). Perception of who is winning the war in Ukraine has a striking connection to support for aid. Among those who believe Ukraine is winning, a staggering 80% express support for aid while only 14% oppose; among those who think Russia is winning, only 50% support aid while 42% oppose.
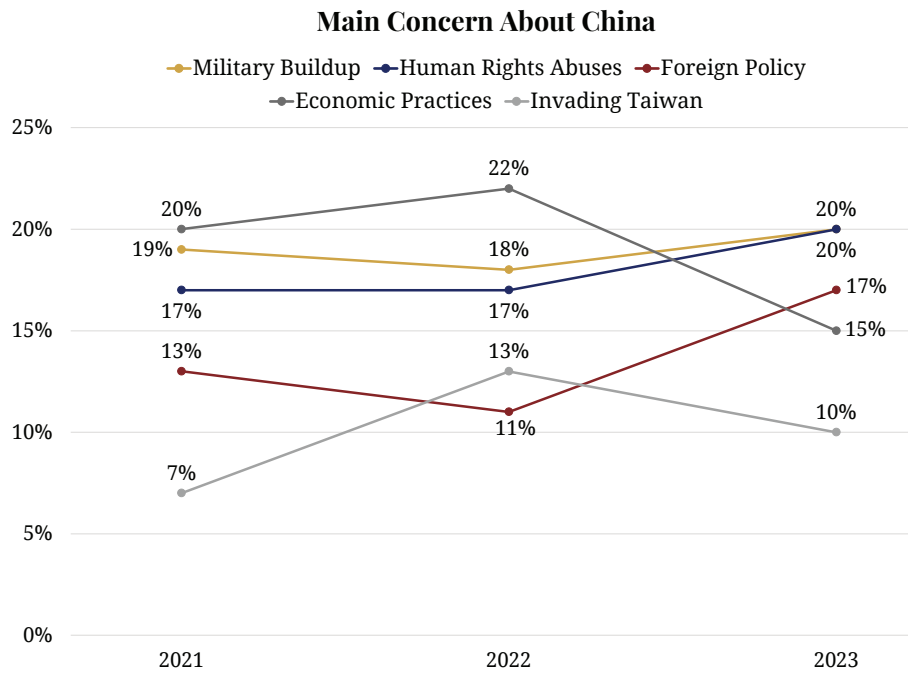
War in Israel

Americans demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the ongoing situation in Israel and U.S. priorities in the Middle East. They identify both strategic and immediate U.S. concerns: pluralities say that the United States is currently doing too little to disrupt Iran's nuclear program (47%), counter Iran's influence in the Middle East (39%), and secure the release of those taken hostage by Hamas (39%). Over 70% of Americans consider Israel an ally of the United States, and threequarters (76%) regard Iran as an enemy. When it comes to supporting Israel or the Palestinians, opinions are divided about if the United States is doing too little or too much on either side—but there is plurality agreement America should do more to counter Hamas (39%).

Competition with China

Over half of Americans (51%) name China as the country that poses the greatest threat to the United States, including a plurality of Democrats (40%) and a majority of Republicans (66%). This is up from 43% overall last year in the aftermath of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, when more Americans named Russia as the greatest threat (31% in 2022 and 24% in 2023). The threat perception has changed dramatically since the first Reagan National Defense Survey in 2018, when only 21% named China as the greatest threat.
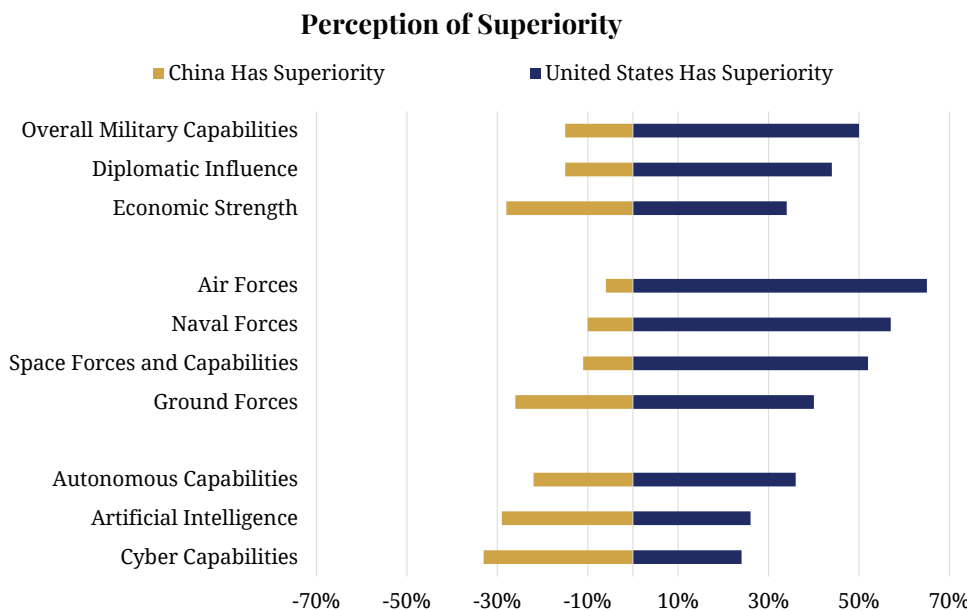
Americans are beginning to see China vying for global geopolitical influence vis-à-vis the United States rather than primarily as an economic competitor. When asked for their top concern about China, the Chinese military buildup and human rights abuses top the list at 20% each. The number of Americans identifying Chinese foreign policy, including efforts to expand influence in the global south, as their top concern about China jumped from 11% to 17% since last year, while those putting Chinese economic practices at the top of their list dropped from 22% to 15%.

Main Concern About China

Supremacy

In this competition with China, how is America doing in relative terms? Half of Americans believe the United States has overall military superiority vis-à-vis China, and more than a quarter (28%) believe the American and Chinese militaries are at parity with about equal capabilities. Perception among Americans of particular capabilities is misaligned with expert assessments,[1] including widespread belief in the supremacy of American air (65%) and naval (57%) forces.

Perception of Superiority

Americans also believe the United States has the upper hand when it comes to our space forces and capabilities (52%) and our ground forces (40%). On more cutting-edge technological capabilities, Americans perceive China as having superiority: 33% think China has superiority in cyber capabilities, whereas 32% perceive parity between the two countries and only 24% report U.S. superiority. Artificial intelligence (AI) is a concern as well, with 29% reporting Chinese superiority and 30% perceiving parity while only 26% think America has supremacy. This public opinion data suggests that leaders have thus far failed to articulate to the broader public what numerous wargames[2] of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and other analysis have revealed about the United States and China's military balance.

---

[1] U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," China Military Power Report 2023, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

[2] Hirsh, Michael. "The Pentagon Is Freaking Out About a Potential War With China." Politico Magazine. June 9, 2023.

Three-quarters (75%) of Americans worry about China surpassing the United States as the world's top superpower. Nearly as many (72%) express concerns about China becoming the largest global economy. But by a slim margin they think that today the United States still has superiority when it comes to economic strength (34% U.S. superiority, 30% equal, 28% Chinese superiority) and slightly greater on diplomatic influence (44% U.S. superiority, 31% equal, 15% China superiority). Looking ahead, more than half of Americans think that China will gain military power (53%) and economic strength (53%) compared to the United States in the next 10 years, with fewer thinking China will gain diplomatic influence (40%) in the next 10 years. Much fewer people believe China will lose power across all of these domains in the next 10 years.

Taiwan

Almost three quarters of Americans (73%) are concerned about a potential invasion of Taiwan, and supermajorities in both parties (68% of Democrats and Republicans alike) view Taiwan as an ally. About seven in ten Americans (71%) are concerned about the Russian invasion of Ukraine inspiring other authoritarian countries to invade their democratic neighbors. An increasing percentage of Americans are expressing support for sending U.S. troops to defend Taiwan if invaded: 46% in 2023, up each year from 39% in 2019. After learning more about Taiwan's democracy and its strategic importance, 52% say they are more likely to support committing U.S. forces to Taiwan's defense. In order to keep the peace and deter a Chinese invasion, 6 in 10 Americans (60%) support increasing the U.S. military presence near Taiwan, and nearly as many support increasing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan (55%).

Arsenal of Democracy

Reagan Doctrine

A strong, bipartisan majority supports a "Reagan Doctrine" approach to U.S. foreign policy: the idea that America should help its allies and friends defend themselves if they are willing to fight aggression against their own countries. Framing security assistance to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan in this context generates higher levels of support—both overall and among partisan subgroups—than when asked outside of this context. Seven in ten Americans (71%) support assisting Israel while around two-thirds support assisting Ukraine (67%) and Taiwan (65%).
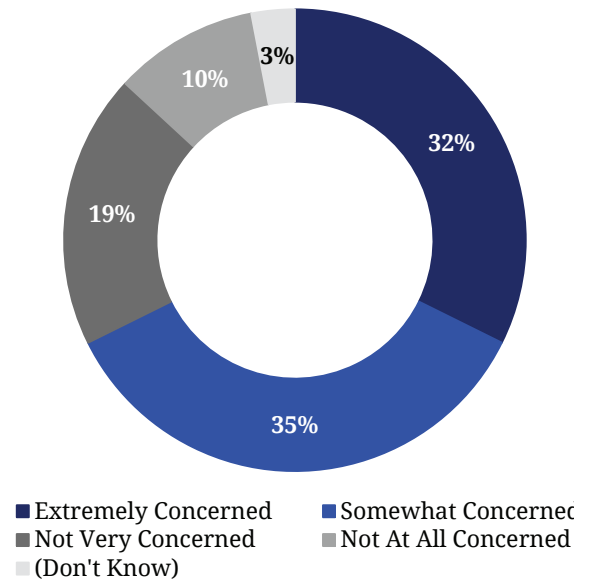
Defense Industrial Base

Despite recent policy initiatives to revive America's manufacturing competitiveness and industrial base, Americans think we need to do more. About 7 in 10 think we need more domestic manufacturing capacity to produce the materials, equipment, and weapons needed for national defense—both in peacetime (69%) and to ramp up production during a crisis (70%).

Approach to National Defense

Defense Spending

Supermajorities of Americans support increasing defense spending. Overall, 77%—including 71% of Democrats, 71% of Independents, and 87% of Republicans—favor increasing government spending on the military. These levels of support have remained remarkably consistent above 70% across Reagan Institute polling dating back five years. In this year's poll, more Americans support boosting defense spending than funding for border security, including among Republicans. Two-thirds of Americans 67%—including 76% of Republicans and 61% of Democrats—are concerned that budget cuts by Congress will reduce the military's capabilities. These findings demonstrate the divide between American public opinion and policy debates in Washington, where a defense cut appears likely as of this writing.

Concern About Budget Cuts Threatening Military Capabilities

- ■ Extremely Concerned — 32%
- ■ Somewhat Concerned — 35%
- ■ Not Very Concerned — 19%
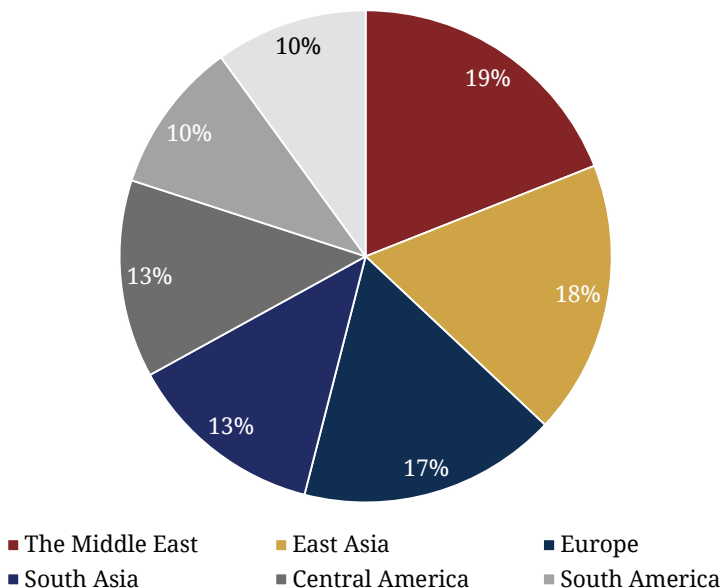- ■ Not At All Concerned — 10%
- ■ (Don't Know) — 3%

Military Presence Overseas and Regional Priorities

There has also been remarkable consistency across the five years of our Reagan National Defense Survey in the belief that the United States should maintain a global military presence, with 66% support, encompassing a majority of both Democrats (67%) and Republicans (69%). Americans want our military to have bases abroad to deter attacks and respond swiftly to emerging threats, contrasting with only 28% who advocate for a reduction in overseas military presence, favoring troop deployment only in response to aggression. Additionally, by a 10-point margin, Americans favor U.S. engagement and leadership when it comes to international events (42%), rather than being less engaged and reacting to events (32%).

Support for Global Military Presence

Average Percentage of Military Resources, Forces, and Attention Americans Think the United States Should Allocate to Each Region

- ■ The Middle East — 19%
- ■ East Asia — 18%
- ■ Europe — 17%
- ■ South Asia — 13%
- ■ Central America — 13%
- ■ South America — 10%

Americans have shifted where they think the United States should focus its military forces, likely due to recent geopolitical events. A plurality now identifies the Middle East as the top priority region, with a substantial increase from 11% to 31% in the past year. Meanwhile, fewer Americans think the U.S. military should focus its forces in East Asia, now second on the list at 25%, down from 31% last year. This reverses a steady trend in the Reagan National Defense Survey and represents the first time since 2019 that the Middle East has topped the list instead of East Asia.

When asked to allocate U.S. military resources, forces, and attention globally, respondents proposed 19% in the Middle

East, 18% in East Asia, and 17% in Europe. They did not ignore other regions of the world, dedicating 13% to South Asia, 13% to Central America, 10% to South America, and 10% to Africa. The roughly equal percentages given to the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe demonstrates that Americans generally recognize which regions are U.S. strategic priorities. And the diverse distribution with no region ignored reflects that Americans support a global military posture.

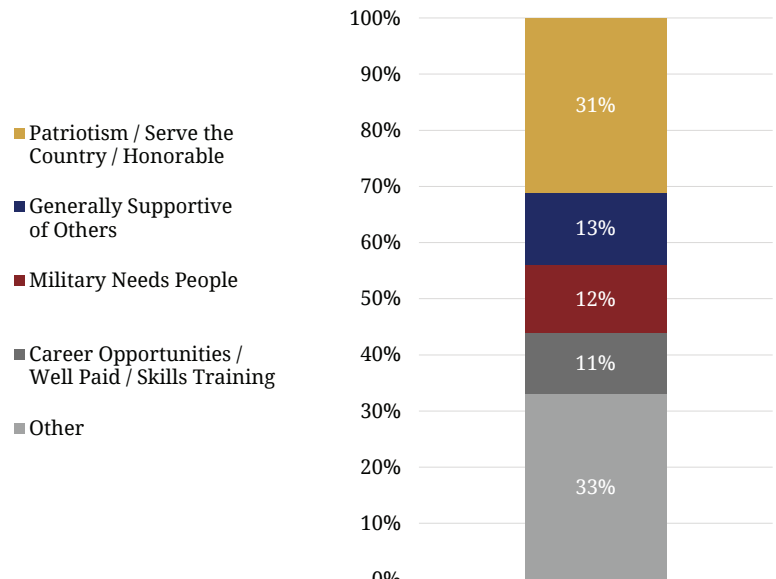## U.S. Military

Confidence and Politicization

Every year, the Reagan Institute asks about Americans' level of trust and confidence in a variety of public institutions. In our first survey in 2018, 70% said they had a great deal of trust and confidence in the military—but that declined 7 points in 2019 and another 7 points in 2020, then falling 11 more points to a low of 45% in 2021. That trend appears to have plateaued, with 46% now reporting a great deal of confidence in the military, consistent with last year's number.

Previous Reagan Institute polling revealed the reason behind the decline in confidence as a growing perception of politicization of military leadership. This year's survey found that a plurality of Republicans (38%) think the military is too focused on social issues at the expense of a focus on warfighting, while almost half of Democrats (47%) think the military is appropriately balancing a focus on warfighting and social issues. Nearly two-thirds of all Americans (63%) think it is inappropriate to block Senate confirmation votes on military nominees to protest Defense Department policies unrelated to warfighting, including 71% of Democrats and 58% of Republicans.
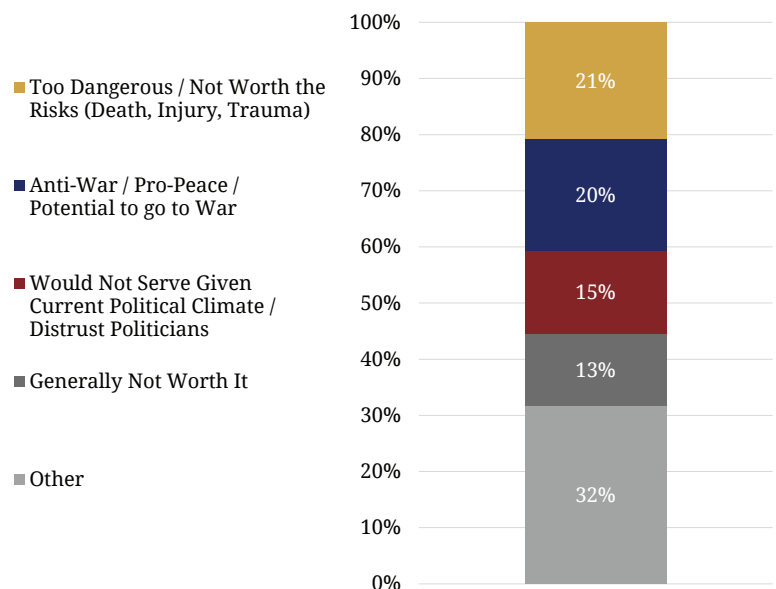
Recruitment

Inspiring a culture of service will be critical to overcoming the U.S. military's recent recruitment challenges. There is not a significant partisan difference on whether someone would encourage or discourage a friend or family member from joining the military. About half (51%)—including 49% of Democrats and 56% of Republicans—would encourage joining the military, while a third (33%)—including 36% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans—would discourage service. The primary reason for those who would encourage

Reasons to Encourage Military Service

- Patriotism / Serve the Country / Honorable — 31%
- Generally Supportive of Others — 13%
- Military Needs People — 12%
- Career Opportunities / Well Paid / Skills Training — 11%
- Other — 33%

Reasons to Discourage Military Service

- Too Dangerous / Not Worth the Risks (Death, Injury, Trauma) — 21%
- Anti-War / Pro-Peace / Potential to go to War — 20%
- Would Not Serve Given Current Political Climate / Distrust Politicians — 15%
- Generally Not Worth It — 13%
- Other — 32%

service—among pluralities of both Democrats and Republicans—relates to patriotism, service, and honor. However, partisans differ on their reasons for discouraging military service. For Democrats, the primary reasons relate to it being too dangerous and not worth the risks or that they are anti-war. For Republicans, the primary reasons are the current political climate and distrust of politicians or because they view the military as too "woke."
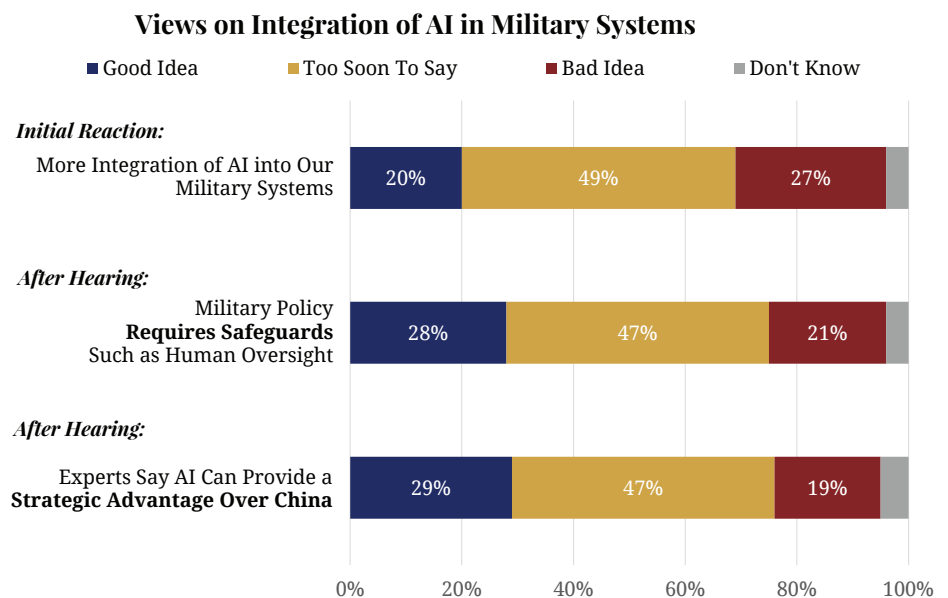
Modernization And Technology Priorities

AUKUS

Overwhelming majorities of Americans view Australia (83%) and the United Kingdom (85%) as allies of the United States. Still, three-quarters of Americans (73%) say they are not aware of the recent security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, known as AUKUS. This pact aims to counter the growing influence of China and involves collaborative efforts, such as the development of advanced defense technologies like nuclear-powered submarines.

When informed about the AUKUS pact and about how current U.S. export regulations pose challenges in sharing sensitive defense technologies with these countries, a majority (58%), including 65% of Democrats and 57% of Republicans, express support for altering American regulations to facilitate technology sharing with Australia and the United Kingdom. Support for such export control reforms is slightly higher (+11 points) among those who have heard of AUKUS.

Artificial Intelligence

In the context of the national conversation on AI and large language models this year, Americans are unsure about military applications for this technology. Despite increased public attention on AI technologies, perception of U.S. relative strength or weakness in the area has not changed, with only 16% who say the United States is the best in the world at AI and slightly over half of Americans (52%) saying we're one of the best. Those numbers are unchanged from the same question in the 2020 Reagan National Defense Survey. Nearly 8 in 10 Americans (79%) expressed concern about the United States falling behind China technologically, particularly in AI, driven by China's ambitious goal of technological supremacy by 2030.

Views on Integration of AI in Military Systems

Legend: ■ Good Idea　■ Too Soon To Say　■ Bad Idea　■ Don't Know

Initial Reaction:
More Integration of AI into Our Military Systems — Good Idea 20%, Too Soon To Say 49%, Bad Idea 27%

After Hearing:
Military Policy **Requires Safeguards** Such as Human Oversight — Good Idea 28%, Too Soon To Say 47%, Bad Idea 21%

After Hearing:
Experts Say AI Can Provide a **Strategic Advantage Over China** — Good Idea 29%, Too Soon To Say 47%, Bad Idea 19%

(Axis: 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%)

A slight majority of Americans (52%), including majorities in each party, favors increasing military spending on AI, after being informed that the military presently allocates roughly 1% of its budget to AI. When presented with contrasting perspectives on the use of AI in military technology—highlighting its potential to improve safety for servicemembers and enhance

decision-making versus ethical concerns and unpredictable consequences—52% maintained their support for increased spending. Only 20% of respondents, however, deemed greater AI integration into military systems a good idea, while 27% said it was a bad idea and 49% considered it premature to form a definitive opinion. Even after being informed about the strategic advantages over China touted by military experts and the incorporation of safeguards in the U.S. military's AI policies,[3] the percentage favoring greater AI integration increased only modestly to about 29%, while 47% still remained cautious saying it was too soon to draw conclusions.

High-Skilled Immigration

When informed that the U.S. military and defense companies believe more skilled immigrants are needed to fill high-tech national security jobs, 62% of Americans express support for increasing this kind of immigration. Democrats show the highest level of support at 77%, but a majority of Republicans (51%) also endorses the idea of increasing skilled immigration. Three-quarters overall (76%), including 83% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans, identified the best reason for increasing skilled immigration as leveraging an advantage over our rivals in attracting the best and brightest talent to work in the United States.
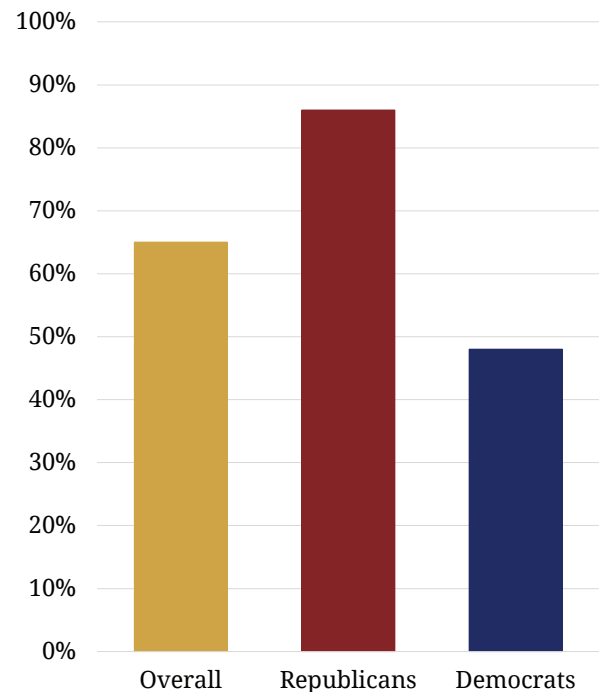
Conclusion

Forty years after his campaign for re-election, President Ronald Reagan continues to be viewed positively among Americans, with about two-thirds (65%) having a favorable view. His ideas and principles have even greater popularity, and his defense and foreign policy worldview continues to reflect the views of most Americans today.

In his 1985 State of the Union Address, President Reagan told the members of Congress before him something an American leader could just as easily say today: **"We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent...to defy... aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth...I want to work with you to support the democratic forces whose struggle is tied to our own security."**

Current political leaders should take a cue from President Reagan, who did not take for granted American public support for his ideas but instead built it. Leaders must remind the public why U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic strength matters and explain how our permitting this strength to atrophy will embolden our authoritarian adversaries. The Reagan National Defense Survey has consistently indicated over the past five years that leaders with that message will find a receptive audience among the American people.

Strong Favorability of President Reagan Across Party Lines

A bar chart showing strong favorability percentages: Overall 65%, Republicans 86%, Democrats 48%.

---

[3] Hicks, Kathleen. "What the Pentagon Thinks About Artificial Intelligence." Politico Magazine, June 15, 2023.

Notes:

Notes:

Scan this code
to learn more
about our Survey

RONALD REAGAN
INSTITUTE