


RONALD REAGAN
INSTITUTE

Reagan National Defense Survey

Conducted November 2022

Though the world has changed in the 40 years since President Reagan was in office, the latest Reagan National Defense Survey shows that the American people continue to support his timeless principle of “peace through strength.” In the face of geopolitical events that shook the foundations of global peace and security in 2022, Americans see U.S. leadership as the key to restoring the peace.

Americans want the United States to lead and be more engaged in the world. They want a strong U.S. military presence overseas and support increasing defense spending. They want America to stand with our allies and support democracy. They want to stand with Ukraine against Russian aggression and deter potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Still, there are some troubling findings from the 2022 Reagan National Defense Survey as well. Our national security leaders would do well to listen to the views of the American people and act to rebuild public trust in our military.

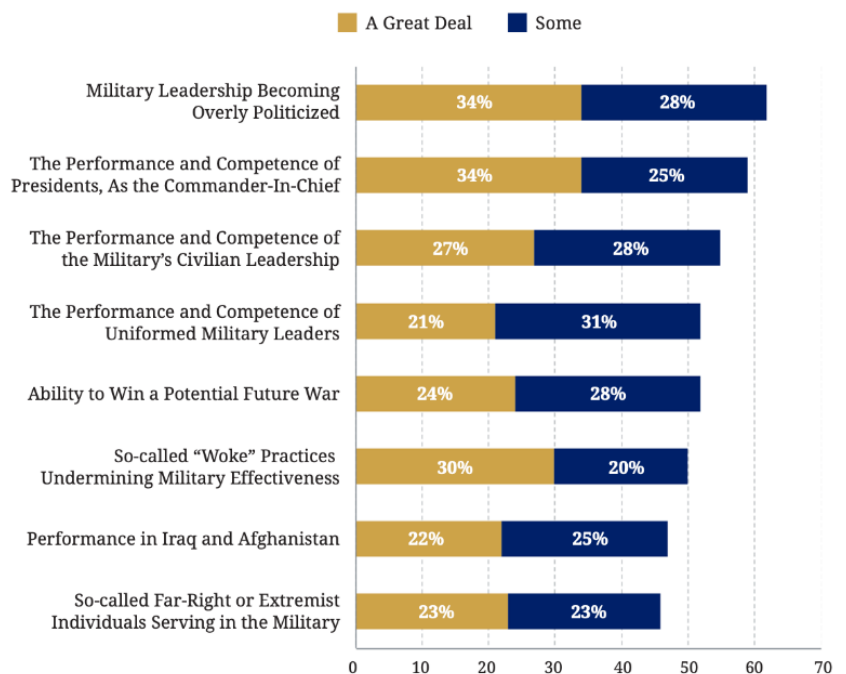
1. Perceived Politicization Drives Declining Confidence in the Military

Every year, the Reagan Institute asks about Americans’ level of trust and confidence in a variety of public institutions. Just five years ago, 70% said they had a great deal of trust and confidence in the military. However, that percentage steadily declined, and last year, for the first time, a minority of Americans had the highest level of confidence in the military, only 45%.

This year, that trend appears to be stabilizing. Now 48% say they have a great deal of trust and confidence in the military. Notably, this is still down 22 points from merely a few years ago. No other public institution asked about—including the Supreme Court, Congress, the Presidency, the news media, or law enforcement—has seen as sharp a decline in public trust over this time.

To better understand this trend, the Reagan Institute added a new

Reason for Decreased Confidence in U.S. Military



Polling Conducted By



series of questions about the extent to which a variety of factors have decreased public confidence in the military. The top response is military leadership becoming overly politicized, with 62% overall saying that has decreased their confidence. This includes 60% of Democrats, 60% of Independents, and 65% of Republicans.

Americans make only a slight distinction between different types of leadership when they complain about politicization. While they see civilian DOD leaders and uniformed military leaders as contributing to this issue, they are more likely to blame presidents as Commanders-in-Chief. Nearly 60% of respondents say that performance and competence of presidents has decreased their confidence in the military.

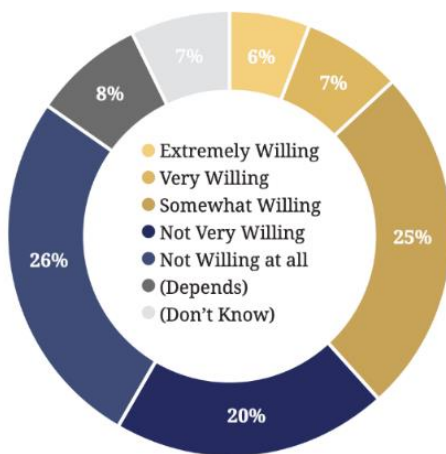
Over half of respondents (55%) say the performance and competence of the military’s civilian leadership—meaning the Secretary of Defense and civilian leadership at the Department of Defense—decreased their confidence in the military. While a slightly smaller percentage (52%) say the performance and competence of uniformed military leaders decreased their confidence, there has been a decline in those who believe U.S. military leadership is the best in the world compared to other countries’ militaries, from 33% in 2021 to 25% in 2022.

The complaints some have recently lodged against the military rank lower on the list. While half (50%) say so-called “woke” practices undermining military effectiveness have decreased their confidence, there is a sizeable partisan disparity on this, with far more Republicans than Democrats blaming “wokeness.” Likewise, while 46% overall say that so-called far-right or extremist individuals serving in the military decreased their confidence, this response is far more common among Democrats than Republicans. Less than half (47%) of survey respondents cite the military’s performance in Iraq and Afghanistan as having decreased their confidence.

Notably, 52% of respondents say the military’s ability to win a potential future war decreased their confidence. Those reporting great confidence in the military’s ability to keep the country safe decreased from 57% in 2021 to 50%. There was also a decrease in those confident in the military’s ability to act in a professional and nonpolitical manner, from 40% in 2021 to 35%. These trends seem to demonstrate a connection between Americans’ sense of the military’s ability to perform its core function and their perception of its leaders becoming overly politicized.

Propensity to Join U.S. Military

Survey Respondents Aged 18-29 Only

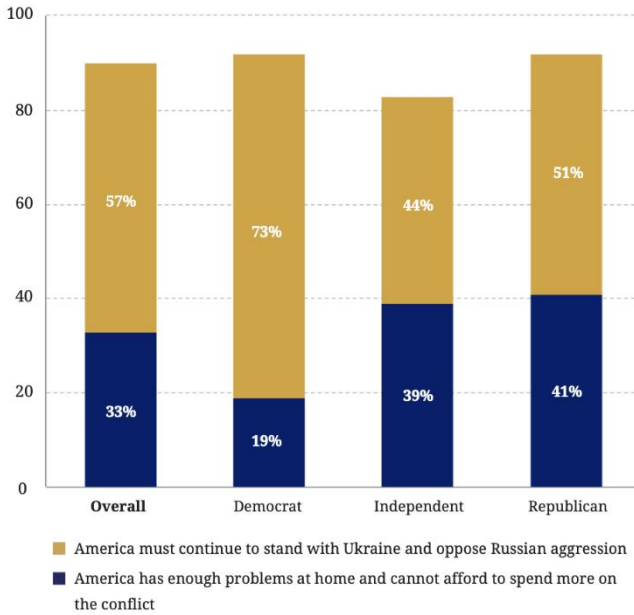


With military recruitment challenges making headlines this year, the Reagan Institute also added a new question for young Americans in the target age range for recruiting the all-volunteer force about their personal willingness to serve in the military. Among respondents aged 18 through 29, 13% are highly willing to join, a quarter (25%) are only somewhat willing, 20% are not very willing, and about a quarter (26%) are not willing at all. There are no notable disparities in responses between different education levels.

2. Americans Want to Continue Aiding Ukraine in Its Fight for Freedom

Perceptions of Russia as an enemy have reached a survey high of 82%, up from 65% just last year. This is driven by double-digit increases by Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Relatedly, perception of Ukraine as an ally has increased from 49% in 2021 to 76%. Nearly two-thirds (67%) are concerned about Russian victory in the war.

Views on Continued U.S. Support for Ukraine



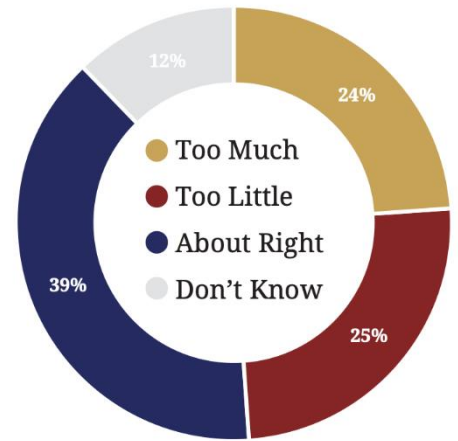
provoking Russia, including 19% of Democrats but notably 41% of Republicans. Regarding the assistance the United States has already sent to Ukraine, 39% say the United States has sent about the right amount, while a quarter (25%) say it has sent too little, and another quarter (24%) say it has sent too much.

NATO

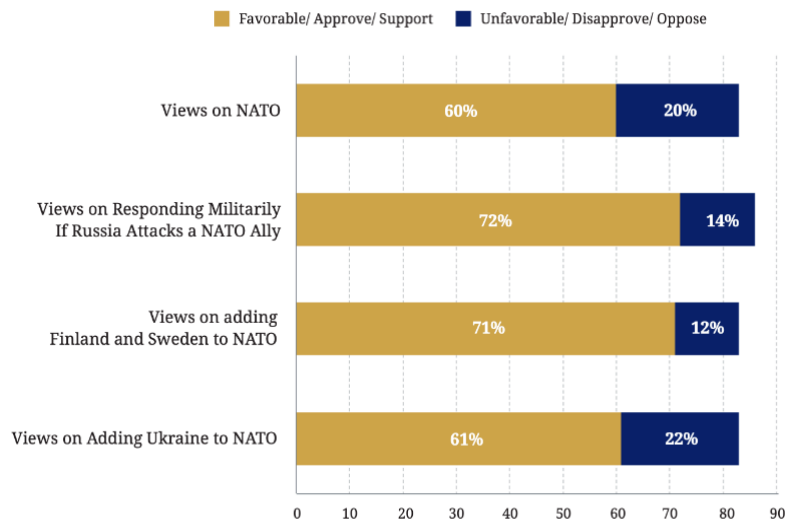
A majority of Americans (60%) have a favorable view of NATO, while 23% have an unfavorable view—both percentages are consistent with previous surveys. An even greater majority (72%) supports NATO Article 5 commitments (defined as the United States responding with military force if Russia attacked a NATO ally in Europe), including 81% of Democrats and 67% of Republicans. Nearly three-quarters (74%) are concerned about the war in Ukraine expanding to NATO countries in Eastern Europe, forcing the United States to get directly involved. There is also bipartisan support for expanding the alliance, as 71% approve of allowing Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Ukraine’s application for NATO membership has 61% support.

Americans support the United States standing with Ukraine and acting as the arsenal of democracy in providing military aid. With regard to America sending military equipment and financial assistance to Ukraine, a majority (57%) believe the United States must continue to stand with the people of Ukraine and oppose Russian aggression in order to protect a friendly democracy and prevent future Russian threats to Europe. This includes 73% of Democrats and 51% of Republicans. Only a third (33%) believe America has enough problems at home and cannot afford to spend more on the conflict and risk further

Views on U.S. Military Aid to Ukraine



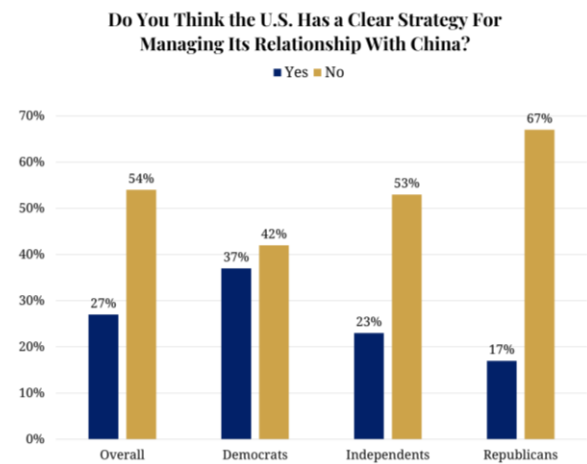
Views on NATO



3. Americans Believe the U.S. Lacks a Clear Strategy for the China Threat

Americans are increasingly concerned about the threat posed by China. Three-quarters (75%) now view China as an enemy, up from 65% in 2021 and 55% in 2018. Despite the war in Ukraine, a plurality (43%) still names China as the country that poses the greatest threat to the United States. However, this percentage is down from 52% in 2021, while those who name Russia doubled, to 31% from 14% in 2021. When asked if the United States has a clear strategy for managing its relationship with China, over half (54%) say no, while only 27% say yes, and 20% do not know.

When it comes to specific concerns about China, Americans recognize the multifaceted nature of the threat. When asked to choose their single greatest concern regarding China, economic practices top the list, including technology theft and its trade relationships with other countries, at 22% overall—including a plurality of both Democrats (21%) and Republicans (25%). However, that is in a near statistical tie with those who say China’s military buildup (18% overall) or its human rights abuses (17% overall) are their top concern. Notably, 13% identified China invading Taiwan as their single greatest concern about China, up from 7% in 2021. Related to these economic concerns, over half (54%), including a majority of both Democrats and Republicans, support efforts to reduce the amount of trade between the United States and China.



Taiwan

Americans see the parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan, with 71% concerned that Russian aggression will inspire other authoritarian countries to invade their democratic neighbors. A similar overall percentage (70%) also express specific concern about the threat of China invading Taiwan in the next five years. Bipartisan majorities of Americans support efforts to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, including 61% who support increasing the U.S. military presence near Taiwan and 58% who support increasing arms sales to Taiwan. If China were to invade Taiwan, 43% would support committing U.S. ground troops to the defense of Taiwan, while 36% oppose. After learning that Taiwan is a democracy and the world’s largest producer of advanced semiconductors, then 65% say they are open to the idea of committing U.S. forces.

4. President Reagan’s Legacy Lives On

Americans continue to view President Reagan positively, with a 67% overall favorability. This includes a majority of Americans of all political stripes: 87% of Republicans, 62% of Independents, and 51% of Democrats.

Americans today want the United States to lead in the world, act as an arsenal of democracy, and maintain our alliance commitments. They believe, as Ronald Reagan put it in his acceptance speech at the 1980 Republican National Convention: “The United States has an obligation to its citizens and to the people of the world never to let those who would destroy freedom dictate the future course of life on this planet.”

The American people are clear-eyed about the threats to freedom today, particularly from China and Russia. They worry, though, that those tasked with taking on these threats are becoming too mired in and distracted by the partisan squabbles consuming other areas of American society. Leaders would do well to learn from President Reagan’s example to restore Americans’ confidence.