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RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

Reagan National Defense Survey

Conducted February 2021

Introduction

With all that has happened in the last year, it is understandable that Americans are experiencing a sense of pessimism. The latest Reagan National Defense Survey reflects a downturn in overall attitudes across nearly every category of question. One of the more alarming downward trends is declining trust and confidence in the military.
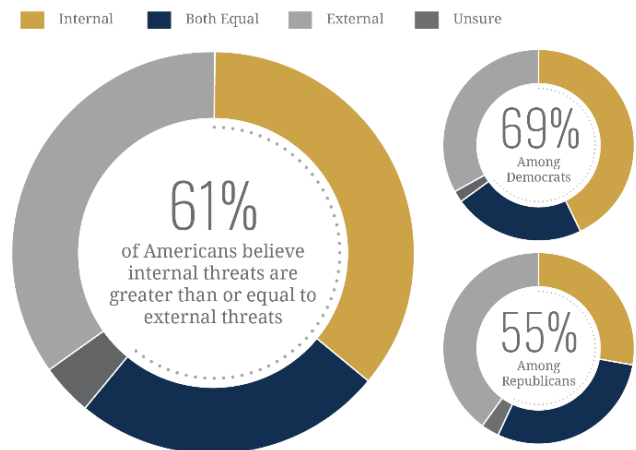
Despite the current environment, Americans still believe in President Reagan's vision of strong American leadership in the world, advancing the values of freedom and democracy abroad, and maintaining the peace through our strength.

1. Rising Concern Over Domestic Division and Political Violence

Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus topped the list of greatest problems facing the country (29%), with politics and partisanship ranking second (17%). Almost all Americans (and an equal percentage of Republicans and Democrats) are worried that political polarization will lead to violence. While it may not be surprising that 88% of respondents expressed this concern given that the survey was conducted just one month after the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, it is worth noting that 84% of respondents in our October 2019 survey reported concern about political division leading to violence.

Americans are presently more worried about domestic threats than those from abroad. When asked whether the greatest threats to the United States come from within or from outside (Figure 1), a majority of Americans (61%) report that threats emanating from within are either equal

Perceptions of Internal vs. External Threats to the U.S.

Internal   Both Equal   External   Unsure

61% of Americans believe internal threats are greater than or equal to external threats

69% Among Democrats

55% Among Republicans

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 1

to (25%) or greater than (36%) those emanating from abroad (35%). There is some partisan distinction on this, with 69% of Democrats viewing internal threats as greater than (40%) or equal to (29%) external threats (28%) and 55% of Republicans saying internal threats are greater than (33%) or equal to (22%) external threats (43%).
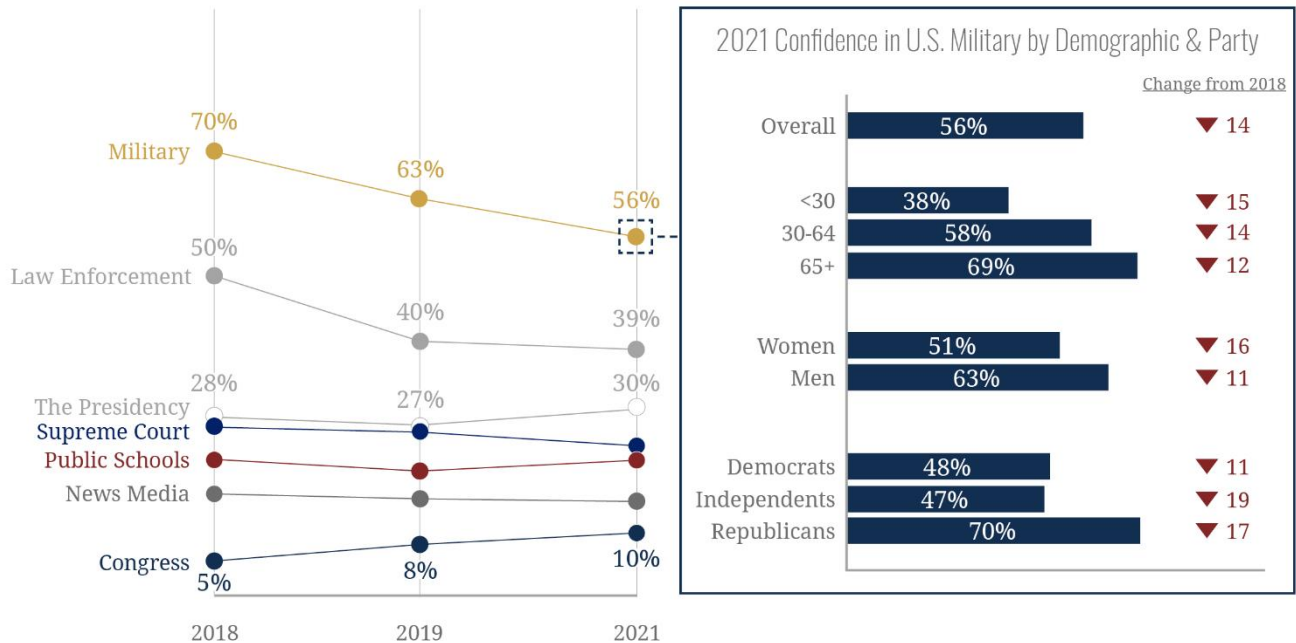
2. Diminishing Trust and Confidence in the U.S. Military Continues

The number of Americans who say they have a great deal of trust and confidence in the military has fallen by 14 percentage points (from 70% to 56%) since 2018 (Figure 2). The lowest ratings come from those under 30 years of age (only 38% say they have a great deal of confidence), Black voters (44%), Democrats (48%), and women (51%).

Trust and Confidence in U.S. Institutions, 2018–2021
Percent of "A Great Deal"

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 2

This diminished confidence, one that mirrors declining support for law enforcement in the United States, is not due to the events of 2020 alone. While the military has suffered a seven-point drop in confidence since 2019, there was an equal seven-point decline between 2018 and 2019. In that time, the military declined in trust across all major demographic subgroups (including age, gender, and party affiliation) by double-digit percentage points. Over the same period of time, all other institutions (including Congress, the presidency, the Supreme Court, the media, and public schools) experienced generally stable levels of trust.

It is worth noting that while public support of the military has fallen, the military remains the most trusted institution by a large margin. Additionally, large majorities of Americans do see a role for the military in responding to a wide range of domestic scenarios, from responding to natural disasters to helping control the pandemic. Smaller numbers believe it would be appropriate to use the military to control violent protests, respond to domestic terrorism, or engage in the event of insurrection by U.S. citizens.

Only slightly over one-half of Americans (57%) think that the United States has the best military in the world and an even slimmer majority (53%) think it would win a war against a nuclear power. Between

using the military or diplomacy in international affairs, 41% of Americans think the United States strikes the right balance, but about a third (34%) think the military is used when diplomacy would be better.
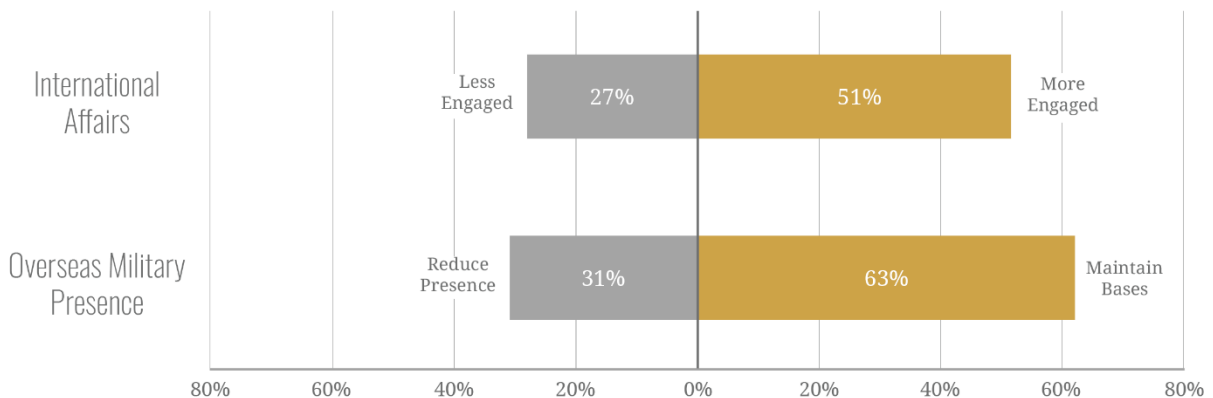
Overall, three-quarters (75%) of Americans are in favor of increasing defense spending, including substantial majorities of both parties: 87% of Republicans (with only 10% opposed) and 67% of Democrats (with 31% opposed). However, the military ranks behind health care and education as a priority for increased funding.

The survey reflects mixed findings when it comes to civilian control of the military. Initially, only 18% of respondents said the Secretary of Defense should be a civilian, whereas 73% thought it should be someone who recently served in the military. After providing some background on the concept of civil-military relations, a plurality (39%) said that the law preventing the Secretary of Defense from being a recent member of the military is a good law, but 33% opposed it. About one-half of Americans supported the congressional waivers for Secretaries Mattis and Austin, with a slight partisan difference on support.

3. Strong Support for Global Leadership and Engagement

Declining confidence in the military has not shaken the belief in the importance of America's role in the world. Americans are not trending toward isolationism and do not want the United States to retreat from global leadership. One-half (51%) of Americans think the United States should be more engaged and take the lead regarding international events, consistent with the findings of our 2019 survey (Figure 3). The number who say America should be less engaged and react to events instead fell by 6 percentage points to 27%.

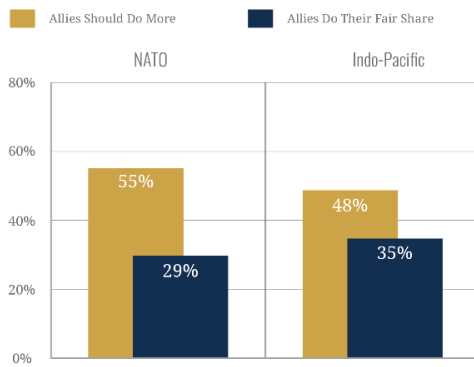### Preference for U.S. Global Leadership, 2021

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 3

Support for leadership and engagement is not only theoretical. When asked if the United States should maintain military bases around the world or reduce its presence overseas, nearly two-thirds (63%) of Americans support maintaining military bases to deter attacks and respond quickly if needed (Figure 3). There is strong bipartisanship on this issue, with over 60% of both Republicans and Democrats supporting maintaining bases. Support for maintaining overseas bases, however, does drop from a majority to a plurality among people under 30 years old (48%).

Perceptions of Burden Sharing with U.S. Allies, 2021

Allies Should Do More ■ Allies Do Their Fair Share

	NATO	Indo-Pacific
Allies Should Do More	55%	48%
Allies Do Their Fair Share	29%	35%

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 4

As for forward-deployed troops, 50% of Americans think troop levels in Afghanistan should be increased or kept the same, while 39% would prefer to decrease. Republicans (47%) are more likely than Democrats (33%) or Independents (36%) to support decreasing troop levels. In Iraq, 60% of Americans think troop levels should be increased or kept the same, with 29% preferring troop levels be decreased. Democrats (23%) are more likely than Republicans (15%) or Independents (14%) to support increasing troop levels.

Americans continue to support alliances and allies around the world, from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to Indo-Pacific allies. Sixty percent of Americans have a favorable view of NATO. Countries like Australia, Japan, and South Korea are widely viewed as allies. Americans d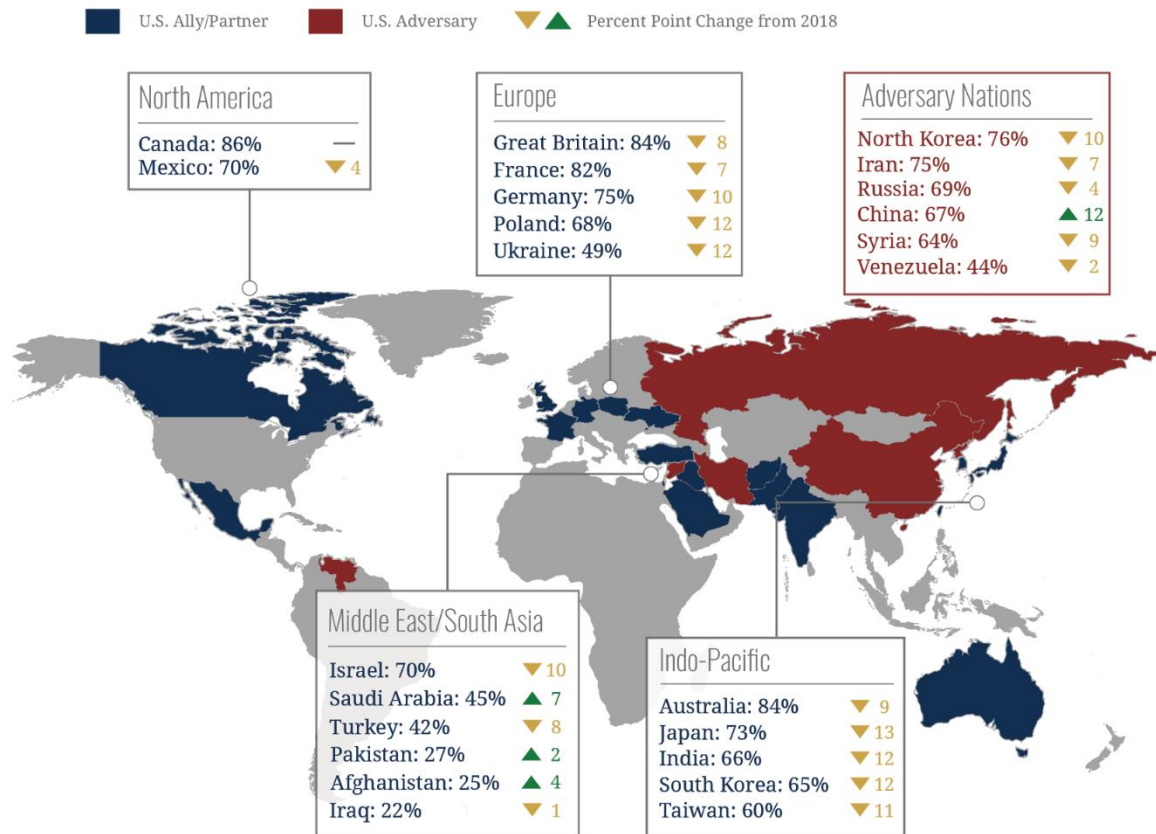o want allies to do more in terms of burden-sharing, however, with a majority (55%) saying NATO allies should do more and a plurality (48%) saying Indo-Pacific allies should do more (Figure 4). In general, however, favorable perception of our allies has declined since 2018 (Figure 5).

U.S. Perceptions of Allies or Adversaries, 2018-2021

■ U.S. Ally/Partner   ■ U.S. Adversary   ▼▲ Percent Point Change from 2018

North America

Canada: 86%	—
Mexico: 70%	▼ 4

Europe

Great Britain: 84%	▼ 8
France: 82%	▼ 7
Germany: 75%	▼ 10
Poland: 68%	▼ 12
Ukraine: 49%	▼ 12

Adversary Nations

North Korea: 76%	▼ 10
Iran: 75%	▼ 7
Russia: 69%	▼ 4
China: 67%	▲ 12
Syria: 64%	▼ 9
Venezuela: 44%	▼ 2

Middle East/South Asia

Israel: 70%	▼ 10
Saudi Arabia: 45%	▲ 7
Turkey: 42%	▼ 8
Pakistan: 27%	▲ 2
Afghanistan: 25%	▲ 4
Iraq: 22%	▼ 1

Indo-Pacific

Australia: 84%	▼ 9
Japan: 73%	▼ 13
India: 66%	▼ 12
South Korea: 65%	▼ 12
Taiwan: 60%	▼ 11

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 5

4

While Americans support the United States being engaged in the international community, opinion is mixed as to whether the Iran nuclear deal or Paris Agreement on climate change are the best approach—and there is extreme partisan polarization on both these topics.

Overall, a majority (54%) of Americans support the Paris Agreement on climate change, while 33% are opposed. Opinion breaks down along party lines, however, with 80% of Democrats in support and 62% of Republicans opposed. Slightly less than one-half of Americans (44%) support re-entering the Iran nuclear deal, with 36% opposed. Similarly, there is a partisan divide on this issue, with 64% of Democrats supporting and 61% of Republicans opposing the deal.
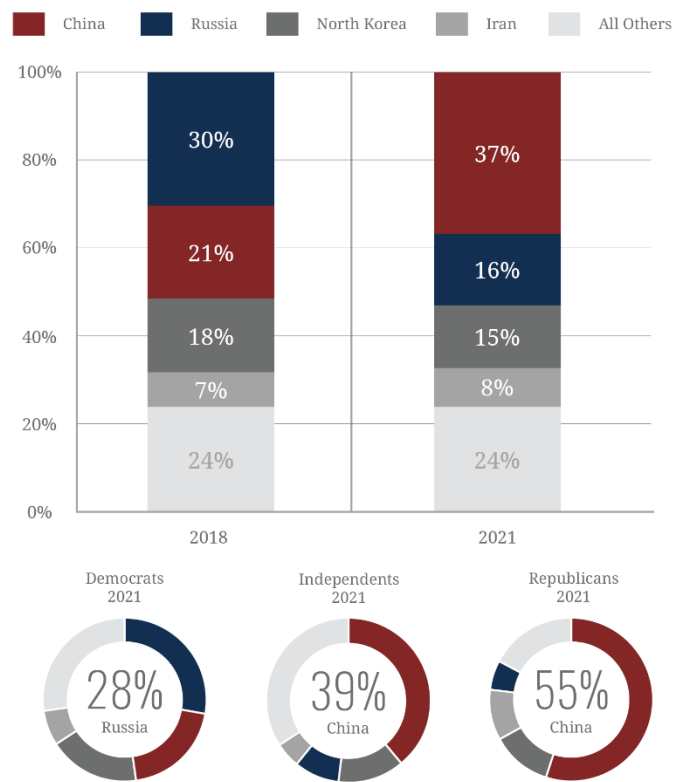
4. Increasing Awareness of the China Threat

An increasing number of Americans believe that China poses the greatest threat to the United States. More than one-third of Americans (37%) say China is the country posing the greatest threat to the United States compared to 21% in 2018. Over the same period, Russia has fallen from 30% to 16% of Americans who think it is the greatest threat (Figure 6).

This trend has been driven by Republicans and Independents, with 55% and 39% putting China at the top of the list, respectively. For Democrats, Russia still tops the list at 28%, while China ranks second with 20% (Figure 6). Among Republicans, 55% list China as the top threat, followed by North Korea (12%), Iran (10%), and then Russia (6%).

There has also been a significant shift in public opinion on the question of where the United States should focus its military forces. More Americans (28%) now say that the United States should focus its forces in Asia, with only 21% selecting the Middle East. In both 2018 and 2019, more respondents chose the Middle East than Asia. Here too, there is significant partisan divide, with Democrats choosing the Middle East (22%) over Asia (19%). Republicans chose Asia over the Middle East by a margin of 37% to 23%.

Perceptions of Greatest Threat to U.S.

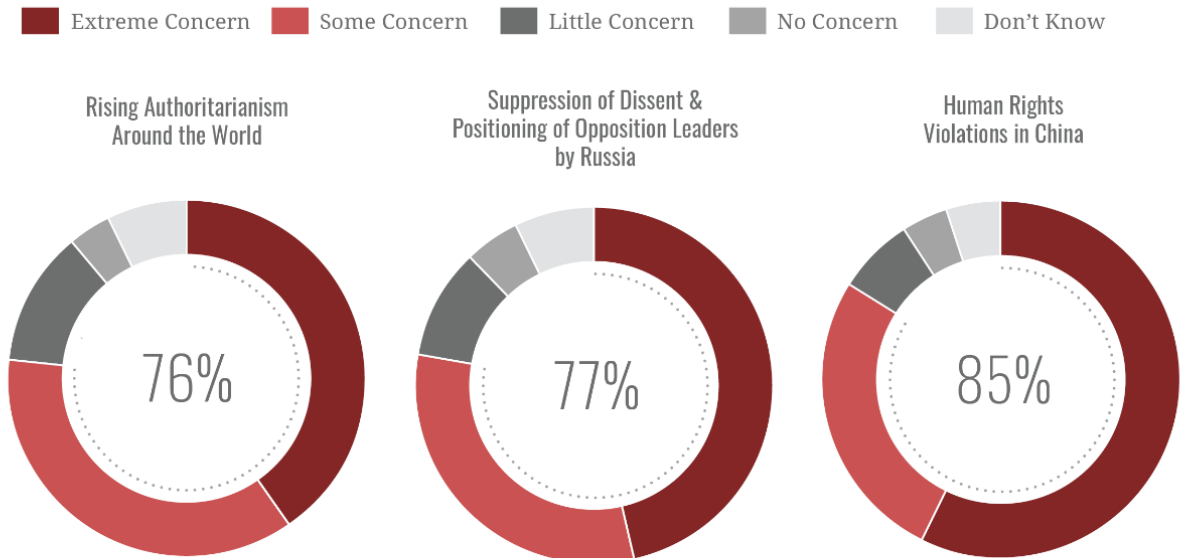Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 6

5. Promoting Freedom and Democracy Abroad

Over three-quarters (76%) of Americans are concerned about rising authoritarianism around the world (Figure 7). And in general, Americans support efforts to promote freedom and democracy abroad. Fifty-five percent support increasing government spending to this end.

With respect to China and Russia, Americans express alarming concern with regard to this set of issues. Three-quarters (75%) of Americans have unfavorable views of both the Chinese political system and the Chinese Communist Party. Human rights violations top the list of concerns among the American people about China, at 85%. Nearly three-quarters (72%) want the United States to support the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, even if it angers China. When it comes to Russia, three in four Americans (77%) are concerned about the poisoning of opposition leaders and the suppression of dissent (Figure 7).

Concern About Authoritarianism, Freedom, and Democracy

Extreme Concern   Some Concern   Little Concern   No Concern   Don't Know

Rising Authoritarianism Around the World — 76%

Suppression of Dissent & Positioning of Opposition Leaders by Russia — 77%

Human Rights Violations in China — 85%

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021
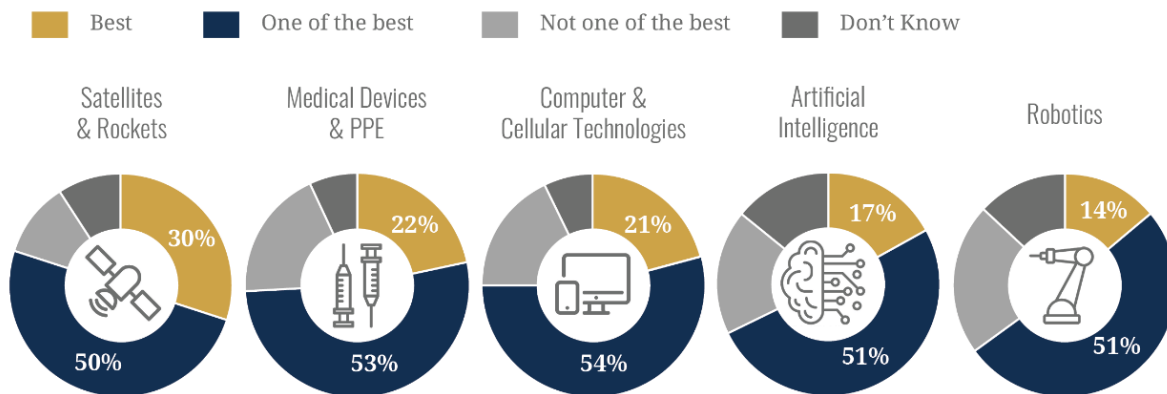
Figure 7

Although Americans are greatly concerned about freedom, democracy, and human rights, they report relatively low awareness of particular situations, like China's actions against the Uyghur ethnic minority group and democracy activists in Hong Kong. When provided with some information about these attacks on freedom, there is a notable increase in concern.

6. Catching Up on Technology and National Security

Americans do not think the United States is the best at developing the technologies critical to national security, which is particularly alarming in the context of significant Chinese investment in these technologies. Three in four (77%) Americans are concerned about China's development of artificial intelligence capabilities. Additionally, a majority (55%) believe the United States is too reliant on non-allies for key national security materials.

With respect to how the United States is doing relative to other countries in developing key technologies, small minorities of Americans think it is the "best in the world" at satellites and rockets (30%); medical devices (22%); computers and cellular technologies (21%); artificial intelligence (17%); and robotics (14%). While in general slightly over one-half of Americans say that the United States is "one of the best" in these areas (Figure 8), in the context of great power competition, there is a meaningful distinction between the being "the best" versus "one of the best" regarding these 21st-century technologies.

How is the U.S. Doing Compared to Other Countries on Key Technologies?

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 8

Americans now principally see national security through a high-tech lens, and it is intuitive to them that threats in the gray zone and technological competition are an increasingly important aspects of contemporary great power competition. They are intensely worried about cyber-attacks on both personal computers and accounts (88%) as well as on government computers and the grid (88%). In fact, more Americans (27%) report cyber-attacks as their chief concern about Russia than any other potential malign Russian activity, including interfering in elections (12%) or invading former Soviet republics (6%). Overall, 82% of Americans are concerned to some extent about Russian cyber-attacks. Relatedly, "technology theft" is high on the list of concerns about China, ranking second behind human rights violations.
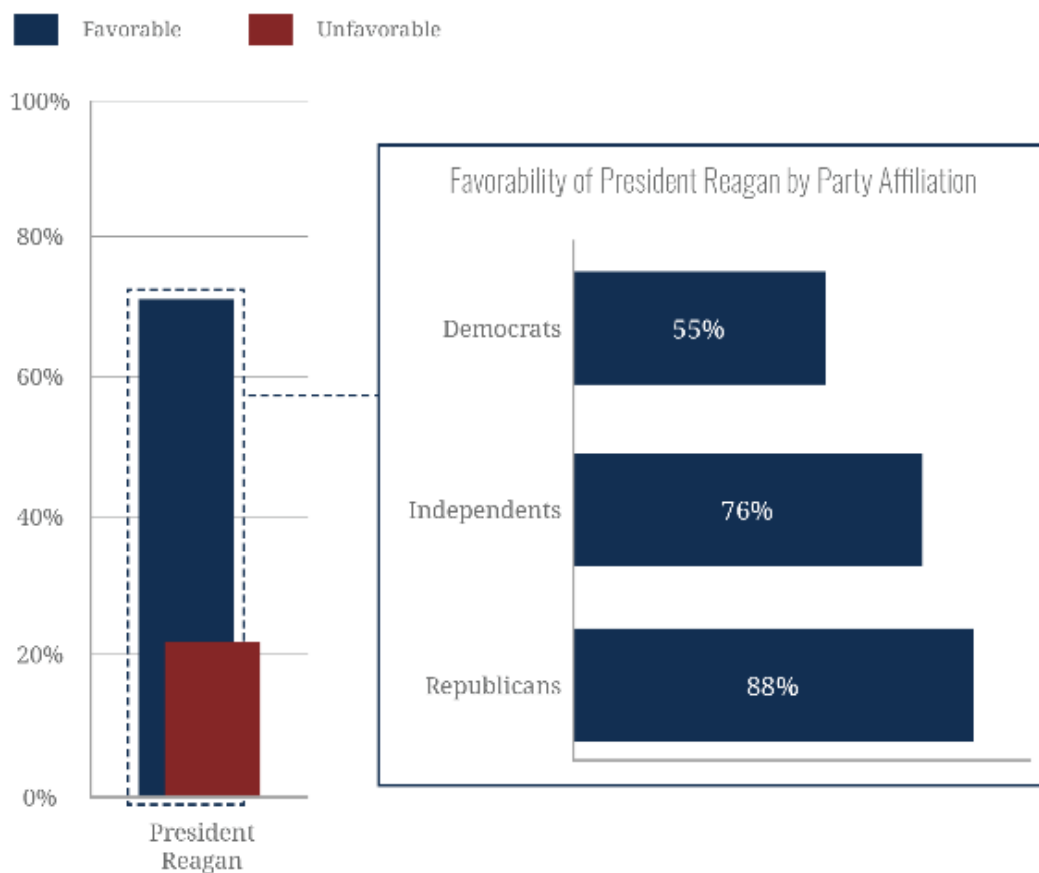
7. President Reagan's Legacy Lives On

President Reagan continues to be viewed favorably among Americans, with 71% overall favorability. Notably, a majority of Americans of all political stripes view President Reagan favorably: 88% of Republicans, 76% of Independents, and 55% of Democrats (Figure 9).

Forty years on from the year he was first inaugurated, President Reagan's values and worldview have been put to the test—and they have withstood the test of time. Amid coarsened domestic politics and geopolitical upheaval, emerging threats and new technologies, extended conflicts and elusive adversaries, the values of Reaganism endure.

The belief in "peace through strength" and the commitment to America as a beacon of freedom in the world—a "shining city upon a hill"—are cemented in the national psyche, unshaken by the forces that might weaken the American resolve.

Leaders who seek to take up the Reagan mantle and believe in a more hopeful, more peaceful future will find substantial support among the American people.

Source: Reagan National Defense Survey, February 2021

Figure 9

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 at the outset of a new administration. This February 2021 poll is RRPFI's third such survey since 2018.

This survey was conducted from February 4-14, 2021 by the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R). It features a mixed-mode design, with 1,011 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,516 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Forty percent of the calls were completed via landline and 60 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 2,527 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 1.96 percentage points. Many items are split-sampled, however, so that the relevant margin of error is +/- 2.77 percentage points. In addition, the margin of error for sub-groups is larger.

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