

American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy

The Global U.S. Position

Three years after the September 11 attacks of 2001, terrorism and other security threats still loom large in the public's mind. However, there is a lowered sense of threat overall compared to 2002, and the domestic concern of protecting American jobs is now the most commonly cited foreign policy goal. Support for foreign policy goals overall is down, as are the numbers of Americans who want to increase spending on homeland security and defense. There is lower support for stationing U.S. troops abroad, particularly in Middle Eastern or Islamic countries. Yet Americans are still committed to playing an engaged role in the world and support taking action when clearly threatened, especially against terrorism. They do not want to play a dominant role, supporting diplomatic and multilateral approaches to international problems in even greater numbers than in 2002.

- International terrorism, chemical and biological weapons and unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers remain the most commonly cited critical threats, but the percentages who view them as critical have dropped significantly since 2002. Virtually all other threats asked about are also down substantially, with majorities no longer considering critical the threats of Islamic fundamentalism, the development of China as a world power, and military conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors.
- Similarly, while the ranking of U.S. foreign policy goals has remained largely constant, there is an overall drop among virtually all goals in the numbers believing they are very important. The major exception is for protecting the jobs of American workers, which now ranks first, followed by preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and combating international terrorism. These latter two goals rank highest among leaders.
- While the American public and leaders favor having bases overseas, support for stationing troops in specific countries—especially those in the Middle East – has dropped substantially since 2002.
- Yet strong majorities of the American public and leaders still believe the United States should take an active part in world affairs. Despite majority support among the American public for taking active steps to ensure no other country becomes a superpower, Americans strongly believe that the United States should work together with other nations to solve international problems. Additionally, large majorities of the public and leaders reject the idea that the United States has the responsibility to play the role of world policeman and think the most important lesson of September 11 is that the United States needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism.
- Americans are still willing to use force in a variety of contexts when critical interests are threatened, especially in responding to terrorism. Many diplomatic means to combat terrorism, such as helping countries to develop and trying suspected terrorists in the International Criminal Court, score as high as military options, and a plurality believes more emphasis should be placed on diplomatic and economic methods compared to military ones in the fight against terrorism.

International Norms and the Use of Force

- Following September 11, there has been substantial discussion regarding the international norms governing the use of force and whether they need to become less restrictive to respond to the new threat posed by terrorists and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The American public and leaders strongly endorse the traditional constraints on the use of force by individual states and resist new ideas for making them looser. They also indicate readiness to give wide-ranging powers to states acting collectively through the United Nations to address various potential threats.
- Majorities of the public and leaders do not support states taking unilateral action to prevent other states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, but do support this action if it has UN Security Council approval. They also both reject preventative unilateral war, but endorse a country's right to go to war on its own if there is strong evidence of an imminent threat. Strong majorities of the public and leaders also believe the United States would need UN Security Council approval before using military force to destroy North Korea's nuclear capability.
- The public and leaders strongly endorse the UN having the right to authorize the use of force to stop a country from supporting terrorist groups. Although a majority of the public says a country should have this right without UN approval, a clear majority only supports the right of the United States to overthrow a government supporting terrorist groups when the threat is imminent.
- Both the public and leaders strongly endorse either a state acting on its own or the UN Security Council having the right to authorize force against genocide and favor using U.S. troops for this purpose. A majority of the public and leaders agree that the UN but not an individual state has the right to intervene to restore a democratic government that has been overthrown. The public even more forcefully rejects the use of U.S. troops to install democratic governments in states where dictators rule.
- There is strong endorsement by both the public and leaders of the right to defend another country that has been attacked even without UN approval. However, UN authorization increases support for this measure. While the public opposes unilaterally defending South Korea from a North Korean attack, a majority favors the U.S. contributing forces to a UN-sponsored effort to defend South Korea.
- The American public and leaders support only using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack and reject using torture to extract information from suspected terrorists.

Multilateralism and International Institutions

Some have argued that in a globalized world it is necessary for countries to participate in a rules-based international system that constrains decision making by the United States and other individual countries so that consensus can be reached on critical issues. Others argue that the United States, as the world's most powerful nation, should not accept these constraints. The survey results indicate there is substantial U.S. public and leader support for collective decision making and strengthening international organizations. Both also support U.S. participation in a wide range of international treaties and agreements.

- Strong majorities agree that the United States should be more willing to make decisions within the UN even if this means the United States will have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice. Significantly, a clear majority of the public favors changing UN Security Council rules so that no single member could veto a decision favored by all other members.
- Strong majorities of both the public and leaders say decisions in international economic organizations should always be made by a majority of members without the possibility of a U.S. veto and favor U.S. compliance with unfavorable WTO rulings. The public also roundly endorses giving the World Health Organization the authority to intervene in a country in response to a world health crisis even if the country disagrees.
- Similarly, the public and leaders favor U.S. participation in the nuclear test ban treaty, the treaty banning the use of landmines, the Kyoto agreement to reduce global warming, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). They additionally support the trial of international terrorists in the ICC and the United States making a general commitment to accept World Court decisions.
- American public and leaders give the UN a positive rating, believe it should have a stronger role than the United States in helping Iraqis write a new constitution and build a democratic government, support U.S. participation in UN peacekeeping activities, and favor strengthening the organization through creating a standing UN peacekeeping force and giving the UN the power to regulate the international arms trade. A plurality of the public supports giving the UN the power to fund its activities by taxing the international sale of arms or oil; a plurality of leaders opposes this.
- Both the public and leaders believe the United States should withdraw its forces from Iraq if a clear majority of the Iraqi people wants this. Opinions are divided, however, on a more general withdrawal of military forces from the Middle East, with the public believing the U.S. should withdraw if a majority of people there want it to do so. A small majority of leaders disagree. Despite this, both public and leaders think that foreign governments both should and do have more influence on U.S. foreign policy than the opinion of people around the world, with leaders generally less concerned than the public about the opinion of either.

International Norms and Economic Relations

There is currently a debate on the equity of the international trading system and the degree to which trade should be free. Related to this are questions about the structure and role of the World Trade Organization and the growth of regional trade agreements. The survey findings indicate Americans want to pursue free trade provided displaced American workers are assisted and the environment is protected. They strongly support an international trading system regulated through multilateral institutions and requiring compliance with decisions that have majority support.

- A large majority of leaders and a smaller majority of the public think globalization is mostly good for the United States. The public, however, clearly sees positives and negatives in international trade, with the U.S. economy and American consumers considered winners while job security and job creation in the United States suffer.

- Majorities of the public think bilateral trade with Japan, the countries of the EU, and Canada is fair, and economic competition from Europe scores very low as a critical threat. A majority of both the public and leaders believe that rich countries aren't playing fair in trade negotiations with poor countries, even though a small majority of the public thinks the United States practices fair trade with poor countries. There is, however, concern about developing countries, with a notable number of the public citing competition from low-wage countries as a critical threat, a majority seeing China as practicing unfair trade, and a large majority believing that outsourcing is mostly bad. Leaders see outsourcing as mostly good and are much less concerned about protecting American jobs.
- Americans support lowering trade barriers such as tariffs, but want government programs to help displaced workers. Overwhelming majorities of the public and leaders also favor including minimum standards for working conditions and the protection of the environment in international trade agreements.
- While Americans support giving subsidies to small farmers, this support is predicated on need. Only very small percentages of the public and leaders favor regular annual subsidies. Large majorities of both the public and leaders oppose subsidies for large farming businesses.
- Americans favor aid to help needy countries develop their economies as a measure to fight terrorism and to achieve numerous humanitarian goals. Leaders are even more emphatic in their support of these measures. Leaders also favor undertaking a multibillion dollar reconstruction and democratization effort in the Middle East, which a majority of the public opposes.
- There is support for extending free trade agreements, with both the public and leaders endorsing U.S. participation in a proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. The American public, however, has mixed feelings about NAFTA, seeing it as benefiting Mexico more than the United States and providing fewer advantages than international trade overall. Leaders look at NAFTA far more favorably.
- The public opposes increasing legal immigration levels to the United States and unilateral reform measures such as giving undocumented workers temporary worker status. Yet they are willing to endorse a bilateral agreement with Mexico that would increase legal immigration levels in the United States in exchange for Mexican efforts to reduce illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Leaders support keeping immigration at its current level or increasing it. They support temporary worker status for the undocumented and favor the bilateral agreement with Mexico.

U.S. Leaders and the Public: Policy Attitudes and Perceptions

When comparing the attitudes of public and leaders on a range of policies and positions taken by the present or previous U.S. administrations, a fairly broad consensus between the public and leaders on many of them emerges, with both public and leaders supporting some and opposing others. In another interesting comparison in which leaders were asked to predict public opinion on a number of policies and positions that were asked in this survey, there are striking misperceptions among the leaders about public attitudes on those questions.

- Both the public and leaders strongly endorse policies ranging from maintaining rules against torture and complying with unfavorable WTO rulings, to using U.S. troops for peacekeeping in Afghanistan and maintaining a military presence in South Korea.
- Both the public and leaders disagree with many policies or positions. Strong majorities want the United States to participate in a range of international treaties, favor strengthening international trade agreements to protect workers and the environment, oppose increasing defense spending, and reject countries going to war on their own to prevent another country from acquiring nuclear weapons.
- The public does not support some policies that the leaders do support: using U.S. troops if North Korea invades South Korea, keeping legal immigration levels the same (public wants to decrease), and expanding economic aid to other countries (public also wants to decrease).
- Leaders do not realize that the public favors participation in the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto agreement on global warming, and UN international peacekeeping forces; favors accepting collective decisions within the UN and unfavorable WTO rulings; and favors giving the UN the authority to tax such things as the international sale of arms and oil.