At Home Abroad: Public Attitudes Towards America’s Overseas Commitments

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On November 23, 2010, North Korean troops fired over 150 artillery shells at Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea, killing two South Korean soldiers and two civilians. Within hours, President Obama condemned the attack, reminding the DPRK and the rest of the world that “South Korea is our ally. It has been since the Korean War and we strongly affirm our commitment to defend South Korea as part of that alliance . . . Along with our alliance with Japan, this is the cornerstone of US security in the Pacific region.” The following day, Obama ordered the aircraft carrier USS George Washington to the region to emphasize US resolve.

Fortunately, there were no further hostilities in November 2010. But we will never know how close the United States came to war, potentially a nuclear war, with North Korea during that confrontation. What may be most remarkable about the incident, however, were the events that did not occur. Despite the fact that the United States was already embroiled in two major wars in the Middle East, neither the President nor his top advisors felt pressured to explain in any detail to the American people exactly why South Korea was a “cornerstone” of American security or how American interests would be harmed if American leaders decided not to help defend it. No Oval Office speech or major press conference with the President was called.

Indeed, the incident passed with little reaction from the press or the public and is now mostly forgotten. After fifty years, the alliance with South Korea did not seem to require further justification. No one suggested that the fact that the alliance was formed so long ago might actually have been reason to question whether the arrangement still made strategic sense today.

Indeed, the domestic reaction (or non-reaction) to the North Korean attack seems to reflect a broader pattern of American attitudes towards its overseas commitments. Although political leaders, scholars, pundits, and America’s foreign allies have been warning that the public
might embrace a “new isolationism” since the end of the Cold War, no significant argument for retrenchment has entered the public discourse on American foreign policy. In recent years only a handful of political leaders—including Patrick Buchanan, Dennis Kucinich, and Ron and Rand Paul—have advocated a meaningful reduction of America’s foreign commitments. None of them has attracted a significant national following. Commenting on Rand Paul’s 2016 Presidential prospects, William Kristol, an influential neoconservative commentator told The Washington Post that “Rand Paul is a lonely gadfly . . . Rand Paul speaks for a genuine sentiment that’s always been in the Republican Party, but maybe it’s ten percent? Fifteen percent? Twenty percent? I don’t think he’s going to be a serious competitor for guiding Republican foreign policy.”

Some observers have pointed to the declining support for America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as evidence of growing isolationism, but ending these costly wars cannot be said to constitute a fundamental shift in American grand strategy. In fact, there remains a significant possibility that the United States will establish new defense commitments to the governments we promoted in Iraq and Afghanistan, binding America to the defense of these countries for many years to come. Still others have suggested that the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis or America’s continuing fiscal problems may yet tempt the public to retreat into isolationism. To date, however, few political leaders have proposed of the kinds of defense budget cuts that would necessitate a fundamental shift in American foreign policy.

Understanding the nature of public attitudes about American foreign policy is critical if the United States wishes to craft a more sustainable national security strategy. Whether America seeks to achieve sustainability by reining in American commitments or by significantly reorienting them, in the long run, new policies must be accepted by the American public. Although it is sometimes asserted that the public plays little role in the realm of foreign policy, the consensus among recent scholarship is that public opinion has a significant influence over America’s foreign policy decisions. Contrary to conventional wisdom, attitudes about foreign policy can sometimes be an important determinant of voting behavior, which means that decision makers who seek to maintain their positions ignore it at their peril. For this reason,
every American President since Franklin Roosevelt has closely tracked public opinion on important foreign policy decisions.6 Because the public is generally not well informed about foreign affairs, elites probably do have a greater opportunity to shape public opinion on foreign policy than they do in the domestic arena. Over the longer term, however, if elites cannot convince the public to support their policies or if the public becomes convinced the policies have failed, they will be punished at the polls.7 Indeed, numerous studies have found that public opinion can affect important foreign policy choices, including the timing, duration and conduct of war.8

This chapter, therefore, investigates American attitudes towards US foreign commitments, drawing on recent public opinion polls including the results of an original foreign policy survey conducted on a representative sample of Americans in the spring of 2012.9 We know surprisingly little about US public opinion on these issues. Although pollsters frequently survey American attitudes regarding ongoing military conflicts, the American public is only rarely asked its opinions on longstanding security commitments to places like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Europe, or Kuwait—and even then, often only during times of crisis. Surveys that do explore foreign policy attitudes tend to address these issues only at the highest level of generality, such as gauging overall levels of public support for a particular military intervention, public fears about terrorism, presidential approval in the conduct of foreign policy, American favorability towards specific foreign countries, and attitudes about the defense budget. To understand how the public is likely to react to proposals for significant changes in American grand strategy, however, we need to know not simply what the public thinks, but why.

The results of the 2012 survey and other related polls provide clear evidence that the American public is not ready to support a major foreign policy retrenchment. On the contrary, although Americans seem to recognize that our foreign commitments are expensive and worry about free riding by our allies, sizable majorities continue to support all of America’s major commitments from Asia to Europe to the Middle East. Americans see the current world as even more dangerous than it was during the Cold War and believe that our allies and alignments help
to guard against these dangers. They do not favor significantly reducing our alliance commitments in the effort to help balance the federal budget. Although Republicans generally favor a significantly more expansive, forceful, interventionist foreign policy than do Democrats, attitudes are not as polarized as in domestic politics. Large numbers of Democrats support preserving our long-term alliance commitments as well.

On the other hand, the survey also reveals that Americans have a relatively poor understanding of the nature and extent of Americas’ commitments. Many Americans could not identify which countries the United States has formally pledged to defend and which it has not. On most questions in the survey, a significant percentage of respondents answered “don’t know” or indicated they did not have an opinion about the foreign policy issue mentioned in the question. These results suggest that public opinion remains at least somewhat malleable on these issues and strong political leadership or dramatic external events could still undermine the internationalist consensus in the years ahead. The current internationalist consensus, after all, emerged in America in the early years of the Cold War not due to pressure from the public, but only after a coordinated effort on the part of elites to convince the American people of the need for international engagement.

**The Internationalist Consensus**

One of the most well-known and consistently asked survey questions on American attitudes towards foreign policy asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement that “the United States should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” By this measure, support for isolationism seems to be at an all-time high, with fifty-two percent of Americans agreeing that the US should “mind its own business” in 2013 (see Figure 8.1).

![Figure 8.1: Majority Says U.S. Should ‘Mind Its Own Business Internationally’](This figure cannot be reproduced here due to limitations in the agreement with the Pew Research Center. It can be viewed online here.)

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On closer examination, however, it seems likely that this trend primarily reflects growing dissatisfaction following America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rather than a significant decline in support for America’s international leadership role. Indeed, as shown in Figure 8.2, responses to another even longer-running survey question—“Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs?”—suggest only a small decline in internationalism, while a sizable majority of Americans continues to support a substantial international role for the United States.11

**Figure 8.2: Support for an Active Part in World Affairs**

In 2012, seventy-four percent of the public agreed that it is very or somewhat important “for United States to remain the world’s number one military power.”12 More to the point, when the public was asked specifically about support for “long-term military bases the US has overseas,” large majorities approve of maintaining or expanding the number of US bases (see Figure 8.3).13
Polls show strong support for a variety of specific military commitments as well. Fifty-six percent of Americans agree that NATO is “still essential to our country’s security” compared to only thirty-five percent who say it was no longer essential. A May 2012 Gallup poll found that nearly ninety percent of the public believes the Japan-US Security Treaty, which commits the US to the defense of Japan, “should be maintained.” In April 2013, sixty-one percent of Americans said they would support using “military troops to help defend South Korea” in the event of an invasion by the North (only thirty-six percent would not support using troops). Thirty-one percent of Americans reported that they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who “proposed to end the current US military alliance with South Korea,” while only twelve percent said it would make them more likely to vote for the candidate. Forty-one percent even favored establishing “new military alliances to help defend emerging democratic states like Brazil and India,” with only nineteen percent opposing such alliances. Americans appear less enthusiastic about Taiwan than our formal Asian alliance partners, but a plurality in 2012 (forty-
eight percent in favor to forty-three percent against) still favored using military force to defend Taiwan in the event of an attack by China.¹⁸

In the Middle East, support for America’s close ties with Israel also remains strong. In March 2015, only eighteen percent of Americans indicated that they felt the United States has been “too supportive” in its relationship with Israel, while twenty-nine percent felt America had not been supportive enough and forty-eight percent said the level of support was “about right.”¹⁹

In 2012, a CBS News/New York Times Poll asked Americans “If Israel were to attack Iran to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, then what should the US do?” Fifty-five percent said the United States should “support Israel’s military action” and only thirty-eight percent said the United States “should not get involved.”²⁰

**COMMITMENT COSTS**

Despite the public’s endorsement of internationalism, most Americans acknowledge that America’s overseas commitments come at a high price. Sixty-one percent of Americans agree that “The United States can no longer afford to maintain its commitments to defend all of its current allies around the world” compared to only thirteen percent who disagree.²¹ In addition, Americans remain concerned that our allies are not bearing a fair share of the burden of our alliances. Seventy-seven percent of respondents, for example, believe that “most of America’s allies get more help from the United States than the United States gets from them.”²² Americans overwhelmingly agree (fifty-three percent to nine percent) that “Japan spends less on its own defense than it should because of the security provided by Japan’s military alliance with the United States.”²³ Similarly, fifty-nine percent agree and only seven percent disagree that “America’s European allies spend less on their own defense than they should because of the security provided by the NATO military alliance with the United States.”²⁴

In addition to these financial costs, the public also concedes that some of America’s commitments have political/strategic costs. Sixty-one percent, for example, agree that “current US military, economic and political support for Israel angers many Muslims and makes terrorist
attacks against the United States and our interests more likely,” while only seven percent disagree.

Despite the recognition of these costs, the public mostly opposes specific measures to reduce the costs of America’s foreign commitments. Only thirty-five percent say they would support “major cuts in military spending” and only thirty percent would support any level of tax increase “to help keep the United States military the strongest in the world.” Just twenty-five percent support the establishment of a “war surtax” to “pay for [future] war[s] and avoid adding to our nation’s debt,” while fifty-three percent oppose it. Although some scholars have suggested that the United States should not oppose or might even encourage allies like Germany and Japan to build nuclear weapons, only twenty-one percent agreed (and forty-two percent disagreed) that “it would be a good thing if countries like Germany and Japan had their own nuclear weapons since then they would not have to rely as much on the United States for their defense.”

A DANGEROUS WORLD

Why does the American public continue to support our overseas commitments in spite of these serious costs? There is no single answer to this question, but the results of the original survey described in this paper suggest that most Americans perceive the world as an exceptionally dangerous place and believe that our foreign alliances continue to play a vital role in protecting the United States and its vital interests. Perhaps most strikingly, more than sixty-three percent of Americans agreed that “The United States faces greater threats to its security today than it did during the Cold War,” while only fourteen percent disagree.

Much of this concern probably stems from Americans’ persistent fears of terrorist attacks. Seventy-five percent of Americans believe that it is very or somewhat likely that a “terrorist attack causing large numbers of American lives to be lost will happen in the near future.” Fifty-five percent believe that it is very or somewhat likely that “the United States will be attacked by terrorists using nuclear weapons in the next decade.” The fear of terrorism may be intensified
by Americans’ views of the causes of terrorist attacks directed against the United States. Forty-nine percent of Americans (including seventy-one percent of Republican respondents) agreed that “terrorists attack the United States mostly because they hate America’s values,” while just thirty-seven percent said that “terrorists attack the United States mostly because they hate America’s foreign policies.”31 The view that terrorism is primarily motivated by a hatred of American values suggests that terrorists will continue to target the United States until we either change our values or defeat them. Perhaps this is also why ninety percent of Americans polled in April 2013 agreed that “Americans will always have to live with the risk of terrorism.”32

Another possible explanation for Americans’ sense of insecurity could be that Americans lack faith in the power of deterrence to keep America safe. For example, sixty-nine percent of the public agreed that if Iran succeeded in developing a nuclear weapon it would be very or somewhat likely to use it against Israel. Only seventeen percent said it was not too likely or not at all likely. A separate poll found that only thirty-two percent of Americans believed that if Iran developed nuclear weapons it “would be deterred from striking Israel for fear of being destroyed in a nuclear retaliatory strike” by Israel.33 Indeed, arguments about the futility of deterrence figured prominently in the Bush administration’s case for war against Iraq in 2003 and in the administration’s wider policy of preempting military threats, which came to be known as the “Bush Doctrine.” Subsequent polls have continued to show that a majority of Americans agree that the use of military force can at least be sometimes justified “against countries that may seriously threaten the US, but have not attacked,” although support for preemption has declined from sixty-six percent in 2003 to fifty-two percent in 2009, the last time this question was polled.34

Americans see our foreign alliances as important to protecting the United States from these threats and minimizing the chances that the United States will be directly attacked. For example, fifty percent of Americans agreed and just twenty-five percent disagreed that “the United States must keep a strong military presence in the Middle East to prevent terrorist attacks against the United States homeland.”35 Fifty-two percent also agreed that “the United States
depends on the support of Israel to protect vital US interests in the Middle East,” with only eighteen percent disagreeing.36

In Asia, on the other hand, Americans see our commitments as vital to protecting important economic interests. Americans agreed by a margin of sixty-four percent to nine percent that “The US must maintain its current naval forces in Asia and the Pacific to protect the cargo ships that carry most of trade between the United States and Asia.”37

Americans also registered concern that failing to support our formal or informal commitments would deal a serious blow to US credibility. Americans agreed by a margin of fifty-eight to twelve percent that “if the United States decided to end its commitment to help defend South Korea, our enemies would doubt America’s resolve to defend other American allies and interests in the future.”38 Thirty-nine percent agreed and only seventeen percent disagreed that “if China attacked Taiwan and the United States decided not to help defend Taiwan, our enemies would doubt America’s resolve to defend our key interests in the future.”39 Americans were also skeptical that our allies would stand up for themselves in the absence of American support. Thirty-six percent agreed (compared to twenty-two percent who disagreed) that “most of America’s allies, even the wealthy and powerful ones, fear war so much that if they are threatened by a determined enemy, they will give in, unless they are defended by the United States.”40

**CONCLUSION**

The survey results reviewed in this paper strongly indicate that the American public has not embraced a “new isolationism,” the rise of which has been forecast repeatedly since the end of the Cold War. Although there is some evidence that the public has begun to move away from the most expansive and interventionist varieties of US foreign policy in recent years, these shifts have been relatively subtle and seem just as likely to reflect a reaction to the increasingly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as the early signs of a larger shift towards isolationism. Americans do not appear to have chosen these views uncritically. They recognize that our
commitments come with substantial economic, political and military costs but Americans seem
to believe these costs are worth paying to defend the United States from what they see as a highly
threatening world.

These findings have important implications for the effort to produce a more sustainable
security strategy for the United States. For supporters of America’s current forward-leaning
foreign policy, a group that includes the leaders of both Republican and Democratic parties,
these findings suggest that they can largely put aside concerns that the public will soon demand a
fundamental reevaluation of our foreign policy. Although the public may question the wisdom of
particular policies or military interventions, the belief that America must retain its overseas
commitments and its leadership role in global affairs remains largely unshaken more than two
decades after the Cold War. For those who believe that substantial retrenchment is necessary for
sustainability, on the other hand, these results suggest that if a fundamental change in US
foreign policy is to occur, the impetus for change is not likely to come from the public.

Although the surveys reported in this paper show that public support for a forward
leaning foreign policy is wide, it is not as clear how deep this support runs. Many of the
questions elicited a very high rate of “don’t knows” or “neither agree nor disagree” responses—
often more than twenty percent. This pattern is consistent with the often-observed lack of
American public interest in and knowledge of foreign affairs. Indeed, the survey revealed that
most Americans have a very poor understanding of our foreign commitments. When asked to
choose from a list of countries which ones the US has pledged via a formal treaty to defend, only
4.8 percent of Americans correctly identified that America is committed to defend Latvia as part
of the NATO alliance. More the fifty-five percent incorrectly assume that the United States has
a treaty to defend Israel—significantly more than correctly identified America’s treaty
commitments to Germany or Japan.
Table 8.1: Percent of respondents who believe “the United States currently has a formal treaty that pledges the United States to help defend _______” (italicized countries are correct)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>55.30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>46.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>42.40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>36.60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>27.70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>23.40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>21.30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>20.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>17.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>11.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>10.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that public opinion on America’s foreign commitments does not rest on particularly well-informed foundations reminds us that we should not conclude that our current, forward-leaning foreign policy is the best one for America simply because a majority of the public supports it. In this case, as with many complex foreign policy issues, public opinion may be more likely to represent a reflection of the elite consensus rather than an independent affirmation of it.43

This is, after all, how America’s current international consensus was fashioned. In the years immediately following the Second World War, most Americans longed for a return to isolationism and were not prepared for the idea of large peace-time armies and their associated budgetary expenses. America’s post-war foreign policy, first articulated in NSC-68, represented a
major departure from the public consensus. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, one of the key authors of NSC-68, worried that “the American people have a false sense of security and… must be made to realize the gravity of our situation and must become reconciled to the fact that we must make certain sacrifices in order to meet the problem of Soviet aggression.”

Senator Arthur Vandenberg famously urged Truman to “scare the hell out of the American people” if that is what it took to get them to accept the new internationalist strategy.

The challenge for proponents of major change in American foreign policy, then, is either to fracture the current elite consensus about American grand strategy, or to convince the public that our current strategy has failed, thereby putting pressure on elites from below. Both strategies are likely to prove difficult. Change from above is improbable because powerful political, organizational and psychological pressures in favor of the status quo make major shifts in elite opinion exceedingly rare. Change from below also seems unlikely. Since the end of the Cold War, the American public has been shielded from the direct costs of the current policy since the country’s current wars have been waged by a small, all-volunteer military and paid for through borrowing rather than tax increases. The most painful costs of an unsustainable grand strategy, therefore, will be borne in the future when American debts come due or when American alliance commitments compel the United States to fight a war it would have rather stayed out of. It is possible that only a major crisis, such as an even more serious economic calamity or failed military adventure abroad, will prompt elites and the public to consider a change of course.


9 Thus survey was conducted with the support of the Tobin Project. Numerous scholars submitted questions for the survey. The full results of the poll are available at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html. The survey interviewed 1056 respondents and has a margin of error of +/- 3.16%.


12 Eleven percent said it was “a little important,” and only five percent said it was “not important at all.” Eleven percent chose “don’t know.” Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).


http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html). Fifty-seven percent, however, reported that it would make them neither more nor less likely to vote for the candidate.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html


21 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

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26 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

27 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

28 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

29 23 percent said it was “not very likely” or “not likely at all.” Fox News Poll, Aug, 2011. Retrieved Nov-21-2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

30 30 percent said such an attack was “not too likely” and 15 percent said it was “not likely at all.” CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll. April 9-11, 2010 (http://www.pollingreport.com/defense.htm).

31 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html


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39 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).
40 Valentino poll (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~benv/data.html).

41 This may reflect in part the structure of the YouGov survey which, unlike many other surveys, explicitly invited subjects to answer “don’t know” rather than only recording that response if the subject spontaneously offered it.
42 The Taiwan Relations Act is not considered a formal defense treaty. As part of the agreement, the U.S. pledges to “make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability” but whether or not to do so remains at the sole discretion of the President of the United States.
43 See for example, Eric V. Larson, Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996).