



INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

Something in the Air: “Isolationism,” Defense Spending, and the US Public Mood

Executive Summary

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MAIN POINTS

- Public opinion polls show a decline in support for U.S. global engagement over the past decade. However, this is not evidence of "neo-isolationism," as some political leaders and commentators have suggested.
- Despite the decline, polls continue to show majority public support for U.S. global engagement and for a U.S. global role comparable to that of other major powers. Public dissent has focused narrowly on America's recent wars and on the notion that the United States should assume a uniquely assertive or “top” global role.
- Americans favor cooperative, diplomatic approaches to resolving conflict and they tend toward a "last resort" principle on going to war. However, the U.S. public will rally to support a forceful response to violent attacks on perceived vital interests. Americans also support forceful action to stem genocide – at least in prospect.
- Americans do not favor involvement in most third-party interstate wars or in any civil wars. They also do not support regime change efforts, armed nation-building, or persisting constabulary roles abroad. On balance, the U.S. public lacks a "crusading spirit" with regard to the use of force abroad – whether the aim is posed in moral, humanitarian, political, or geopolitical terms.
- To gain public support, military goals must be seen as realistic, pragmatic, and cost-effective. Ongoing support requires that the perceived costs of war match the perceived benefits. Domestic economic conditions are key in shaping the perceived "opportunity cost" of war.
- Current support for bombing ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria is consistent with the limits outlined above. Support will waver if the mission grows or fails to show real progress.
- Polls show a chronic gap between elite and public views on military intervention and America's global role. Foreign policy elites express a stronger preference for military activism and a dominant U.S. role. More common among the general public are selective engagement, cooperative leadership, and isolationist views. These differences may reflect differences in how costs and benefits are experienced.
- Singular events such as the 9/11 attacks can temporarily close the elite-public gap. It re-emerges if the public feels that the costs of military activism are exceeding its

benefits. Economic and fiscal crises increase public sensitivity to cost-benefit issues and to trade-offs between competing goals, domestic and military.

- One consequence of recession, federal deficits, and the experience of recent wars has been reduced support for defense spending. Counter-balancing this is enduring majority support for superior defense capabilities. However, the public views military superiority as a deterrent and an insurance policy, not a blank check for military activism.
- A plurality of Gallup respondents in 2014 continue to desire less Pentagon spending. This may soon change. Public perceptions of threat and of the health of the U.S. military are pivotal in determining attitudes on spending and such perceptions are quite susceptible to manipulation.
- Partisan political dynamics significantly affect public opinion on defense spending. During polarized election campaign periods, security policy debate becomes more hawkish, carrying public opinion with it.
- Political actors seeking bigger Pentagon budgets and a more confrontational foreign policy can frame issues in several ways to bias debate. A common stratagem is to frame discussion of budget issues in terms of averting a "hollow military." Another is to use Second World War metaphors – references to Hitler, Munich, and isolationism – to frame current security challenges and policy options.
- Top presidential candidates for 2016, both Democratic and Republican, are likely to promote significantly higher levels of defense spending: more than \$600 billion for Fiscal Year 2018.
- Historical precedent suggests that, given partisan allegiances and the hawkish turn in the security policy debate, a plurality of Americans may come to support higher spending levels. However, precedent also suggests that majorities will not soon support new large-scale protracted military campaigns abroad. Moreover, support for increased spending, should it emerge, will soon evaporate if national leaders continue to over-reach abroad.

Introduction: ISIS and “isolationism”

Soon after the official departure of U.S. combat troops from Iraq, some American political leaders and commentators began perceiving and decrying a “neo-isolationist” trend in U.S. public opinion.¹ The evidence was polling data showing strong public reluctance to involve the nation in new conflicts abroad -- specifically in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Iraq.² A related concern has been public opinion on U.S. defense spending, which continues to lean toward additional cuts despite a 12% real reduction in the baseline Pentagon budget since 2010. This, some have insisted, is hobbling America’s capacity to deal with global challenges.³

During summer 2014, however, American public sentiment seemed to take a hawkish turn in response to the sudden advance and depredations of the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq

and ash-Sham”(ISIS).⁴ Today, large majorities of Americans favor U.S. air strikes on ISIS in both Iraq and Syria.⁵ And this has inspired some defense leaders and lawmakers to argue that effective action against ISIS requires boosting the Pentagon’s budget.⁶

So, has the neo-isolationist moment passed? Will the public now support a loosening of Pentagon budget constraints?

A serious examination of public opinion data over the past decade (and more) shows that isolationism – a desire to disengage from global affairs – was never at the heart of Americans’ reluctance to involve the United States in new conflicts abroad. The real target of growing public discontent was unbounded U.S. military activism – that is, a tendency to intervene seemingly everywhere without due attention to cost or benefit. The public’s current desire to strike hard at ISIS does not contravene this dissent at all.

U.S. public concern about ISIS surged in two steps during 2014 – first in response to the humanitarian plight of minorities fleeing ISIS and again in response to the vicious murder of American journalist James Foley.⁷ What polling on ISIS tells us about current U.S. public attitudes toward war is that:

- Americans will often support limited military action to stem what they perceive as the impending mass slaughter of innocents abroad.
- Americans are ready to respond forcefully to vicious assaults on Americans by foreign extremists.
- Organized attacks on Americans that seem to be “identity-based” will be viewed as a threat to Americans everywhere.

The current limits of Americans’ will to war are also clear. Majorities continue to oppose the deployment of ground troops. Support is tied to relatively low-cost standoff operations. There continues to be little support for involvement in interstate wars, civil wars, regime change efforts, nation-building, or persisting constabulary roles.

One change that does seem likely is an increase in public support for additional Pentagon funding. This would be partly a result of partisan political dynamics (as examined below). It would also reflect a public desire for reassurance about the strength and resilience of U.S. national defenses – although not a green light for a broad resurgence in interventionism. Historical precedent suggests that this support will not last long if national leaders continue to over-reach internationally – as seems likely.

What remains true and distinctive about the current period is that U.S. public opinion on security policy is at a crossroads defined by new strategic and economic realities as well as

a decade's experience of war. Accurately appreciating the public mood requires looking beyond the current fixation on ISIS and clearing away the haze of alarmist claims about "neo-isolationism." There is an undeniable public desire for a more sustainable and effective approach to securing the nation – one that neither Democratic nor Republican leaders seem able or willing to provide.

Second thoughts on war

The public's reluctance to open new war fronts is commonly described as "war weariness" – a depletion of will. Actually, it reflects a rudimentary cost-benefit assessment of recent U.S. military activism. How does the public see America's major military involvements of the past 13 years?

- Today, the public views the use of force in Iraq to have been a wrong decision by a 50% to 38% margin.⁸
- The use of force in Afghanistan fares better with 51% to 41% of the public considering it the right decision. However, Americans also believe by a 52% to 38% margin that the U.S. effort in Afghanistan has been mostly a failure.

Similarly, the public does not believe that intervention actually reduces the risk of terrorist attack.⁹ With regard to the Syrian civil war, for instance, Americans believe by a margin of 60% to 3% that direct U.S. involvement would *increase* the threat of terrorism.¹⁰ With regard to ISIS, 34% believe that U.S. military action will increase the likelihood of attacks on the United States, while only 18% believe it will reduce the risk.¹¹

Some suppose that America's recent economic woes play a key role in the public's "neo-isolationist" turn. Williams Galston writes that "As long as the economy remains troubled," a preference for nation-building at home "will prevail against external challenges that seem less than existential."¹² And, in fact, numerous public opinion surveys show that, since 2007, fiscal and economic concerns have displaced worries about foreign borne threats at the top of citizen national priority lists.¹³ This is not solipsism. Instead, it reflects a public desire to rebalance national priorities in light of new strategic circumstances.

America's current economic and fiscal woes are unusually acute and they reflect global economic trends that suggest no early or easy respite.¹⁴ The shift in global economic power now underway will produce a circumstance – a new global economic balance – unlike any America has experienced since the 19th century.¹⁵ These trends have inspired forecasts of a "New Normal" domestic condition characterized by slower growth, higher unemployment rates, and reduced government services.¹⁶

These developments have increased public sensitivity to the cost-effectiveness of government action. So has the meteoric rise in federal debt and deficits. But the measure of economic health most salient to the public is change in household income. Between 2007 and 2012, median household income fell by more than 8% in real terms.¹⁷ As of mid-2014, it remains 6% below the 2007 level.

On the cost side of the equation, overseas military operations have drained \$1.75 trillion (2015 USD) from the treasury over the past 14 years. Baseline Pentagon spending grew steeply during this period as well. In aggregate it has exceeded the level set in 2000 by \$1.6 trillion. And to these economic considerations the human cost of war must be added: for America, 6,800 service people killed and more than 50,000 injured (by official count).

The cost of recent wars has been extraordinary and the results much less than anticipated. This touchstone fact suggests that Americans have not grown “war weary” as much as *war wise*. Looking closer, the trend in opinion goes further back than the past few years. And it points to a critical gap between leaders and led. At issue is the official consensus that has guided U.S. security policy for most of the post-Cold War era. Put simply, Americans have lost faith in its worth and effectiveness.

Americans Rethink Global Engagement

Testing for “isolationism”

Periodic polls by the Pew Center and Chicago Council for Global Affairs give a longer, more detailed view of trends in opinion on global engagement.¹⁸ At first glance, several seem to add credibility to concerns about “neo-isolationism.” For instance, Pew has periodically asked respondents if the United States “should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” Forty-three percent said yes in 1975, 41% in 1995, and 52% in December 2013.¹⁹

Pew also has tested agreement with the statement: “We should not think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our own strengths.”²⁰ Remarkably, 73% of respondents agreed in 1975, 78% in 1995, and

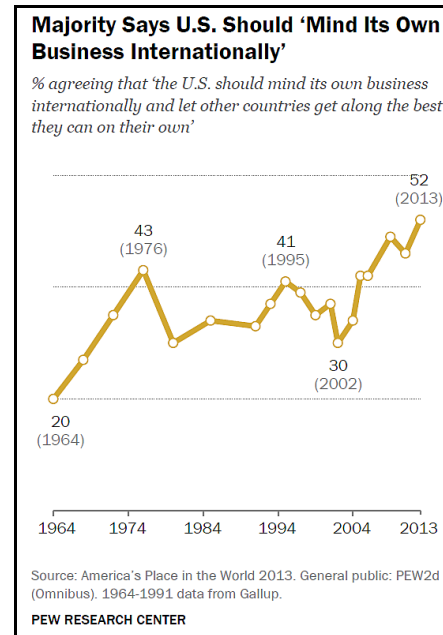


Figure 1

80% in December 2013. These responses reveal both the trend and depth of public concern. But do they evince isolationism?

The two questions asked by Pew differ from each other in an important respect. The first poses more of an absolute or binary choice: engagement, yes or no? The second is more relativistic, probing feelings about the balance between domestic and foreign policy. What it reveals is strong support for rebalancing priorities. Frustration of this desire may be pivotal in provoking more unequivocal attitudes on engagement. At any rate, *rebalancing does not imply withdrawal*.

Gauging engagement

The public's desire to recalibrate engagement draws attention to the necessary context for any serious examination of isolationist dangers: the actual character and extent of U.S. global engagement. Of course, by any measure, the United States is intensively – indeed, exceptionally – engaged in world affairs.²¹

Presently, the United States participates in more than five dozen international organizations and thousands of international agreements.²² It is a permanent member of the UN security council as well as a leading member of the Group of Seven, the IMF, and the World Bank. And it is the world's top provider of foreign aid, surpassing the next three top providers combined.²³ In terms of global *military* engagement, America is in a class by itself:

- America's military is today significantly involved in more than 15 conflicts worldwide (as well as several peace operations).²⁴
- It is party to military alliances with 45 nations and maintains security assistance partnerships with more than 100 others.²⁵
- It maintains a military presence in 175 foreign nations, 40 of which host U.S. military facilities. It routinely stations or deploys at least 200,000 troops overseas. In recent years, the number has ranged as high as 400,000. (All other nations combined have less than 150,000 outside their borders.)²⁶

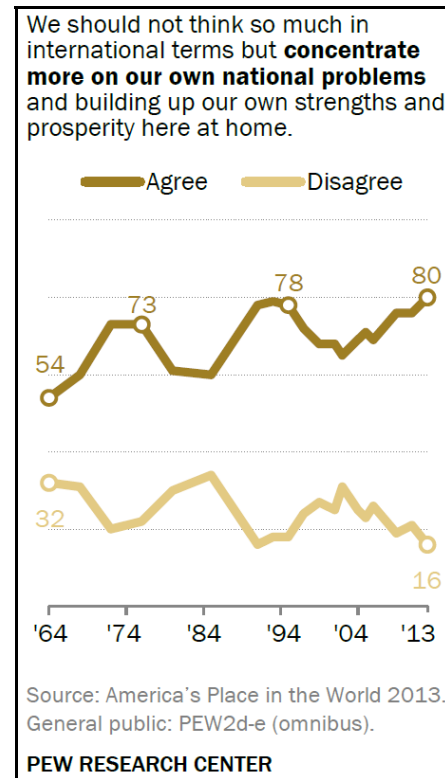


Figure 2

Not only is the United States exceptionally engaged in world affairs, but a closer look at polling data shows that a significant majority of Americans remain quite internationalist in outlook.

Balanced engagement, not "isolationism"

One question routinely posed in Chicago Council surveys is subtly different than those reviewed above: "Is it better for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out."²⁷ In Sept 2014, 58% of Americans thought it best to be active, while 41% stood opposed. Notably, this question does not juxtapose domestic and foreign goals. Nor does it imply being a global "busybody." It centers on the perceived value of being involved in the common affairs of nations. When engagement is viewed this way, significant majorities of Americans favor it.

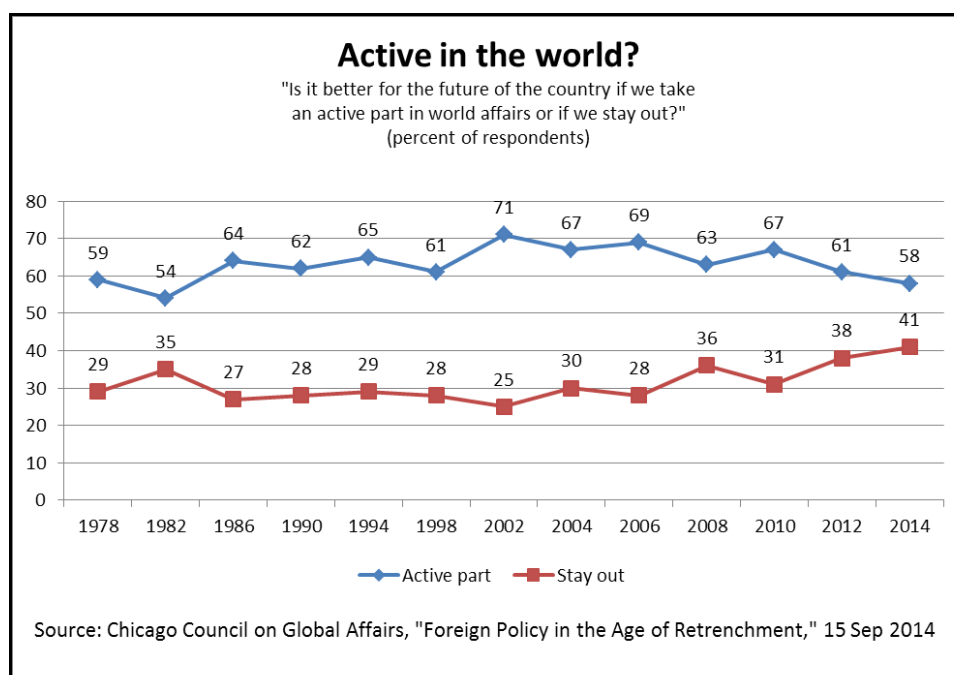


Figure 3

It is generally true that the public expresses greater concern with events at home than with those abroad *when the choice is posed as a simple dyad*. When national priorities are disaggregated, however, concerns about global affairs often rise to the top of the list.

In fact, both Pew and Chicago Council polls find that significant majorities consistently support U.S. participation in international institutions. Majorities also support

cooperative multinational approaches to addressing world problems – *as long as leadership, responsibility, and burdens are evenly shared.*²⁸ What attracts little public support is the role of the United States as global cop, hegemon, sole leader, or "most active" world leader. Thus, the 2012 Council survey found 78% of respondents agreeing that the United States was "playing the role of world policeman more than it should."²⁹

A series of questions on current and potential conflicts by the Pew Center also shows that "Americans are broadly supportive of nonmilitary forms of international engagement and problem solving, ranging from diplomacy, alliances, and international treaties to economic aid and decision making through the UN."³⁰

War and engagement

When asked in general about possible intervention in different types of overseas contingencies, majorities support action to stop genocide, prevent humanitarian catastrophes, and secure the flow of oil – a mix of high-purpose and self-interest goals.³¹ Routinely disfavored is involvement in foreign civil conflicts and interstate wars.³² Broadly speaking, support for intervention also declines when questions grow more specific about time and place or when casualties are mentioned. Conversely, support is stronger when intervention is presented as a collective or UN-mandated effort.

Overall, Americans tend toward a "last resort" stance on the use of force. They are willing to go to war for a variety of reasons, but they see war as an exceptional response to dire circumstances. And they are pragmatic in desiring realistic goals and cost-effective outcomes. What they lack is a "crusading spirit" with regard to the use of force abroad, whether the aim is posed in moral, humanitarian, political, or geopolitical terms.

These basic sentiments about military operations abroad help explain the trend in public responses to general questions about global engagement today. Although polling since 2004 confirms a steady decline in support for nonspecific "global engagement," Chicago Council surveys correlate this decline with negative assessments of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Looking further back, similar shifts in opinion are evident during times of troubled military operations abroad (1964-1976) or following the conclusion of major confrontations (1992-1995).

Chicago Council time-series polls also verify the sensitizing effect of economic recessions. The Council records an especially sharp decline in support for engagement between 2006 and 2008, leading the Council authors to conclude that "the American people want to play an active part in world affairs but their internationalism is increasingly constrained by economic troubles at home."³³

Leaders *versus* Led on Global Engagement

The elite-public divide

The alarmism about Americans' desire to reform U.S. global practice is symptomatic of a chronic gap between policy leaders and the general public. In Pew Center polls covering the years 1993-2009, a strong plurality of the public preferred that the United States play a leadership role equal to that of other nations.³⁴ By contrast, policy elites strongly prefer that the United States play a dominant or "most assertive" role. Only a third of the public chose these strong leadership options.

Regarding the use of force, the U.S. public is routinely less hawkish than national leadership.³⁵ One Chicago Council poll contrasted elite and public views on 11 conflict scenarios.³⁶ The public proved less willing to justify forceful U.S. intervention in eight of the scenarios. And, of course, the recent consternation over supposed "neo-isolationism" turns entirely on the public's reluctance to deeply involve the United States in new foreign confrontations.

Explaining the gap

A variety of factors may account for the gap between public sentiments and official policy, including the fact that policy makers occupy a social and demographic strata not representative of the general public. This can contribute to differences in the perception and weighting of policy costs and benefits. So can institutional pressures, partisan political concerns, and special interest inducements. At heart, the elite-public divide reflects a divergence in strategic assumptions or dispositions.³⁷

Since the mid-1990s, the central tenet of U.S. security policy has been to put U.S. military predominance to work in efforts to transform the global strategic environment.³⁸ This has included an expansion of military alliance commitments as well as efforts to contain rising powers, patrol the global commons, stabilize fragile states, extinguish extremism, and reform (or even restructure) "rogue" nations. These ambitious proactive goals contrast with the more traditional ones of simple deterrence, defense, and crisis response.

Political scientist Barry Posen has called the dominant approach the Primacy strategy, and it has both neoliberal and neoconservative variants.³⁹ These variants differ over the weight given to diplomacy and multilateralism. The neoconservative variant also is distinguished by its enthusiasm for supposedly "decisive" military campaigns. Both have expanded the scope of U.S. military activism, however, and lowered the threshold on the use of force.⁴⁰

The allure of primacy

The primacy strategy gained prominence at the Cold War's end in part because it held out the alluring prospect of advancing a new global "rule set" under U.S. leadership, which appealed to both neoliberals and neoconservatives. Most important to the rise and resilience of the primacist approach, however, has been the institutional momentum and political clout of the defense establishment. The adoption of a strategy prescribing "full spectrum dominance" and greater military activism put an end to post-Cold War Pentagon retrenchment. The basic precepts of the new approach were reflected in the first *Quadrennial Defense Review* (1997). During the 12 years following publication of the first *QDR*, the baseline Pentagon budget grew 45% in real terms. The total Pentagon budget (including war costs) grew 92% in real terms.

Although dominant in official circles, the primacist view has been at odds with U.S. public preferences throughout most of the post-Cold War era. The gap narrowed only in the years immediately following victory in the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf war and the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

Today, after a decade of energetic military activism, the gap is wider than ever. But it can be managed. Different strategic dispositions sometimes converge (or can be made to converge) on similar policy choices. Much depends on popular perceptions of national security challenges. And these can be significantly influenced by political leaders, policy experts, and the news media.⁴¹ Military leaders in particular have unique sway.⁴²

Elites influence public thinking both by direct appeal and by filtering, framing, or "spinning" the information they convey.⁴³ In the security policy arena, Second World War metaphors are common framing devices. These include allusions to Hitler, Munich, Pearl Harbor, appeasement, and isolationism.⁴⁴ They serve to center public discourse on the prospect of a catastrophic "breakout" by an unrelenting and incomparably powerful foe. Although analogy is no substitute for analysis, it can – if sufficiently evocative – move a nation across the threshold to war.

Defense Spending, Global Engagement, and Public Opinion

America's current national security strategy is nothing if not expensive. Since 1998, when post-Cold War retrenchment ended, the United States has allotted approximately \$10 trillion (2014 USD) to the Department of Defense, including war funding. Today, America devotes 4% of GDP to defense, which is about twice the country average for the rest of the world.⁴⁵

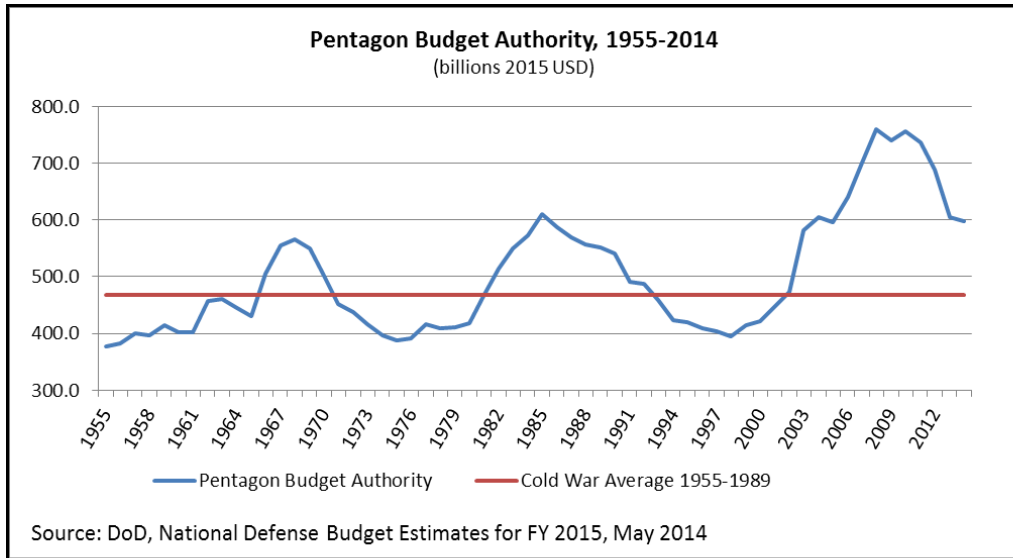


Figure 4

Gallup polling on defense spending shows that during the post-Cold War era public opinion has moved from majority support for significant reductions to plurality support for increased spending back to plurality support for cuts.⁴⁶ (Fig. 5.) Today, total Pentagon spending (including war costs) is down 21.5% in real terms from its 2008 high point. And this certainly constrains the capacity for military activism – but the public favors it.

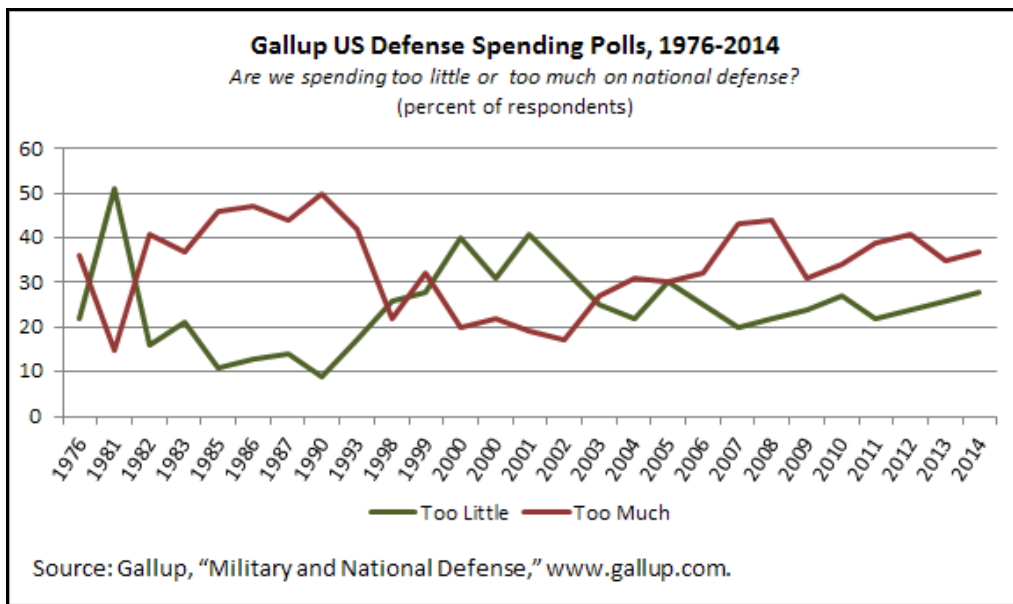


Figure 5

Trends in opinion about defense budgeting

To summarize the historical findings of Gallup and others:⁴⁷

- 1985-1995: A strong plurality of Americans support reductions in defense spending throughout this period. A clear majority support cuts in 1990. DoD annual budgets decline by 31% in real terms during these years.
- 1995-1998: A transition period during which preference for the “status quo” increases and then is supplanted by pluralities favoring increased spending. Budgets decline by 6% across these years.
- 1998-2003: Significant public support for increased spending is evident. (Interestingly, this support is especially strong in 2000 and 2001 *before* the 9/11 attacks.) Annual budgets increase by 29%.
- 2003-2007: By early 2003, public opinion is shifting toward “spend less.” This sentiment grows steadily between 2003 and 2006 along with concerns about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Budgets continue to rise, however, growing 37.6% in real terms.
- 2007-2008: “Spend less” sentiment surges further upward gaining plurality assent as the financial and economic crisis takes hold and Operation Iraqi Freedom seems to mire in civil war. Budgets rise 8.5%.
- 2008-2012: “Spend less” sentiment moderates somewhat as an untested Democrat takes the presidential helm, but then rebounds as the nation focuses intently on reducing the federal debt and deficit. Budgets decline by 9%.
- 2012-2014: The total 2014 Pentagon budget is down 13% from the 2012 level in real terms. But it still registers 42% above the level of 2000. In Gallup’s February 2014 survey, “send less” sentiment out-polls “spend more” by 37% to 28%.

The trend in public opinion across the 2003-2014 period clearly shows the effect of disillusionment with the post-9/11 wars and growing sensitivity to issues of cost. However, it does not imply a general lack of public support for high levels of military spending.

As the public sees it: How much is enough?

Polling by Gallup and others over the past 20 years show that a majority of Americans consistently values America's position as the world's top military power.⁴⁸ This does not contradict the public’s preference for diplomacy over war or its apprehensions about

military activism. It simply reflects a bedrock faith in the deterrent power of a strong military, which can accord with a variety of positions on engagement. Still, the value afforded superiority does imply public sensitivity to issues of defense sufficiency and readiness – as a matter of homeland protection, if nothing else. And this concern provides leverage for those who wish to see higher levels of spending.

How much defense spending suits the public? It depends.

Most polling does not engage respondents in a deliberate process of weighing budget realities and options. One exception is a 2012 poll conducted by the Program for Public Consultation (PPC).⁴⁹ It provided respondents with detailed background information and summary arguments for increasing and decreasing spending. The result was a majority favoring an 11% reduction in the Pentagon base budget from the 2012 level which, in real terms, would be roughly equivalent to the effects of sequestration. This may be the best available indication of well-informed public opinion on the topic. But it is not indicative of how public opinion on spending usually takes form.

What drives opinion on defense spending?

The 2012 PPC poll revealed that most U.S. citizens actually have little idea of how much the nation spends on its military – not in absolute terms, nor relative to other federal spending, nor relative to what other nations spend. At best, national media may convey a sense of whether the Pentagon budget is slated to grow or shrink in a particular year in current dollar terms. So, what determines public response to this information?

Intensive polling by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) has shown that spending preferences will vary significantly depending on how questions about defense spending are framed.⁵⁰ Alternatively mentioning foreign threats, higher taxes, military weakness, or federal debt produces significantly different responses about defense spending. This not only illustrates the power of message framing, it also suggests that strategic, political, and economic considerations play a key part in shaping public sentiments. What matters is how the perceived rise or fall in spending resonates with these broader considerations.

The considerations that can significantly affect public opinion about defense spending include:⁵¹

- Perceptions of the strategic environment and threats to U.S. security,
- Perceptions of national strength and defense preparedness,
- New security policy initiatives (including war) and their outcomes,

- Economic and fiscal conditions, and
- Presumed trade-offs between defense and other government spending.

Some of these inputs are directly experienced by the public – for instance: personal economic circumstances. Much else is heavily mediated (as noted above) and thus susceptible to manipulation and framing. In the case of defense preparedness, warnings of a “hollow military” can be an especially effective frame. The “hollow military” frame invokes uncertainty and speaks to Americans’ invariant desire for reliable protection.⁵² This works to bias opinion by centering discussion on the possibility (however remote) of a sudden, unanticipated, and catastrophic collapse of national defense capabilities.

Citizens are only selectively receptive to opinion leaders, however; They tend to privilege those leaders whose general disposition echoes their own. This makes partisan and ideological allegiances important factors in opinion formation. It also means that any apparent consensus among Democratic and Republican leaders is especially powerful in shaping public opinion.⁵³

Opinion on defense strength and preparedness

Since 1990, Gallup polling has also periodically examined public satisfaction with U.S. military strength and preparedness.⁵⁴ (Figure 6.) Importantly, changes in how people feel about the condition of America’s defenses does *not* correlate uniformly with either changes in defense spending or with sentiments about the defense budget. The relationship is a complicated one.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, public satisfaction with U.S. defenses declined in response to controversy over the readiness of America’s armed forces. Budget increases during 1998-2000 were not sufficient to redress this concern, however. Public satisfaction did not begin to recover until 2002-2004, seemingly in response to initial progress in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. As the wars dragged on, however, “defense satisfaction” eroded.

By 2007 and 2008, the plurality view was that U.S. national defense was “not as strong as it needed to be.” At the same time, a plurality of Americans came to feel that defense spending should be *reduced*. During these years, *more than one-third of Americans seemed to favor defense cuts while simultaneously feeling that U.S. defense strength was either “about right” or “not enough.”* These seemingly contradictory sentiments can be reconciled when understood against the backdrop of economic crisis, fiscal pressure, and growing disillusionment with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Figure 6. Gallup Polling on Military Spending, Strength, and Preparedness									
	DoD Budget % Change*	Level of Pentagon Spending % respondents			Strength of National Defenses % respondents			Military Strength and Preparedness % respondents	
		Too Much	About Right	Too Little	Excess Strength	About Right	Not Enough	Satisfied	Not Satisfied
2014	+0.3	37**	32	28				72	22
2013	-11	35	36	26				74	21
2012	-5	41	32	24	13	54	32	71	23
2011	-1	39	35	22	11	50	37		
2010	+5	34	36	27	7	46	45		
2009	-1.5	31	41	24	6	54	37		
2008	+12	44	30	22	10	41	47	66	30
2007	+12	43	35	20	8	43	46	62	32
2006	+11	32	40	25	7	47	43	67	28
2005	+3	30	38	30	9	49	40	66	31
2004	+8	31	45	22	10	54	34	81	17
2003	+27	27	44	25	13	52	34	83	14
2002	+8	17	48	33	6	50	43	79	19
2001	+10	19	38	41	7	48	44	61	32
2000 Aug	n.a.	20	34	40					
2000 May	+4	22	44	31	6	55	38		
1999	+8	32	35	28	7	48	42		
1998	-3	22	45	26					
1993	-8	42	38	17	16	64	17		
1990	+5	50	36	9					

* Percentage reflects budget change in current dollar amounts
 ** Majority/plurality position appears in bold

Sources: Gallup, Military and National Defense, www.gallup.com; DoD, "National Defense Budget Estimates for FY2015," May 2014, <http://comptroller.defense.gov>

Gallup polling results suggest that, after 2004, the public became increasingly sensitive to the inherent limits of military power and increasingly attentive to the balance of costs and benefits associated with combat operations. This gave greater traction to the distinction between necessary and unnecessary military action – a distinction that the primacy strategy typically obscures. The American public seemed increasingly aware and accepting that a nation could be the world's top military power and yet not able to achieve some goals at an acceptable cost. The question became, Which goals are realistic and necessary – and which are not?

Figure 7. Change in Fiscal and Economic Conditions 1985-2014				
	Federal Deficit or Surplus as % GDP	Unemployment	Real Growth in Median Household Income	Real Growth in Per Capita GDP
1985-1993	Deficit 1985: 5% 1989: 2.7% 1992: 4.4%	1985: 7.4% 1989: 5% 1992: 7.8%	+1.7%	+14.7%
1993-2001	Surplus: 2000: 2.3%	2000: 3.9%	+14%	+23.3%
2001-2012	Deficit: 2009: 9.8% GDP 2012: 6.7% GDP	2009: 10% 2012: 7.9%	-9.3%	+10.7%
Current	Deficit: 3.5% GDP	6.1%	+2.5% since 2012	+3.9% since 2012
1985-2014			+8.8%	+60.6%

Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Real Median Household Income in the United States" and "Federal Surplus or Deficit as Percent of Gross Domestic Product"; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Current-dollar and real GDP"; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey"; and, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Historical Gross Domestic Product Per Capita 1969-2014."

The shift in attitudes during the 2004-2008 period contrasts with the change in the late 1990s and early 2000s. During both periods, Gallup polls found comparable levels of public concern about defense strength and preparedness. However, during 1998-2001, this concern was matched by a willingness to spend more. For several reasons, public concern meant and implied different things during the two periods.

In 2007 and 2008, public opinion had been conditioned by years of costly and indecisive war. Among other effects, this fractured leadership consensus, which facilitated public dissent. By contrast, as noted, the turn of opinion during 1998-2000 was prefaced by controversy over military readiness and by an apparent bipartisan consensus on the need

to boost Pentagon spending. In this case, the issue was understood as one of ensuring basic defense and deterrence capabilities.

The contrast in economic conditions also made a difference. (Fig. 7.) Beginning in 2007, economic and fiscal crises led the public to set a tougher standard when judging the worthiness of activism. By contrast, in the 1998-2000 period, a sense of relative prosperity had prevailed. Between 1993 and 2000, Median Household Income (MHI) had grown 14.5% in real terms and the federal budget had moved into surplus. Between 2000 and 2011, MHI *dropped* 9% and federal deficits ballooned past \$1.3 trillion.

A pending shift in opinion on defense spending?

Since 2011 public satisfaction with military preparedness has increased and clear majorities once again feel that U.S. defense strength is “about right.” This is concurrent with Pentagon spending *cuts* and plurality support for *additional cuts*. It also accords with public reluctance to start or join new wars abroad. This reluctance does not mean that the public will continue to favor defense budget restraint, however.

Twice in the past 40 years public opinion on defense spending shifted swiftly and dramatically from favoring reduced spending to favoring more. The first period was 1978-1982. The second was 1998 to early 2000, as mentioned above. Comparing these pivot points with emerging conditions today suggests that the public may soon be amenable to a rebound in defense spending – not in order to enable more activism but, paradoxically, *as an alternative to it*.

Historical shifts in opinion on defense spending

The first transition period (1978-1982) covers most of the Carter administration years and the first two of the Reagan administration. The second (1998-early 2001) encompasses most of President Clinton’s second term and the first months of the Bush administration. Both periods were preceded by significant post-conflict reductions in defense spending. Both saw sharp spikes in public support for increased spending.

Five factors played a role in effecting change during both these periods:

First, the standing president seemed weakened politically by domestic developments – Carter, by persistent stagflation and the energy crisis; Clinton, by the Lewinsky scandal and his subsequent impeachment (Dec 1998). And this generally weakened White House control of the policy narrative.

Second, shifts in opinion pivoted on hotly contested and partisan election campaigns during which Democrats felt pressed to protect their right flank.

Third, security policy debate became captivated by perceptions and assertions that the United States was failing to counter new challenges abroad.

Fourth, military leaders began to warn insistently of a putative “hollowing” of the armed forces (meaning a sharp decline in combat readiness). Allegations of a weakened military and reports of trouble abroad served as reciprocal “frames,” each reinforcing the other.

Fifth, bipartisan consensus appeared to take form among policy leaders in support of higher levels of defense spending, or greater assertiveness abroad, or both. As noted, bipartisan consensus can have a powerful effect on public opinion, as trusted leaders on all sides seem to point in the same direction.

The surge in support for defense spending was short-lived during both periods. As budgets rose and the presidency changed hands, the appearance of elite consensus evaporated and public opinion rapidly reverted to a “spend less” preference.⁵⁵ This was due partly to rising deficits and economic troubles, but also to dissatisfaction with changes in U.S. military posture.⁵⁶ The reversion in opinion did not soon curtail the rise in spending, however. During both periods, defense spending continued apace at exceptionally high levels for five or more years.

The Obama legacy: Forward to 2016

Since 2012, the factors associated with past rebounds in support for bigger defense budgets have again become prominent, beginning with a distinct decline in the President’s popularity.⁵⁷ The United States is again entering a period of intense electoral campaigning that will span 2014-2016. Democratic candidates will focus on protecting their right flanks, per usual. Already the leading Democratic contender for the presidency is positioning herself to the right of the Obama administration on foreign policy issues.⁵⁸ This will move media and expert discourse in a more hawkish direction.

Unlike his Democratic predecessors, President Obama has largely avoided a contentious relationship with military leaders by accommodating them on key issues – especially defense spending. Despite the nation’s economic and fiscal crisis, Obama’s first four Pentagon budgets provided total funding equal in real terms to that provided in Bush’s last four (approximately \$2.8 trillion in each case). Although significant reductions began in Fiscal Year 2013, the President successfully cast these as due to Congressional gridlock

and the Budget Control Act.⁵⁹ Pentagon leaders were free to pressure Congress to lift the limits on spending. In the meantime, the administration allowed the Pentagon to circumvent the full weight of sequestration in various ways.⁶⁰

In defense strategy, Obama has gradually restored the neoliberal version of the primacist approach, charting a course part way between those of the Clinton and Bush administrations.⁶¹ He has stepped away from large-scale protracted military deployments and instead put emphasis on lower-visibility strike operations and security force assistance. U.S. military activism is less intensive and focused today than during the Bush years, but more expansive.⁶² Although the growing scope of activism runs counter to public preference, the light-footprint methods favored by the administration mitigates this tension.⁶³

Locked in a box

While side-stepping many of the political difficulties faced by his Democratic predecessors, Obama's defense policy has straight-jacketed public debate in several ways that limit the prospects for reform.

First, the President's accommodation with the Pentagon on spending has created the appearance of bipartisan leadership accord on the need for baseline defense spending to significantly exceed one-half trillion dollars annually. For more than three years civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon have been adamant in warning that dipping below this amount by even as little as 5% might have catastrophic consequences.⁶⁴ This has primed policy discourse to respond to "hollow force" claims, which are now fully deployed.⁶⁵ And it has virtually ensured that Democratic and Republican candidates in 2016 will vie in bidding up Pentagon spending (as was the case in 2000).⁶⁶

Obama's perpetuation of the primacy strategy has also locked policy discourse in the neoliberal-neoconservative box. The primacy approach overvalues and overplays America's "sole military superpower" status, seeing security problems everywhere as a challenge to U.S. leadership. It privileges military responses of one sort or another and focuses debate on the calibration of military action: What type? How much? How long?

Faced with difficult challenges – as in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine – the primacy approach favors escalation. And it legitimates charges of "weakness" should policymakers or the public seek more deliberate or restrained approaches. It is little surprise that Second World War issue frames are now fully in play – casting Assad and Putin as Hitler, warning against a replay of Munich-like appeasement, and tarring non-interventionary sentiment as "isolationist."⁶⁷ "Hollow force" claims are also being linked by military leaders to instability abroad.⁶⁸

Will the public turn?

Despite the hawkish turn in policy discourse, historical precedent suggests that Americans will not soon support a return to big protracted military operations abroad – and certainly not the commitment of large numbers of ground troops.⁶⁹ Public reluctance to take on major contingencies after Vietnam was not resolved until the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War – 15 years after the Vietnam exit. *By contrast, a rebound in Pentagon spending could find public support as an acceptable assertion of strength.* This, too, would accord with historical precedent.

Weighing against public acceptance of higher defense spending is America’s “new normal” economic circumstance. Although U.S. GDP is slowly recovering, the improvement in the economic circumstances of most Americans has lagged behind.⁷⁰ Still, median household income may reach its pre-recession levels by 2017, making a rise in defense spending more saleable. Much depends on the degree of uniformity among opinion leaders in espousing hawkish and alarmist views on international events and U.S. national defenses.

Conclusion

A flexing of the Pentagon’s budget muscles will not redress the problems that vex U.S. security policy. Nor will it heal the recurring gap between official policy and majority opinion. Contrary to public preferences, increased Pentagon spending will enable increased military activism. It also will reduce the pressure on the Pentagon to reform how it uses its resources.

The current trend in official policy represents a missed opportunity. Economic and strategic realities both argue for a thorough reset of U.S. security policy, whose failures are manifest. Recent polling suggests that the American public is ready to consider change. And policy alternatives are available for consideration.⁷¹ What is lacking is positive leadership.

Critical public debate can serve as a policy corrective, but the integrity of this process depends on discarding those metaphors and framing devices that appeal to public fear and uncertainty. This includes facile allusions to the threats and failures of the 1930s and 1940s: Hitler, Munich, and isolationism.⁷² It also includes “hollow force” claims made on behalf of America’s half-trillion dollar military. Such allusions should uniformly face a long hard climb to credibility.

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27. Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment*, 15 Sep 2014, pp. 6-7, available at http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2014_CCS_Report_1.pdf

28. Although a decline in cooperative spirit is apparent in the recent Pew Center poll, majorities still prefer international cooperation on a broad range of policy issues (PRC 2013, p. 21). The 2012 Chicago Council survey reviews the U.S. public’s preference for diplomatic approaches to conflict management across a variety of scenarios (CCGA 2012, pp. 20-24). The Council survey also finds the public to prefer that U.S. military interventions occur as part of a UN or allied operation, not unilaterally (CCGA, Figure 1.12, p. 19).

29. Chicago Council, 2012, op. cit., p. 11.

30. Pew Center, 2013, op. cit., p. 20.

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36. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, “*Global Views 2004: American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*,” 2004, page 29, Figure 2-7, “Support for Use of Troops in Various Circumstances,” available at http://www.amicc.org/docs/Global_Views_2004_US.pdf

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- "Do you think the United States is number one in the world militarily, or that it is one of several leading military powers?"
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52. "Hollow force" properly refers to a condition in which a military is substantially less capable than its apparent size and equipment level suggests. This is a condition worthy of grave concern. It is a precursor to military disaster, possibly with strategic consequences – as the Iraqi military has recently illustrated. Of course, armed forces routinely suffer less serious deficits in readiness and sustainability. There is a great and consequential difference between "hollow" and "less than perfect" or "less than desired" – a difference obscured by facile references to "hollow forces."

At any rate, the "hollow force" construct is a slippery one. Measures of military readiness are partly subjective. Readiness itself is not simply a function of funding or resources. Military planners can allocate resources in ways that short-change readiness. And how readiness is judged depends partly on wartime deployment plans, which can be more or less ambitious. Notably, the military readiness problems during both the Carter and Clinton terms had more to do with how the Pentagon managed its resources than with budget shortages.

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54. Gallup, "Military and National Defense" polls, op. cit. See polling results for:

- "Next we'd like to know how you feel about the state of the nation in each of the following areas. For each one, please say whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. If you don't have enough information about a particular subject to rate it, just say so. How about the nation's military strength and preparedness?"
- "Do you, yourself feel that our national defense is stronger now than it needs to be, not strong enough, or about right at the present time?"

55. During the Reagan years, "spend less" sentiment out-poll "spend more" beginning in 1982. During the GW Bush presidency, "spend less" sentiment out-poll "spend more" beginning in Feb 2003.

56. By late 1982, public sentiment on spending had returned to Vietnam syndrome levels and Reagan's popularity rating had dropped from 51% to 43%. The Republicans lost 26 House seats in the 1982 mid-term election.

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