

October 19, 2012

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

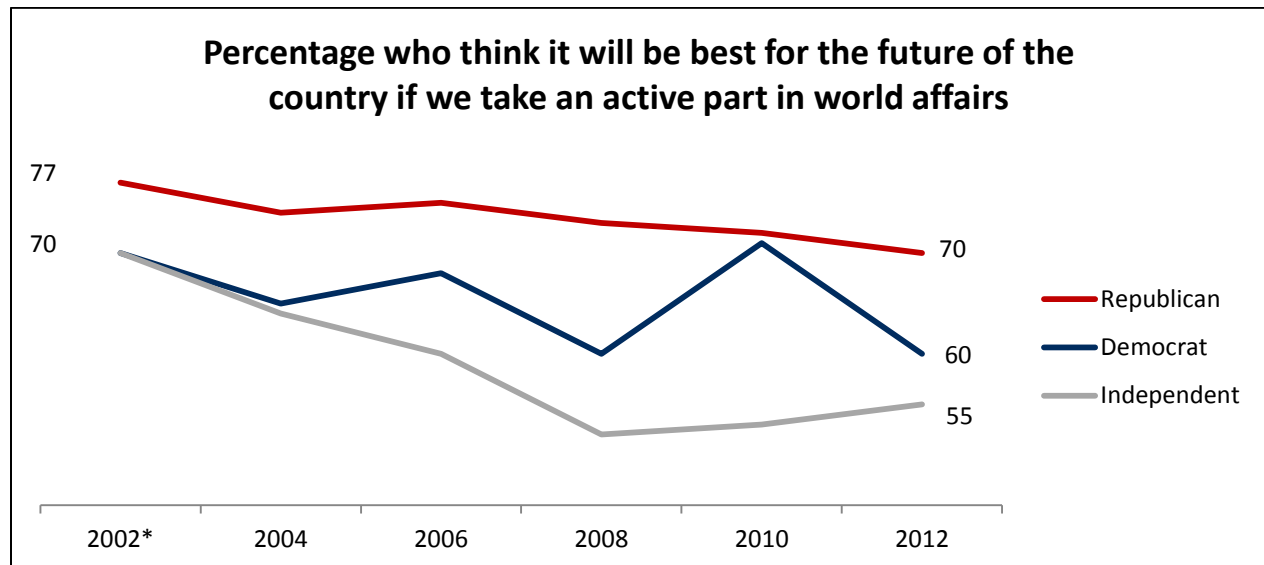
## Background Brief for Final Presidential Debate: What Kind of Foreign Policy Do Americans Want?

By Gregory Holyk and Dina Smeltz<sup>1</sup>

Foreign policy will take center stage in the third and final presidential debate Monday night at Florida's Lynn University. While the candidates will undoubtedly highlight differences between them, the [2012 Chicago Council Survey](#) finds that partisan differences among the public are usually ones of degree, not outright disagreement. According to moderator Bob Schieffer, the debate will cover [five topics](#). This report is organized around those topics and provides insight into current public thinking on these topics.

### America's Role in the World

While majorities across the political spectrum support the U.S. taking an active role in world affairs, more self-described Republicans (70%) support taking an active role than Democrats (60%) and Independents (55%). Support for taking an active part in world affairs among Independents has dropped 15 points over the past decade, compared to only 7 and 10 points among Republicans and Democrats, respectively, over that same time span.



<sup>1</sup> Gregory Holyk is a research analyst at Langer Research Associates. Dina Smeltz is senior fellow, Public Opinion and Global Affairs, at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

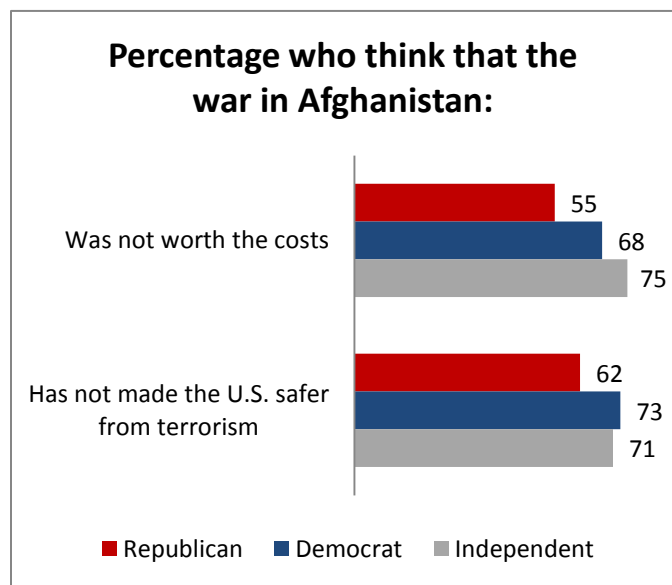
One of the clearest ways to differentiate the foreign policy views of Democrats and Republicans is to identify which foreign policy goals they see as very important. Democrats are more apt to see limiting climate change, combating world hunger, strengthening the United Nations, and defending human rights as “very important” foreign policy objectives by double-digit margins, while Republicans are more likely to see great importance in reducing illegal immigration, maintaining U.S. military power, and combating terrorism. In most cases, these differences are ones of intensity and not opposing majorities.

<b>Percentage who think the following is a “very important” foreign policy goal of the U.S.:</b>			
	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Protecting the jobs of Americans workers	84	84	82
Reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil	78	77	73
Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons	76	74	67
Combating international terrorism	73	64	57
Maintaining superior military power worldwide	68	48	46
Controlling and reducing illegal immigration	70	43	48
Combating world hunger	31	54	40
Strengthening the UN	28	46	29
Limiting climate change	16	46	33
Promoting and defending human rights in other countries	22	34	26

Republicans are also less likely than others to support defense budget cuts, though a majority still favor cuts (54% of Republicans, vs. 76% of Democrats and 71% of Independents). Finally, the proportion of those calling strong U.S. leadership in world affairs “very desirable” is highest among Republicans (45%), while smaller proportions of Democrats (35%) and Independents (28%) share that view.

### **Afghanistan and Pakistan**

While majorities across partisan lines do not think the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has been worth the costs and do not think the war has made the United States safer from terrorism, Republicans are less negative than Democrats and Independents. GOP backers are also more likely to want to leave some combat troops in Afghanistan after 2014 (28% Republicans, 11% Democrats, 16% Independents) and more likely to be “very concerned” about the threat to American national security if the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan (46%, vs. 37% of Democrats and 33% of Independents).



As in the past, Republicans view the world in terms of power and security to a greater degree than Democrats and Independents. Accordingly, Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to view terrorism (77%, vs. 65% of Democrats and 61% of Independents), Islamic fundamentalism (54%, vs. 31% of Democrats and 35% of Independents), and Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan (65%, vs. 52% of Democrats and 44% of Republicans) as critical threats to U.S. vital interests.

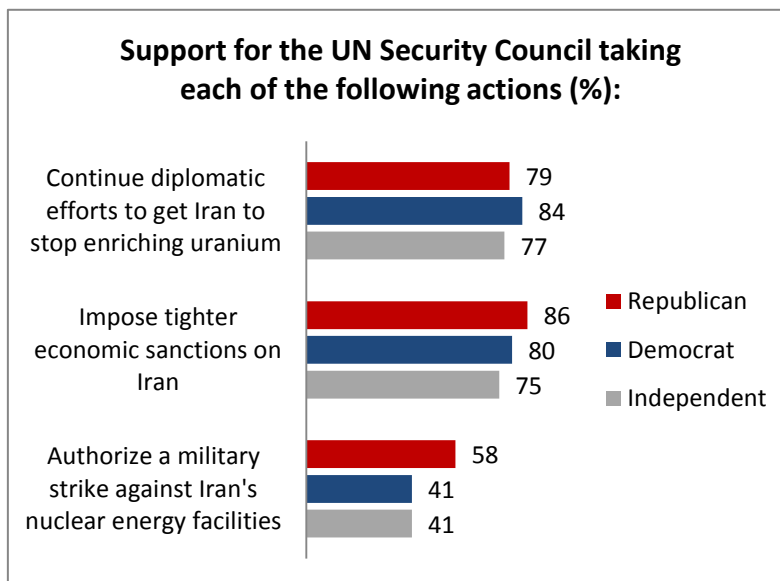
Democrats and Independents are more supportive of non-military approaches to foreign policy such as diplomatic engagement and foreign aid. Democrats and Independents are more open to talking with the leaders of the Taliban and other unfriendly countries or non-state actors, and are more inclined to make joint decisions within the UN (66% of Democrats and 57% of Independents, vs. 43% of Republicans).

<i>Percentage who think U.S. leaders should be ready to meet and talk with leaders of:</i>			
	<b>Rep.</b>	<b>Dem.</b>	<b>Ind.</b>
The Taliban	36	53	51
Hamas	40	58	55
Iran	58	74	67
North Korea	63	75	68
Cuba	68	77	75

While fewer than half of all respondents favor maintaining or increasing economic aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Democrats are more favorable towards aid for both countries. Nearly half of Democrats support increasing economic aid to Afghanistan (45%, 32% Republicans, 36% Independents); about a third of Democrats support increasing aid to Pakistan (36% Democrats, 22% Republicans, 31% Independents).

### Red Lines: Israel and Iran

Americans view Iran and its nuclear ambitions as one of the most critical threats to the United States, but partisanship colors how Americans think Washington should handle Iran. Broad majorities across all three groups support economic sanctions and diplomacy. Only Republicans, though, reach majority support for United Nations authorization of a military strike against Iranian nuclear energy facilities (58% vs. 41% of Democrats and Independents alike).



If Israel and Iran were to go to war following an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, a majority of Democrats (66%) and Independents (65%) favor the United States staying out of the conflict, while a majority of Republicans (54%) favor the United States entering the conflict on the side of Israel.

## The Changing Middle East and the New Face of Terrorism

Americans remain apprehensive about threats from the Middle East, with most Americans (73%) viewing the region as the source of the greatest security threats to the United States in the future. One of the key questions for American foreign policy in this region has been whether or not conflict between Islam and “the West” is inevitable. On this topic, Republicans are much more pessimistic than Democrats and Independents. A majority of Republicans (56%) say that “because Muslim social and political traditions are incompatible with Western ways, violent conflict between the two civilizations is inevitable.” In contrast, majorities of Democrats and Independents (58% each) say that “because most Muslims are like people everywhere, we can find common ground and violent conflict between the civilizations is not inevitable.”

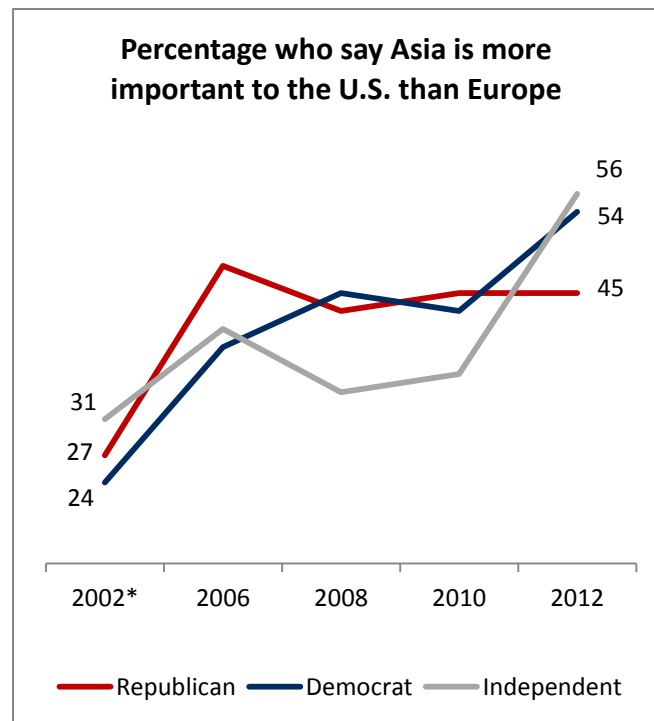
Overall, Americans are mixed about whether the Arab Spring will be good or bad for the United States (34% mostly good, 37% no impact, 24% mostly bad). Its reverberations continue to be felt in the Middle East, nowhere more so than in Syria, where Americans support limited action. Six in ten support increasing economic and diplomatic sanctions against the Syrian regime (63%), and nearly as many support enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria (58%). Beyond these options, there is limited support for sending arms and supplies to anti-government groups in Syria (27%), bombing Syrian air defenses (22%) or sending troops into Syria (14%). Support for these actions crosses partisan affiliation: majorities among Republicans, Democrats and independents all support economic and diplomatic sanctions and a no-fly zone and oppose other options.

Support for actions against terrorism remains strong even as it has declined among all political groups in the decade since the September 11 attacks. Yet Democrats and Republicans continue to differ slightly in their preferred approaches. Higher percentages of Democrats support working with the United Nations and helping poor nations economically over air strikes on terrorist sites and the assassination of terrorist leaders, while more Republicans support air strikes and assassination than working through the UN or helping poor nations. Majorities from both parties, however, support all these measures. While lesser majorities from both parties support attacks by ground troops against terrorist encampments, more Republicans than Democrats are willing to take such action.

<i>Percentage who say they favor the following measures to combat international terrorism:</i>			
	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Independent</b>
Working through the UN to strengthen international laws against terrorism	75	86	78
U.S. air strikes against terrorist training camps and other facilities	80	68	67
Assassination of individual terrorist leaders	79	68	65
Helping poor countries to develop their economies	64	72	67
Attacks by U.S. ground troops against terrorist training camps and other facilities	62	54	49

## The Rise of China and Tomorrow's World

Long focused on Europe, Americans have slowly come to see Asia as an increasingly important region to the United States. For the first time in Chicago Council Surveys going back to 1994, when asked which continent is more important to the United States—Asia or Europe—slightly more Americans (52%) say that Asia is more important than say Europe is more important (47%). Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to say that Asia is more important to the United States than Europe (54% and 56%, respectively, vs. 45% of Republicans). However, despite the Democrats' greater relative focus on Asia, the shift in priorities from Europe to Asia over the past ten years has been apparent across the political spectrum.



There is little doubt among Americans that China's economy will one day grow as large as that of the United States. But Republicans are more worried about this prospect than others, with 49 percent saying it would be a negative development, compared with 38 percent of Democrats and 37 percent of Independents. In addition, a slight majority of Republicans (51%) and Independents (53%) see China as a rival, while a majority of Democrats (54%) see it as a partner. Although Republicans may be more wary of China, majorities across the partisan spectrum say the United States should pursue a policy of friendly engagement and cooperation with China.

China is not the only rising power in the world: countries like Turkey and Brazil are becoming increasingly independent in the conduct of their foreign policies. A large majority of Americans (69%) sees this as mostly a good thing because it makes them less reliant on the United States. This view is shared across party lines by majorities of Democrats (73%), Republicans (69%), and Independents (66%) alike.

### ***A Note on Methods***

This report is based on the results of The Chicago Council's 2012 biennial survey of public opinion conducted from May 25 to June 8, 2012. The survey probes American attitudes on a wide range of U.S. foreign policy issues. GFK Custom Research conducted the survey for The Chicago Council using a randomly selected sample of 1,877 adults age 18 and older from their large-scale, nationwide research panel. The panel is recruited using stratified random digit dialing (RDD) telephone sampling. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.8 percentage points. Some questions from the 2002 survey, denoted with an asterisk, are

from telephone interviews. The *2012 Chicago Council Survey* was made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation. The full report on the *2012 Chicago Council Survey*, “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” is available at [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

For more information about the *2012 Chicago Council Survey*, please contact Dina Smeltz, senior fellow, Public Opinion and Global Affairs ([dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org](mailto:dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org); 312-821-6860) or Craig Kafura, senior program officer, Studies ([ckafura@thechicagocouncil.org](mailto:ckafura@thechicagocouncil.org); 312-821-7560).