

Young Americans Question US Global Engagement

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Whether it's using WhatsApp to chat with friends in other countries, hopping on increasingly accessible flights to far-flung places, or going down a K-pop rabbit hole on YouTube, young Americans in recent decades have grown up in a more globally interconnected world than previous generations could have ever imagined. Yet Chicago Council data show that the youngest two generations of Americans—Millennials and Generation Z—are most likely to question US global engagement at a policy level and are especially hesitant to endorse a foreign policy dominated by military approaches. While they support many of the same policies as their elders, Gen Z and Millennials are less confident in some of the approaches and assumptions that have underpinned US foreign policy for decades, namely, the benefits of global engagement and US leadership, and the role of the military in US foreign policy.

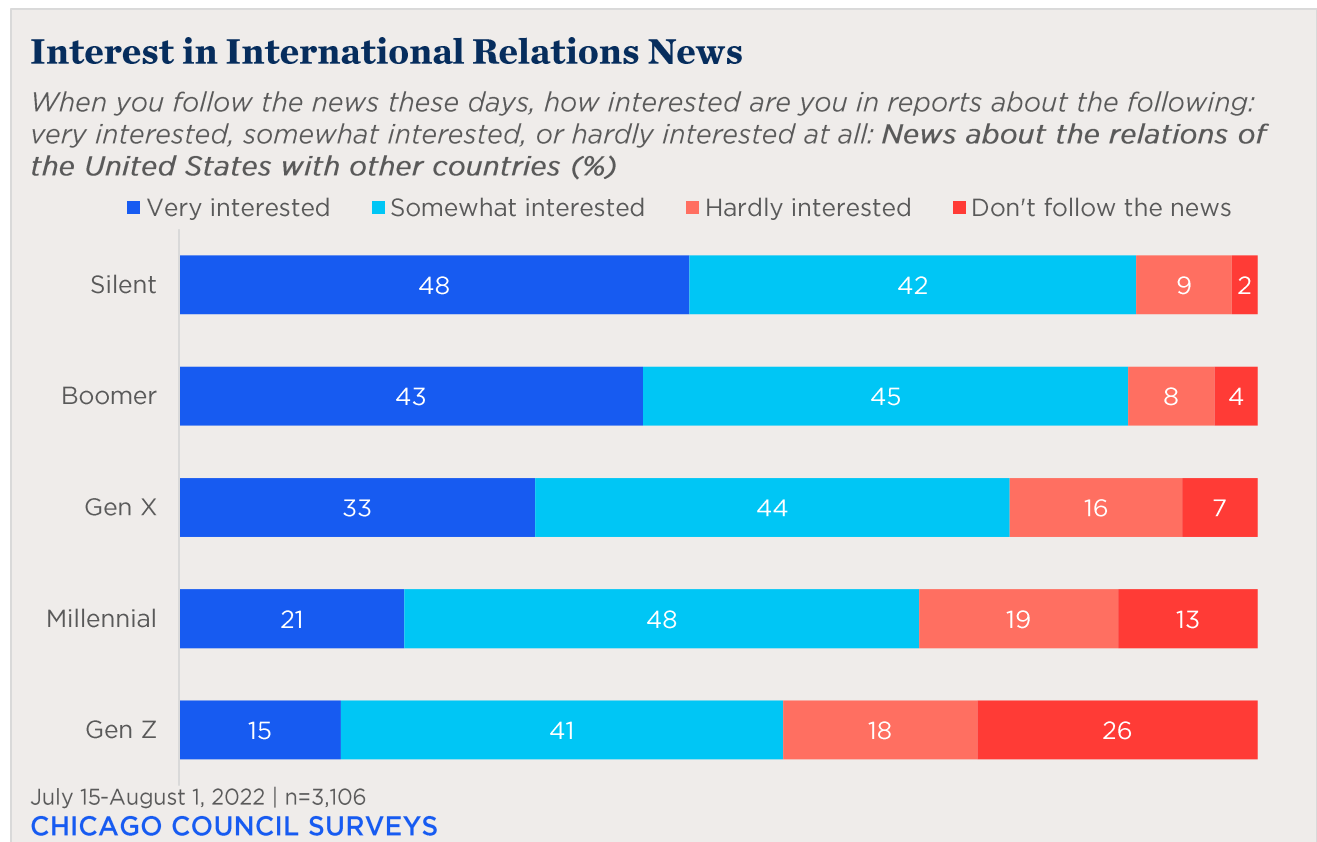
Key Findings

- While a majority of Millennials and Gen Z express interest in news about US relations with other countries, they are much less likely to do so than older generations.
- Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Z are nearly evenly divided on whether it is best for the United States to take an active part in world affairs or stay out.
- Leading international cooperation on global problems is the top foreign policy priority for the youngest two generations of American adults, while their elders place more emphasis on protecting the physical security of the country.
- Pluralities of these younger generations think military approaches are overused in US foreign policy, and unlike their elders, they would rather see the federal defense budget decreased than increased.

- Younger generations feel less threatened by Russia and China and are less likely to support US-led campaigns to counter their influence.
- Allies need not fear: younger Americans still support maintaining US alliances and troop levels around the world.

Young Americans Pay Less Attention to International Affairs

By their own admission, Millennials and Gen Z (also known as Zoomers) are paying less attention than older Americans to news about US relations with other countries. Vast majorities of the Silent Generation (90%), Boomers (88%), and Gen X (77%) say they are very or somewhat interested in news about the relations of the United States with other countries. This is compared to slimmer, yet still significant, majorities of Millennials (69%) and Gen Z (56%) who say the same. But older generations are much more inclined to say they are very interested than are younger cohorts.



Interest in news about US relations with the rest of the world is an important indicator because there is a clear relationship between it and support for US engagement abroad. For example, Millennials and members of Gen Z who report being very or somewhat interested in news about global affairs tend to

have foreign policy views more like those of older generations and are much more supportive of US engagement in the world overall. Those with little or no interest in news about US international relations demonstrate lower support for US global engagement.

Conventional wisdom might suggest that as Americans mature, they start to pay more attention to international news. But Chicago Council survey data show that with the exception of a spike in 2002 after the September 11 attacks, the percentages within each generation who say they closely follow international news has remained consistent over time (See appendix).

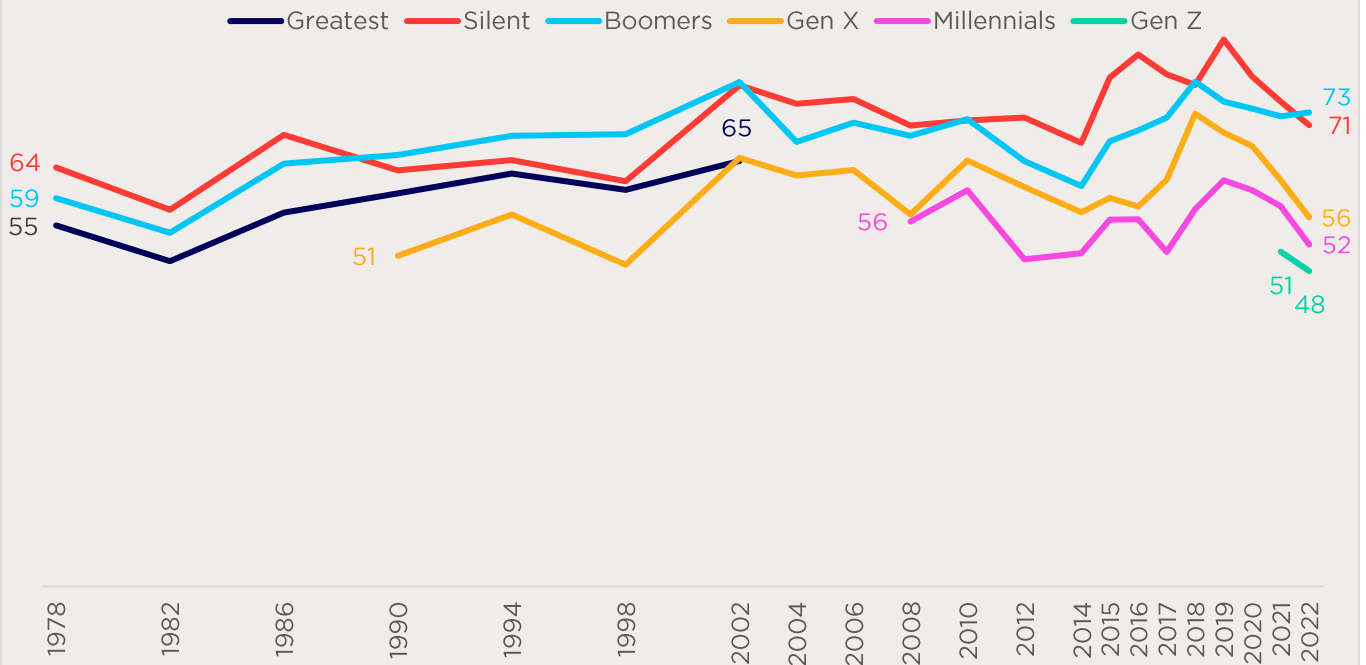
Is Global Engagement Worth It? Young Americans Appear Unsure

Perhaps due in part to their lower interest in international affairs, both young generations are closely divided on whether it will be best for the future of the country if the United States takes an active part in world affairs or stays out of them. A slim majority of Millennials (52%) falls on the “active part” side, while a slim majority of Gen Z (52%) falls on the side of staying out. Prior to Gen Z this year, no generation has ever had a majority preferring to stay out of world affairs, going back to 1978.

In 2022, Gen X was also fairly divided on this question of US global engagement, with 56 percent preferring to play an active role in world affairs while 42 percent would rather stay out. The older generations are decidedly more convinced: more than seven in 10 among members of the Boomer and Silent Generations favor an active role for the United States.

US Role in World Affairs

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? (% active part)



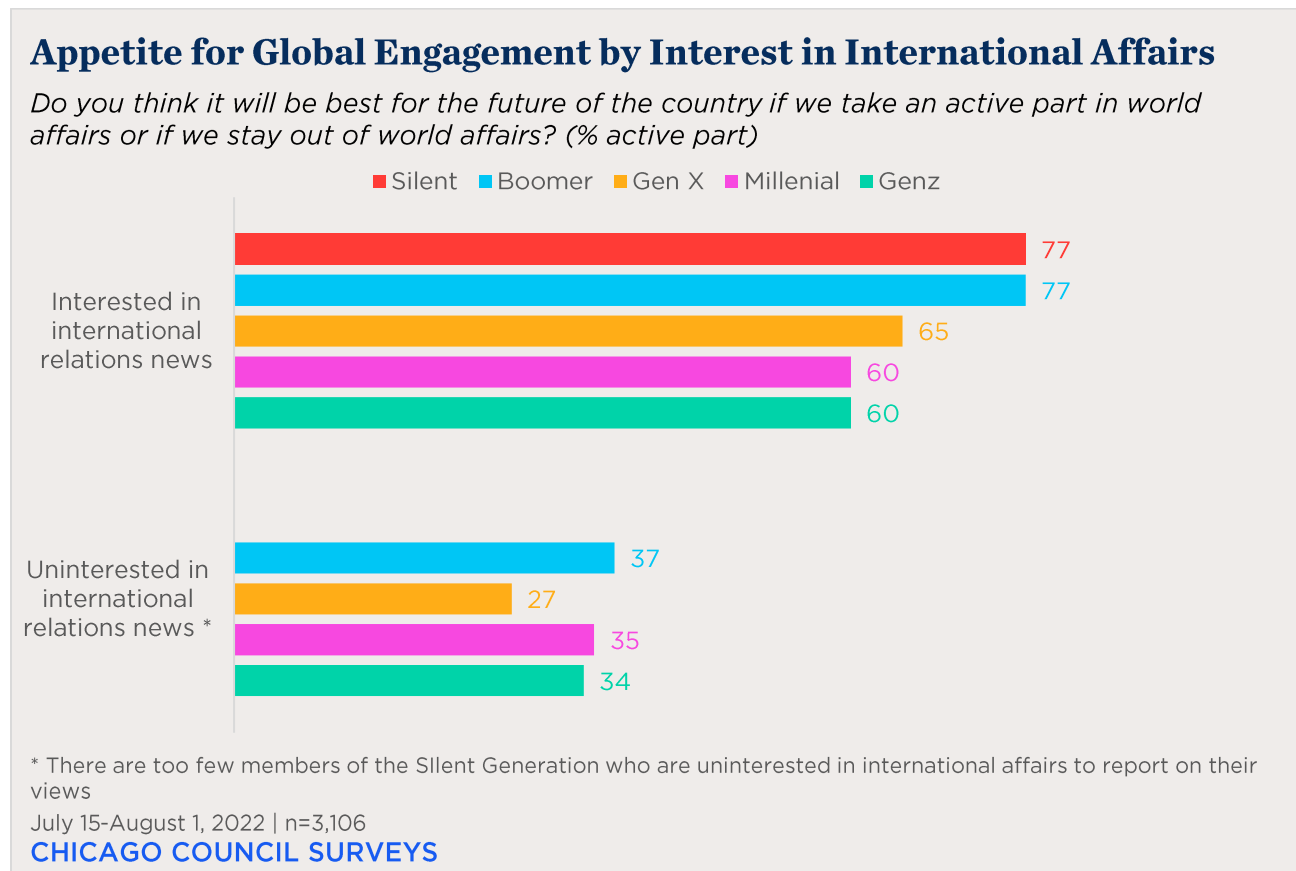
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In general, each generation has trended up in its support for an active US role in the world as it has aged. Boomers' lowest level of support for an active role in the world (54%) came in 1982, when they were between the ages of 18 and 36; today that generation's support level is at 73 percent. The Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, and Generation X have similarly come to embrace the idea of an active role in the world as they have aged, although support has dropped sharply over the last five years for both the Silent Generation and Gen X. Given this pattern, some Millennials' and Gen Zs' hesitance about global engagement may be attributable to their stage in life or the time in which they are living.

That being said, Millennials have shown no signs of growing consistently more supportive of global engagement over the past 14 years. Beyond that, the current levels of Millennial and Gen Z support for staying out of world affairs, 47 and 52 percent respectively, are higher than those ever reached by any other generation. To some extent, disinterest may be a true characteristic of their generations and the contexts they have grown up in, rather than just a product of their current biological ages. Most of Gen Z, for example, has no memory of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and immediate surge of national unity

and fear. But many do remember the ensuing wars in the Middle East that lasted for most of their childhood and teen years, and [report](#) thinking of those wars as wastes of time, lives, and money at higher rates than older generations.

But despite coming of age at the same time, these generations are not monoliths. Those Millennials and Generation Z members who are very or somewhat interested in international news feel differently: six in 10 of interested members of these generations believe the United States should take an active part in world affairs.

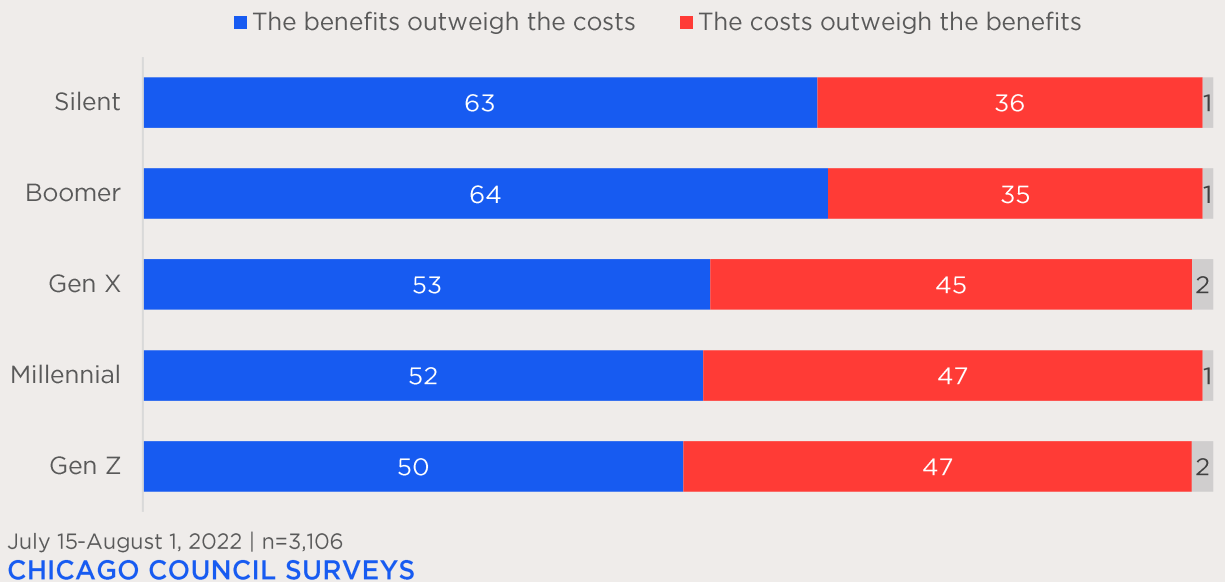


Divided on Whether Benefits of US Global Role Outweigh Costs

As to why young Americans today might prefer a scaled-back role in international affairs, the data indicate they are unsure whether the benefits of maintaining the US role in the world outweigh the costs. About half of Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X believe this to be true, but nearly equal portions of each of these generations see the costs as outweighing the benefits. In contrast, Boomers and the Silent Generation are much more convinced of the benefits of US global leadership, with nearly two-thirds of these two generations saying the benefits are greater than the costs.

Costs and Benefits of US Role

Overall, when it comes to maintaining the US role in the world, do you think the costs outweigh the benefits or the benefits outweigh the costs? (%)



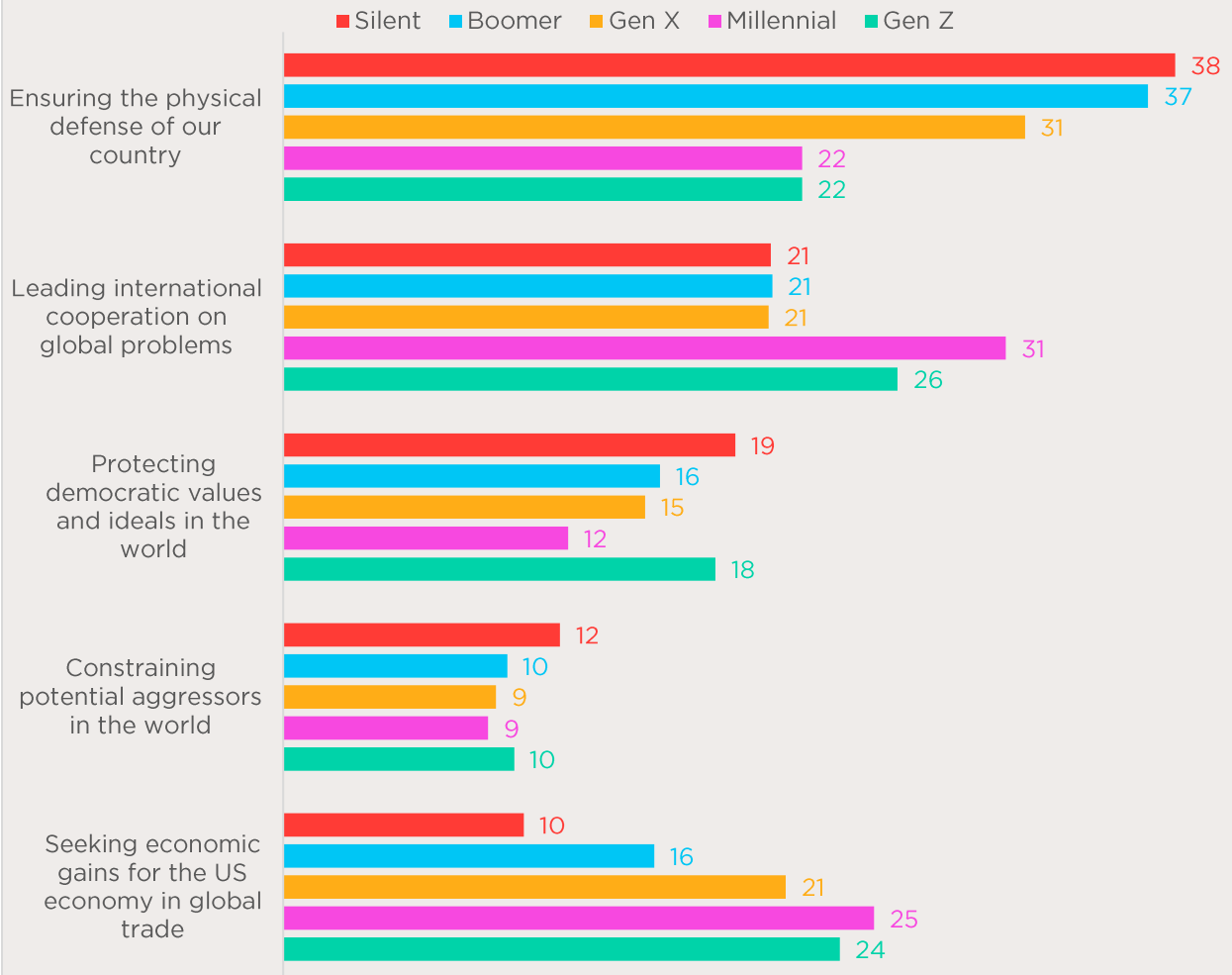
Similar to the connection between interest in news about global affairs and international engagement, Millennials and members of Gen Z who are interested in international affairs are more likely than those who are not to say the benefits of global engagement are worth the costs.

Divergent Views of the Purpose of US Foreign Policy

The above data indicate that Millennials and Gen Z may prefer to engage in global affairs more selectively than Boomers and the Silent Generation. But what issues will be the ones that lure Millennials and Gen Z into the foreign policy arena, and what would their goals be for US foreign policy? While it's impossible to say for sure, Council data indicate that compared to their parents, younger generations are less concerned about physical security threats to the country and are less supportive of a large role for the US military. When asked what the most important priority for US foreign policy should be today, pluralities among the Silent Generation, Boomers, and Gen X agree it should be ensuring the physical defense of the country (38% Silent, 37% Boomer, 31% Gen X). However, Millennials and Gen Z are more divided. Leading international cooperation on global problems (31% Millennials, 26% Gen Z) edges into the top spot on their priority lists, with seeking economic gains for the United States in global trade (25% Millennials, 24% Gen Z) and ensuring the physical defense of the United States (22% each) close behind.

US Foreign Policy Priorities

Which of the following priorities do you think should be the most important for the making of US foreign policy today? (% most important)



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Young Americans Worry about Overreliance on Military Approaches

When asked about specific foreign policy tools available to the US government, majorities of Americans across generations think a range of tactics—from maintaining alliances to US economic and military superiority to placing sanctions against other countries—are at least somewhat effective. But younger Americans (from Gen X to Gen Z) consider these traditional foreign policy tools to be less effective than do their older counterparts.

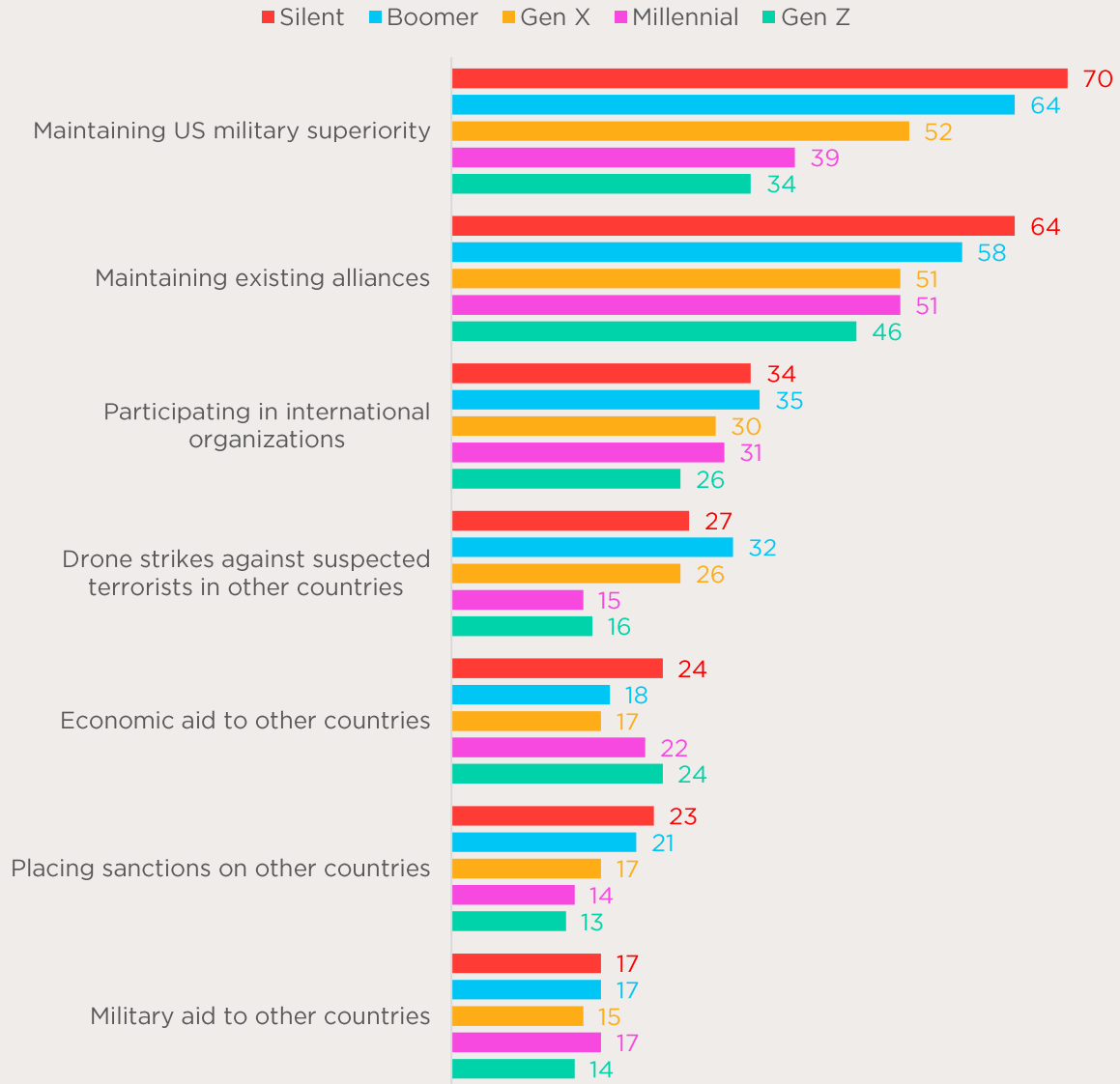
They differ in the degree of effectiveness they assign each foreign policy tool presented. When asked which of the items were considered very effective, the

relative rankings of items were similar across age groups, but the absolute percentages deeming each one as very effective were very different. Of all the policy approaches listed on the survey, maintaining existing alliances was the only one that a bare majority of Millennials (51%) saw as very effective in achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States (only 47% agree among Gen Z). Only minorities of these generations consider maintaining US military and economic superiority very effective compared to majorities among older Americans.

In fact, Gen Z did not rate any approach as very effective at the majority level. The Silent Generation, Boomers, and Gen X, on the other hand, each had two to three approaches that majorities classified as very effective. In addition, these younger Americans are significantly less likely than older generations to say they have a great deal of confidence in the leaders of the US military to enact policies that benefit the United States (see appendix).

Efficacy of Foreign Policy Approaches

How effective do you think each of the following approaches are to achieving the foreign policy goals of the United States – very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all? (% very effective)



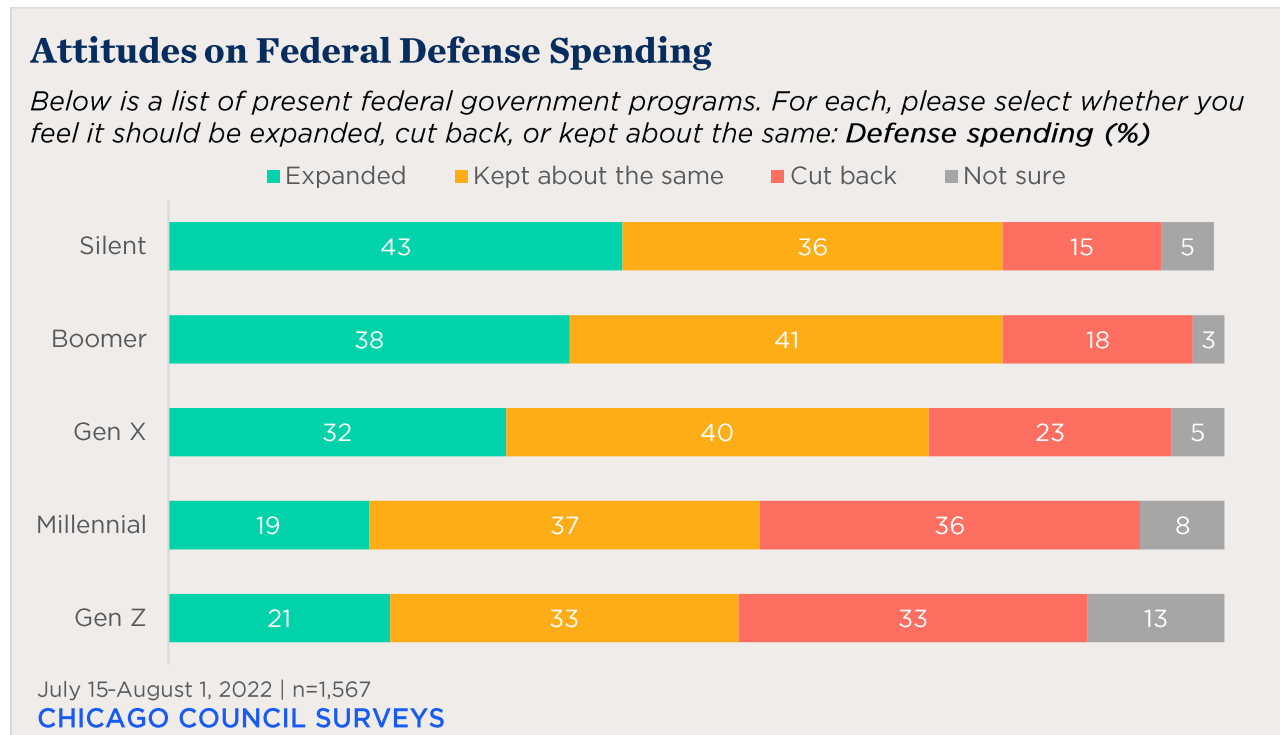
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This lower support for military approaches to US foreign policy is consistent with previous research on young Americans' views. In the 2021 Chicago Council Survey, pluralities of Millennials and Gen Z also said the United States uses military tools such as drone strikes and interventions too much when conducting foreign policy (41% Millennials, 42% Gen Z), while pluralities of older generations felt these tactics were used the right amount (53% Silent, 45% Boomer, 37% Gen X). Pluralities and majorities of the younger two

generations also felt diplomatic and humanitarian foreign policy tools were not used enough (see appendix). A [2019 Center for American Progress survey](#) conducted among registered voters further corroborates this finding. In that poll, two-thirds of Gen Z and Millennial respondents, compared to just over half among other generations, agreed the United States should prioritize economic and diplomatic efforts rather than military action to protect American interests around the world.

Younger Americans' preferences for the size and funding of the military follow logically from the important but de-emphasized role they would give it in US foreign policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey found that while majorities across generations would prefer to keep the size of the military about the same, the remainders of the Silent Generation, Boomers, and Gen X would strongly prefer increasing the size of the military to decreasing it, while Millennials and Gen Z were evenly divided between these other two options. In 2022, Millennials and Gen Z were more likely than older generations to advocate cutting federal defense spending. Both are evenly divided as to whether they would prefer to see the defense budget kept the same or cut, with expanding the budget an unpopular idea with both groups. This stands in stark contrast to older generations, for whom expanding the defense budget is seen as preferable to scaling it back.

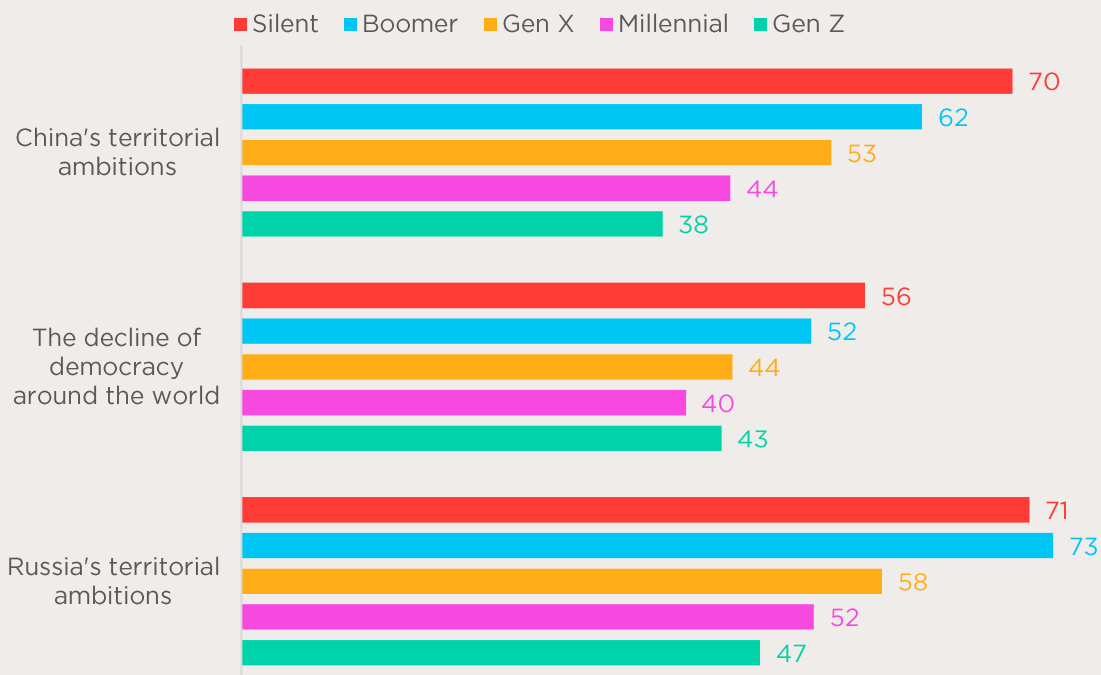


Younger Americans Are Less Anxious about Great Power Competition

Recent dialogue around current foreign policy crises has focused on a return to interstate competition, especially when it comes to US relations with China and Russia. But younger Americans are less likely than older Americans to view the territorial ambitions of Beijing and Moscow as critical threats to the United States. In addition, while by no means favorable, Millennials' and Zoomers' impressions of Russia and China are less negative than those of older Americans, and they are less likely to expect US allies to work with the United States to counter Russian and Chinese influence. And while the Silent Generation and Boomers are fairly evenly split on whether the United States should play a leading or supporting role in coordinating international efforts to respond to China's rise or Russia's invasion of Ukraine, majorities among Millennials and Gen Z decisively favor a supporting role in both of these situations. Gen X falls fairly evenly in between the oldest two and youngest two generations.

Perception of Geopolitical Threats

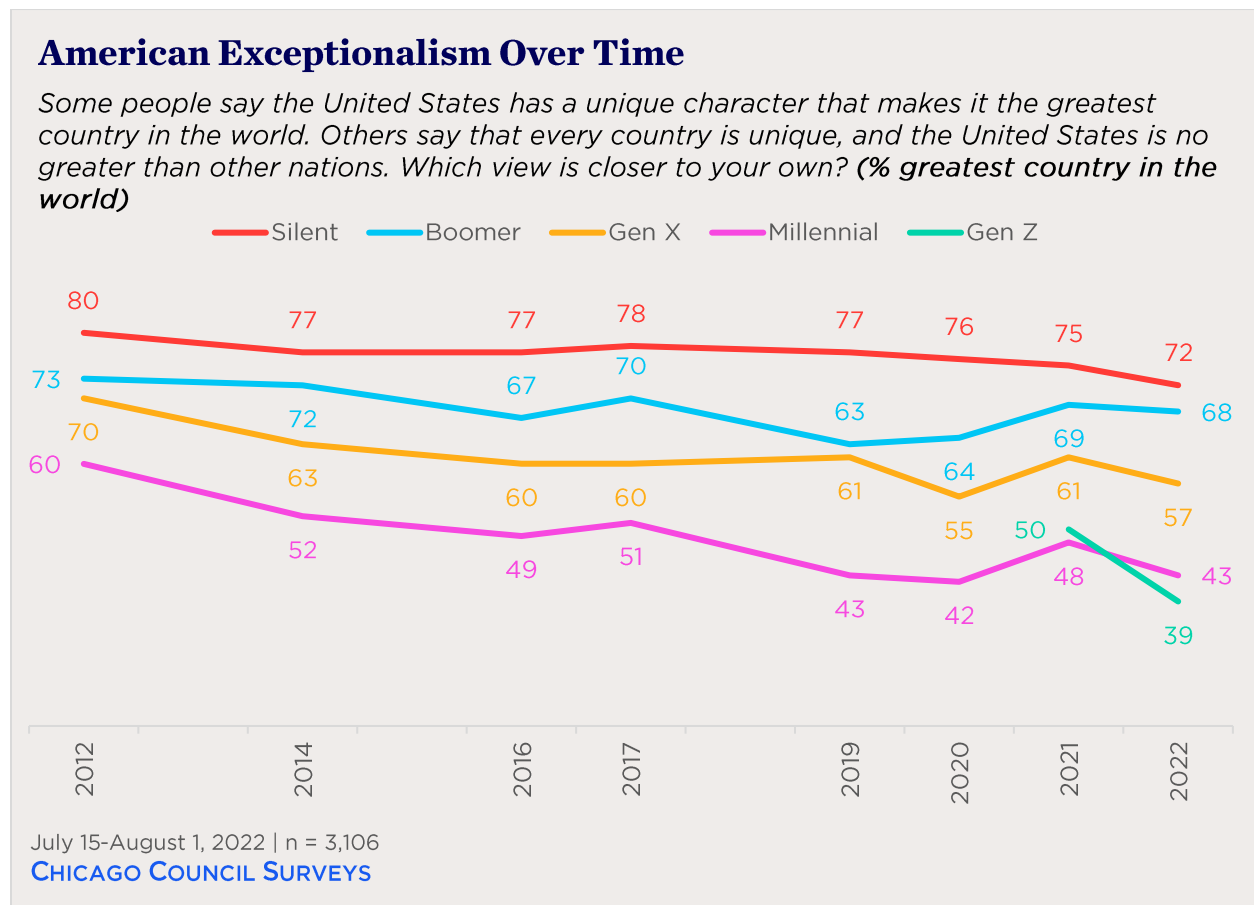
Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all (% critical threat)



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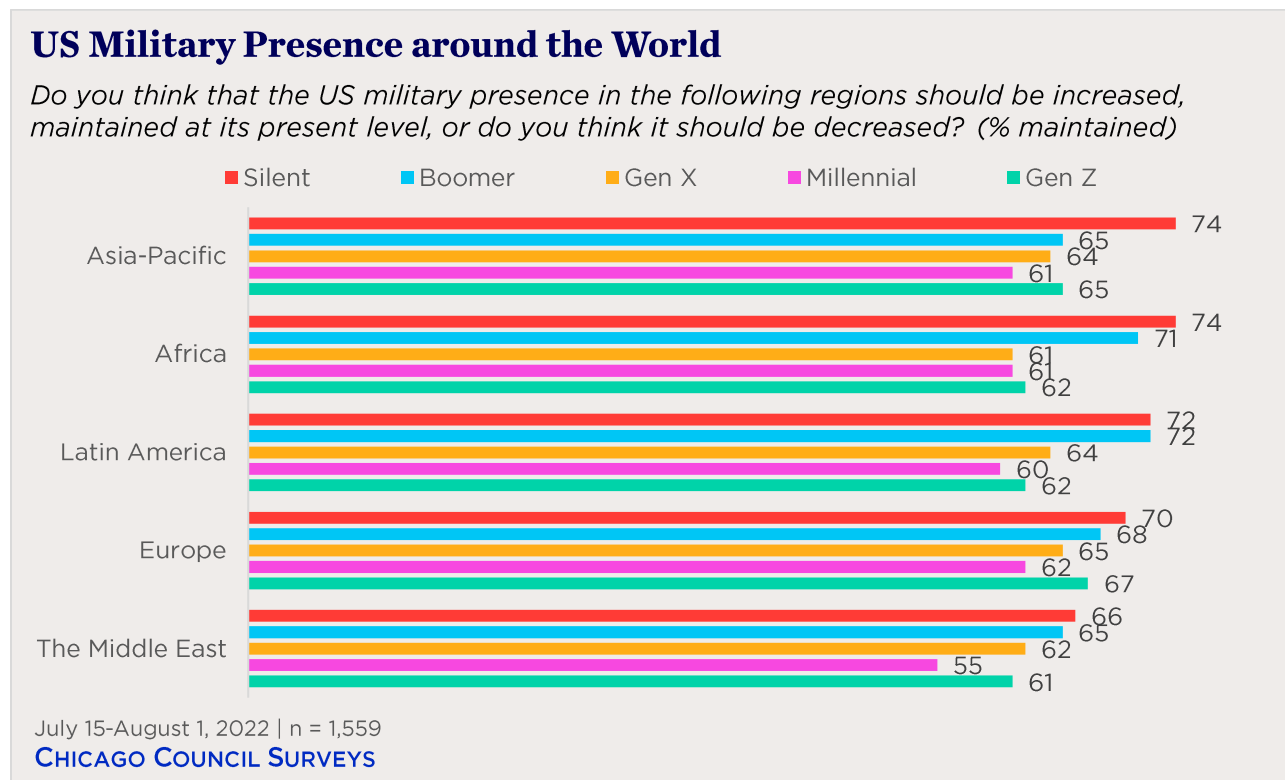
Moreover, younger generations do not seem to endorse US prescriptions to other countries' development and governance. They are less intensely concerned than older Americans about the decline of democracy around the world and much more likely than older Americans to say the United States is no greater than other nations (61% Gen Z, 57% Millennial, 42% Gen X, 31% Boomer, 28% Silent). This finding is consistent with those of the [Pew Research Center](#) and [other research organizations](#), which consistently find that younger Americans are more likely to say that the United States has peer countries and even that there are other countries that are better than the United States. This fundamental difference in how Gen Z and Millennials view the world compared to older Americans is likely a key factor contributing to their views on the efficacy of US foreign policy approaches, confidence in government institutions, and preferences for multilateralism.



Do US Allies Have Reason to Worry?

While Gen Z and Millennials place less emphasis on military forms of global engagement overall, they still appear to recognize the importance of maintaining US presence in key areas of the world, particularly to support

allies. As is the case with older generations, majorities of Gen Z and Millennials support maintaining US military presence at its current level in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. That being said, Millennials do stand out in that they would rather decrease US military presence in each region than increase it. About two in 10 Millennials would prefer to reduce US military presence in Asia, and that portion rises to about three in 10 for each of the other regions asked about. This serves as another reminder that even where there is agreement across generations at the majority level, a sizable minority of younger generations, and especially Millennials, remains cautious about the role of the US military around the world.



Similarly, American generations are nearly identical in their views on the US commitment to the NATO alliance, with about six in 10 of each generation preferring to maintain the current level of commitment to the alliance, and an additional two in 10 advocating increasing the commitment. Previous Council research has also found that majorities across generations believe US security alliances in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East benefit the United States and its allies, rather than benefiting one side or the other more. Taken together, these data indicate a recognition among younger generations that even if military force is not their preferred way of conducting US foreign policy, the US overseas presence aids the United States in deterring aggression against the United States and its allies. They also seem to consider US defense

commitments and missions in each of these regions as worthwhile and important to maintain.

Although Millennials and Gen Z are less likely than older generations to prioritize military approaches to US foreign policy, there are instances where they think intervention might be necessary. The 2019 Center for American Progress survey found that Millennials, and especially Gen Z, were more likely than older Americans to agree that the United States has a responsibility to promote respect for human rights in other countries and were more likely than older Americans to prioritize fighting global poverty and human rights. In fact, a majority of Gen Z wants the United States to play a leading role in promoting human rights and democracy around the world (see appendix). They tend to side with older generations on the unacceptability of one country invading another if it has historical claims; that it is likely Russia's invasion could establish a precedent that national borders are not fixed and can be changed by force; and that it is likely China could see the invasion of Ukraine as a precedent, encouraging it to invade Taiwan. For all three of these items, majorities of increasing size across the generations agree.

Millennial and Gen Z concerns about territorial integrity and the human rights dimensions of foreign policy could explain some surprising findings from the 2022 Chicago Council Survey. While these younger Americans are less likely to promote militaristic approaches to foreign policy issues, they do support a range of assistance in the cases of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a hypothetical Chinese invasion of Taiwan. In these cases, they broadly resemble the views of older Americans but support these actions to a lesser degree.

Half of Gen Z and majorities of Millennials and older generations support sending additional arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government, and majorities across the board—though lower among the two youngest generations—support accepting Ukrainian refugees into the United States, providing economic assistance to Kyiv, and increasing economic and diplomatic sanctions against Russia. In fact, while still a minority, Millennials (41%) are more likely than any other generation to support sending US troops to defend Ukraine from the Russian invasion (28% Boomer, 31% Gen X, 32% Gen Z).¹ Both Millennials and Gen Z are also more likely than other generations to support sending troops to defend Taiwan in the case of a hypothetical Chinese invasion of the island (36% Silent, 37% Boomer, 36% Gen X, 43% Millennial, 51% Gen Z). Similar to the Ukraine scenario, older Americans

¹ This question is from the Council's [November 18-20, 2022 poll](#), which did not include enough members of the Silent Generation to definitively report on their views.

support other types of assistance to Taiwan at higher majority levels than Millennials and Gen Z (see appendix).



Conclusion

For the first time in over four decades, a majority of the youngest generation of American adults thinks the United States should stay out of world affairs. Gen Z and Millennials are less convinced about the benefits of engaging in the world than their elders are. They appear undecided as to whether the benefits of global engagement such as trade, mutual defense, and burden sharing on international problems outweigh costs like economic and military assistance to other countries, defense spending, and the extensive military deployments that have characterized US foreign policy in their lifetimes. They are also less confident in the traditional tools and approaches the United States uses to pursue its international objectives. This is especially true when it comes to military and hard security issues, which they recognize as important but are less likely to see as a top priority.

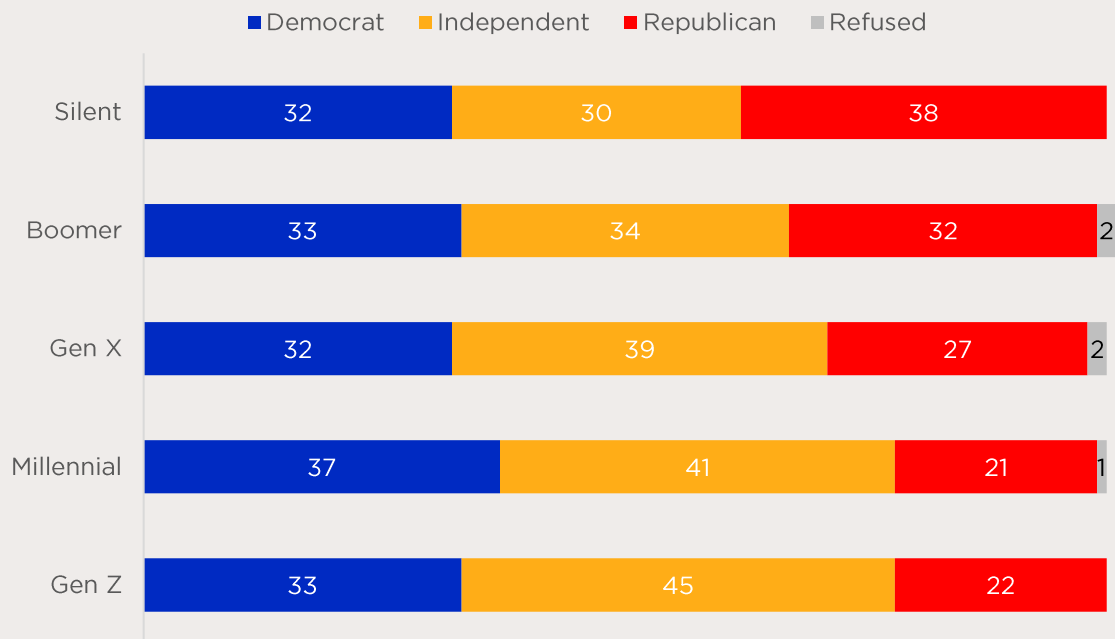
In a field that prioritizes advanced degrees and decades of experience, Millennials and Gen Z are still a ways off from calling the shots in the most influential foreign-policymaking institutions. And to be sure, their views could shift as they age or are shaped by world events yet to come to pass. Nonetheless, identifying the differences in how these generations view the world and the United States' role in it is important for those crafting policies and stances that are meant to have longevity and withstand the shifts in opinion that will come with this new wave of voters and foreign affairs professionals.

Getting to Know Millennials and Gen Z

Just as their parents' and grandparents' foreign policy lacks some appeal for younger generations, they are also somewhat less likely to embrace the traditional political party affiliations of their parents. These youngest Americans skew more ideologically liberal than the oldest generations. Compared to the overall American population, Millennials are slightly more likely to identify as Democrats (37%) or Independents (41%). The proportion of Democrats within Gen Z (33%) is comparable to other generations and the overall public (34% Democrat), but this youngest age cohort is much more likely to identify as Independent (45%). Only one-fifth of Millennials (21%) and Gen Z (22%) identify as Republicans, compared to 27 percent of Gen X, 32 percent of Boomers, and 38 percent of the Silent Generation. Millennials and Gen Z are also significantly less likely to have voted in the 2020 presidential election, although for Gen Z, some members who were included in this sample were not yet old enough to vote in 2020.

Party Identification by Generation

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? (%)



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Each generation is also more racially and ethnically diverse than the one before it. Millennials and Gen Z are both still majority white, non-Hispanic (56%), but are less white than older generations (82% Silent, 71% Boomer, 59% Gen X). Millennials and members of Gen Z self-identify as Hispanic at significantly higher rates than the overall population but identify as Black, multiracial, or some other identity at similar rates to the overall population distribution.

While it's still too early to tell how much education Gen Z will seek—many are still in high school or college—Millennials are the most educated generation, with 43 percent having completed a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares to about a third each of the Silent Generation (32%) and Boomers (33%) and 39 percent of Gen X. Millennials and Gen Z are also much more likely than older generations to identify as areligious, atheist, or agnostic.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2022 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2022 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 15–August 1, 2022, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research

panel, KnowledgePanel, in both English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 3,106 adults aged 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 1.8 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The 2022 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation. The authors of this report would also like to thank Council intern Emma Geiser for her work creating data visualizations for this report.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Founded in 1922, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing knowledge and engagement in global affairs. Our in-depth analysis and expert-led research influence policy conversations and inform the insights we share with our growing community. Through accessible content and open dialogue of diverse, fact-based perspectives, we empower more people to help shape our global future. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org.

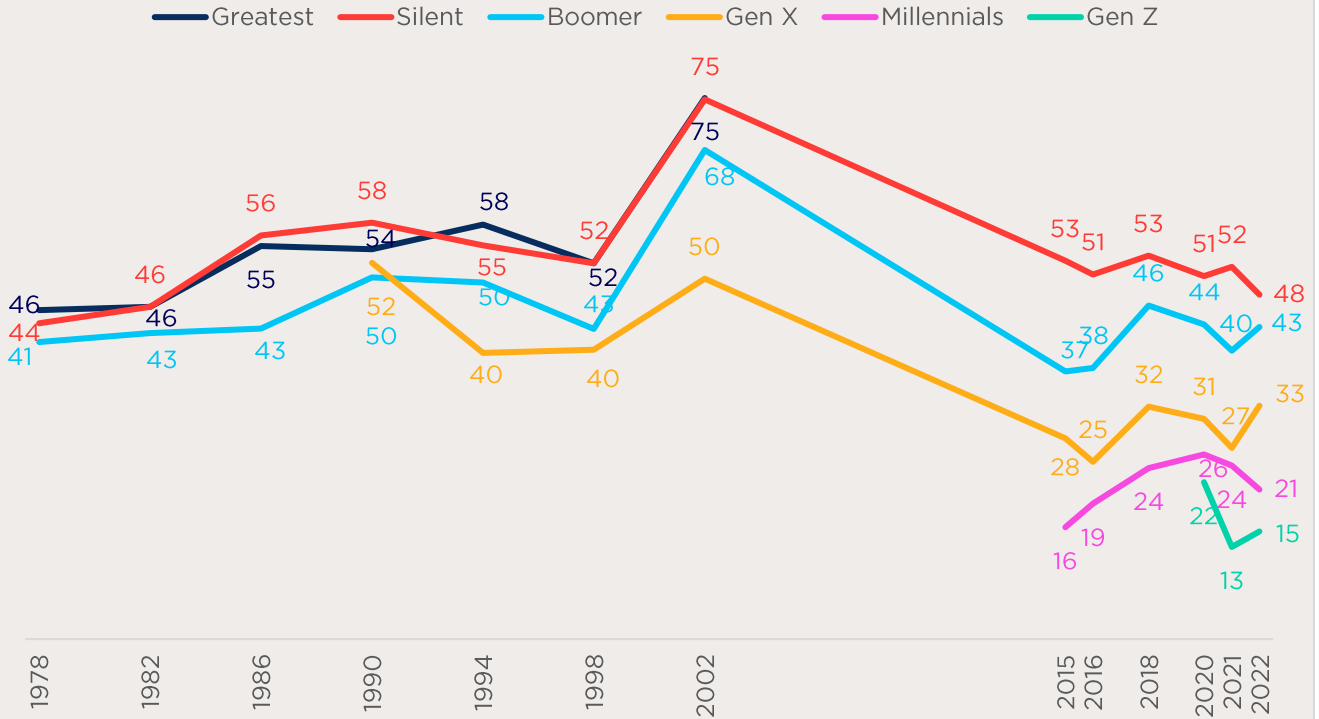
About the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy

Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974. For the latest research from the Crown Center, follow [@ChiCouncilFP](https://twitter.com/ChiCouncilFP).

Appendix

Interest in International Relations News

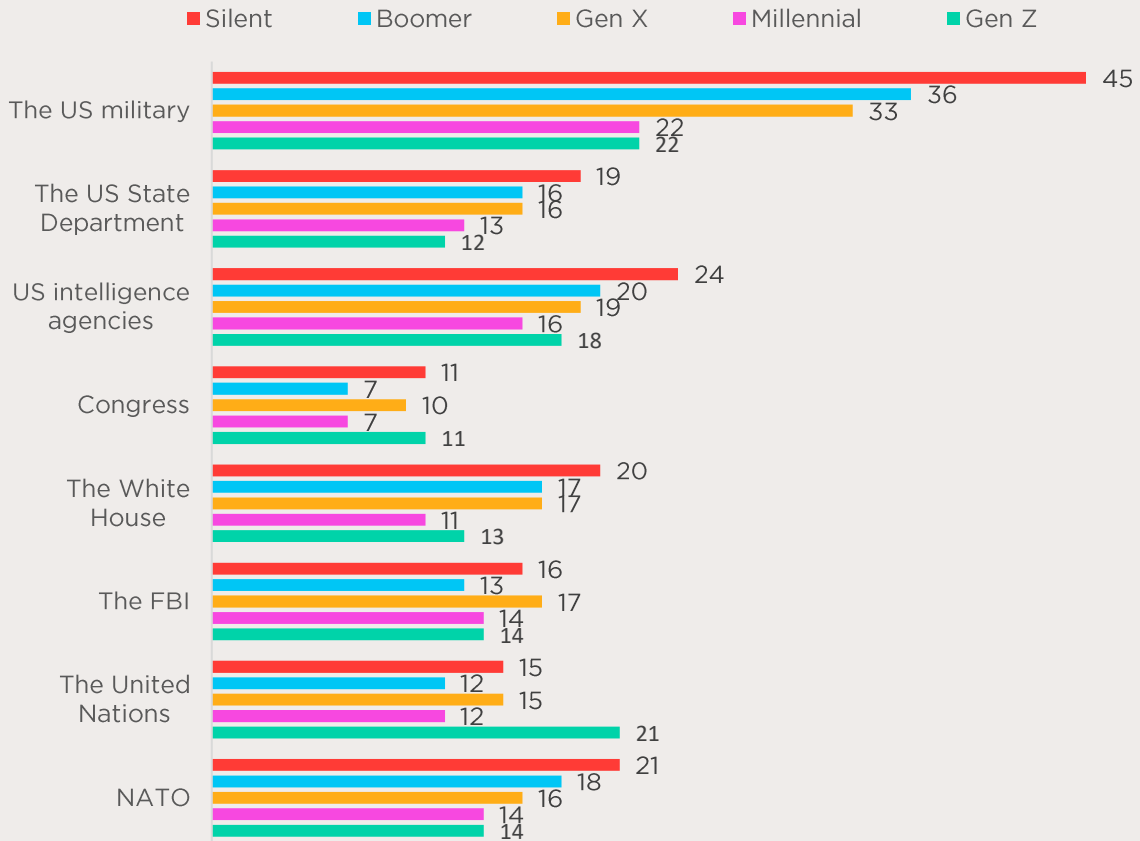
When you follow the news these days, how interested are you in reports about the following: very interested, somewhat interested, or hardly interested at all? News about the relations of the United States with other countries (% very interested)



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Confidence in Institutions

Please tell me how much confidence you have in the ability of leaders in each of these institutions to shape policies that benefit the United States: (% a great deal)

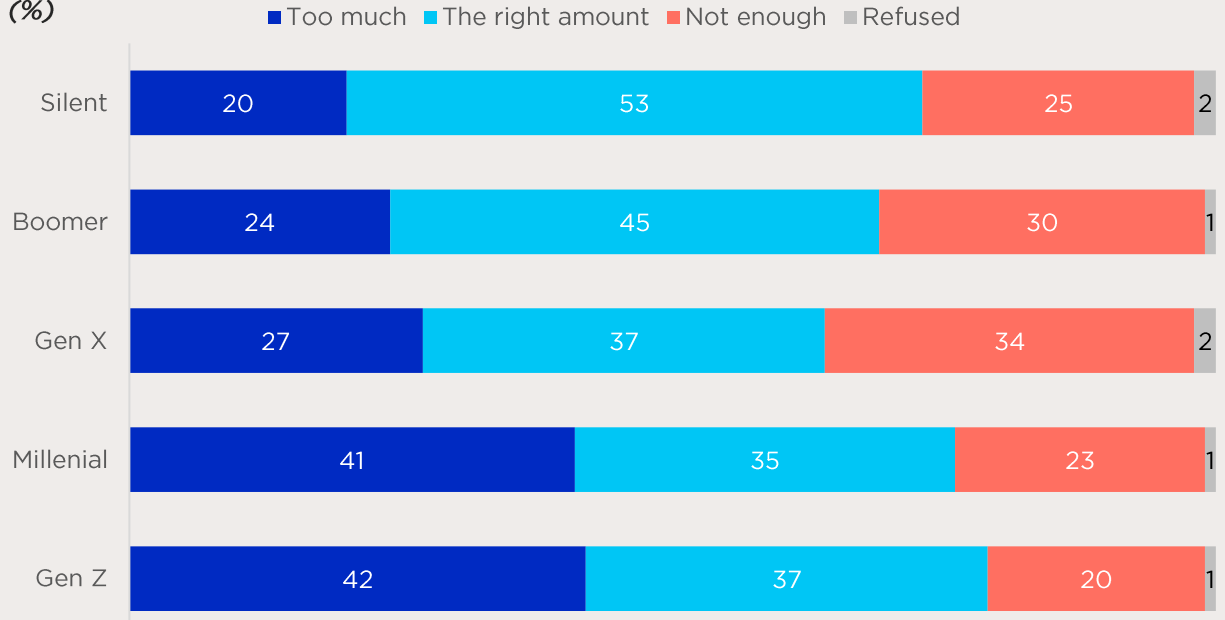


July 15-August 1, 2022 | n = 3,106

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US Use of Foreign Policy Tools

Do you think the United States uses the following sets of foreign policy tools too much, not enough, or the right amount: **Military tools like drone strikes and military interventions** (%)

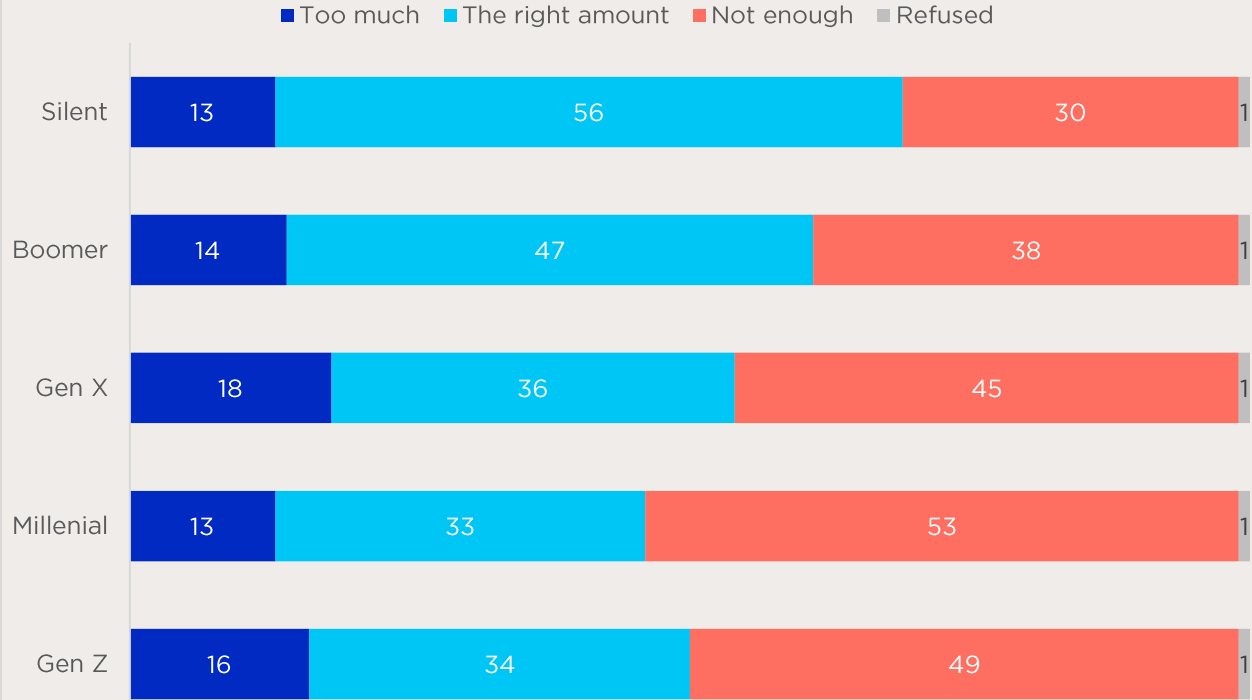


July 7-26, 2021 | n=2,086

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

US Use of Foreign Policy Tools

Do you think the United States uses the following sets of foreign policy tools too much, not enough, or the right amount: *Humanitarian tools like sharing vaccines, combating hunger, and providing disaster relief* (%)

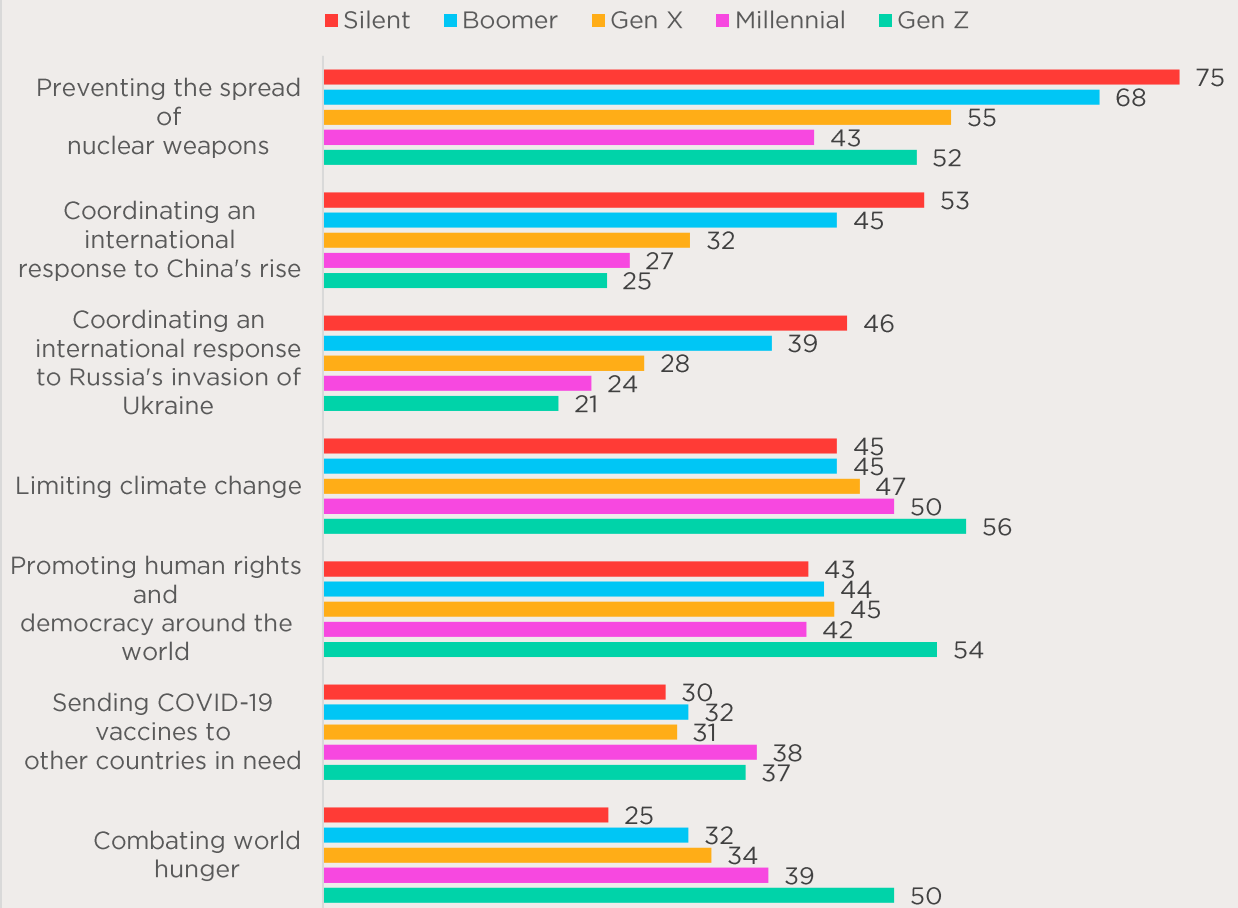


July 7-26, 2021 | n=2,086

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US Role in International Efforts

Should the United States play a leading role, a supporting role, or no role in the following international efforts: (% leading role)

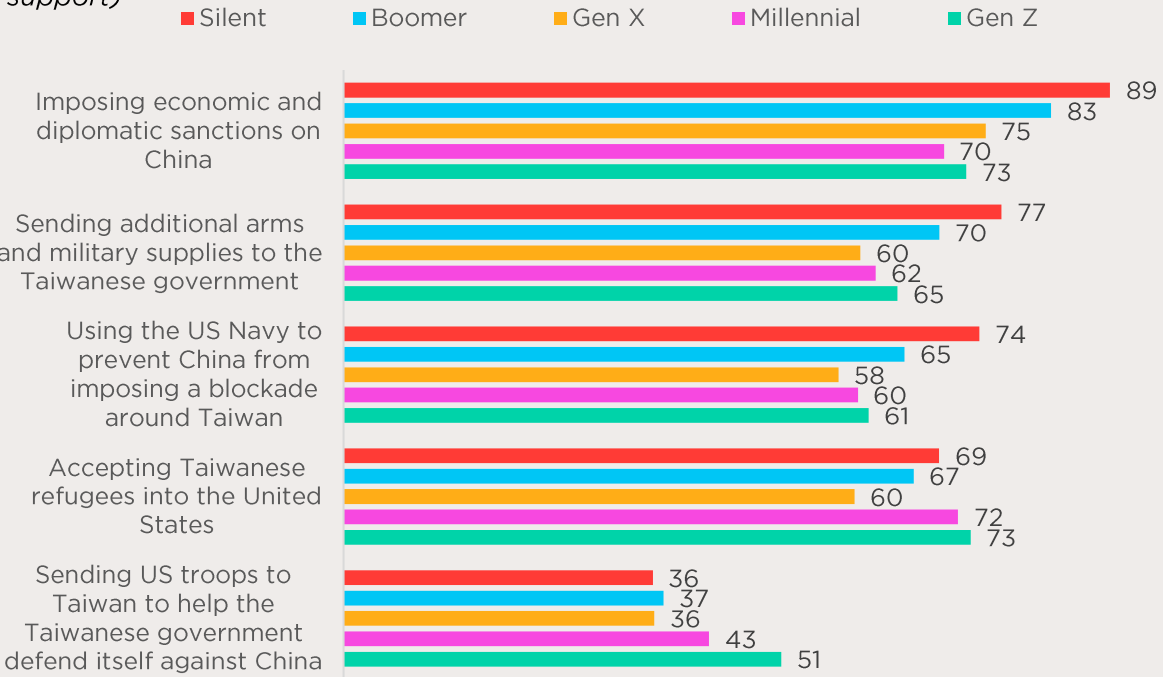


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Response to Chinese Invasion of Taiwan

If China were to invade Taiwan, would you support or oppose the United States: (% support)



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