

Generational Divides in Attitudes toward the US Role in the World

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With a diverse range of experiences and unique characteristics, each generation of Americans—from the Silent Generation to Generation Z—has a distinctive outlook on the role of the United States in the world, its strategic priorities, and the foreign policy tools it should employ. Data from the 2023 Chicago Council Survey, conducted September 7–18, 2023, highlight these diverse perspectives and reveal significant generational divides in attitudes toward global engagement. Americans from the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X, believe it is best for the United States to take an active role in world affairs. By contrast, Americans from the Millennial Generation and Generation Z are far less convinced of the merits of active global engagement and are more selective about how the United States engages with the world.

Key Findings

- Majorities of Americans from the Silent Generation (72%), Boomers (65%), and Generation X (55%) believe the United States is the greatest country in the world.
 - By contrast, majorities of Millennials (59%) and Generation Z (65%) say the United States is no greater than other countries.
- The Silent Generation (75%) and Boomers (67%) believe it is best to take an active part in world affairs, while Generation X (54%) is less convinced.
 - Millennials (50%) and Generation Z (50%) are divided.
- Millennials and Generation Z are less likely to support both the use of US troops in other parts of the world and long-term US military bases abroad than their older counterparts.
- With the exception of Millennials, who are evenly divided (49% vs. 50%), majorities of Americans from all generations say the benefits of maintaining the US role in the world outweigh the costs (72% Silent, 67% Boomer, 56% Generation X, and 54% Generation Z).

Young Americans Don't Buy into American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is [the belief](#) that the values, political system, and historical development of the United States distinguish it from and make it morally superior to other countries. Throughout the last several decades, the notion of American exceptionalism warranted a very active role in world affairs and [motivated much of US foreign policy](#), underpinning many of the United States' military interventions and efforts to promote Western conceptions of democracy, human rights, and free markets abroad.

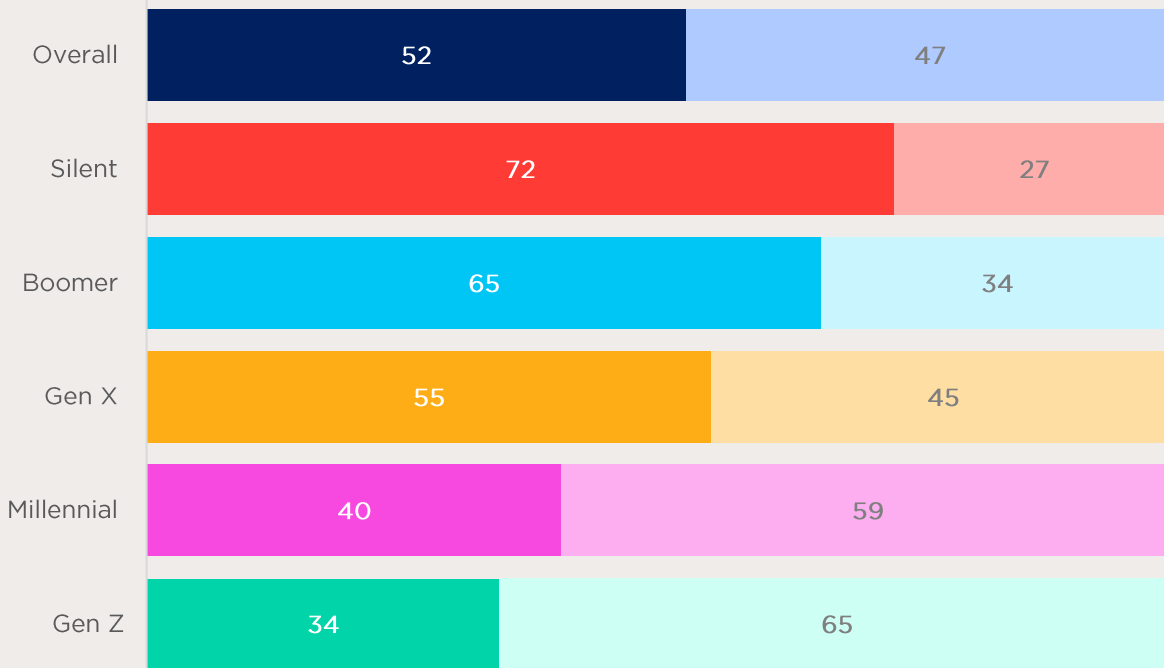
While the notion of American exceptionalism may have been central to the political socialization of older generations of Americans, many of whom make up the US political elite, the American public at large is divided on this claim. Whereas a slim majority of Americans (52%) think the United States is the greatest country in the world, nearly as many say it is no greater than other countries (47%).

There is an especially distinct gap in perceptions of American exceptionalism across generations, as older Americans are more likely to believe in it (72% of Silent Generation, 65% of Boomers, and 55% of Generation X) than their children and grandchildren. Younger Americans are far less convinced of the premise (40% of Millennials and 34% of Generation Z), and, in fact, majorities of Millennials (59%) and Generation Z (65%) say the United States is no greater than other nations.

Views on American Exceptionalism

Some people say the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. Others say that every country is unique, and the United States is no greater than other nations. Which view is closer to your own? (%)

The US is the greatest country in the world | The US is no greater than other nations



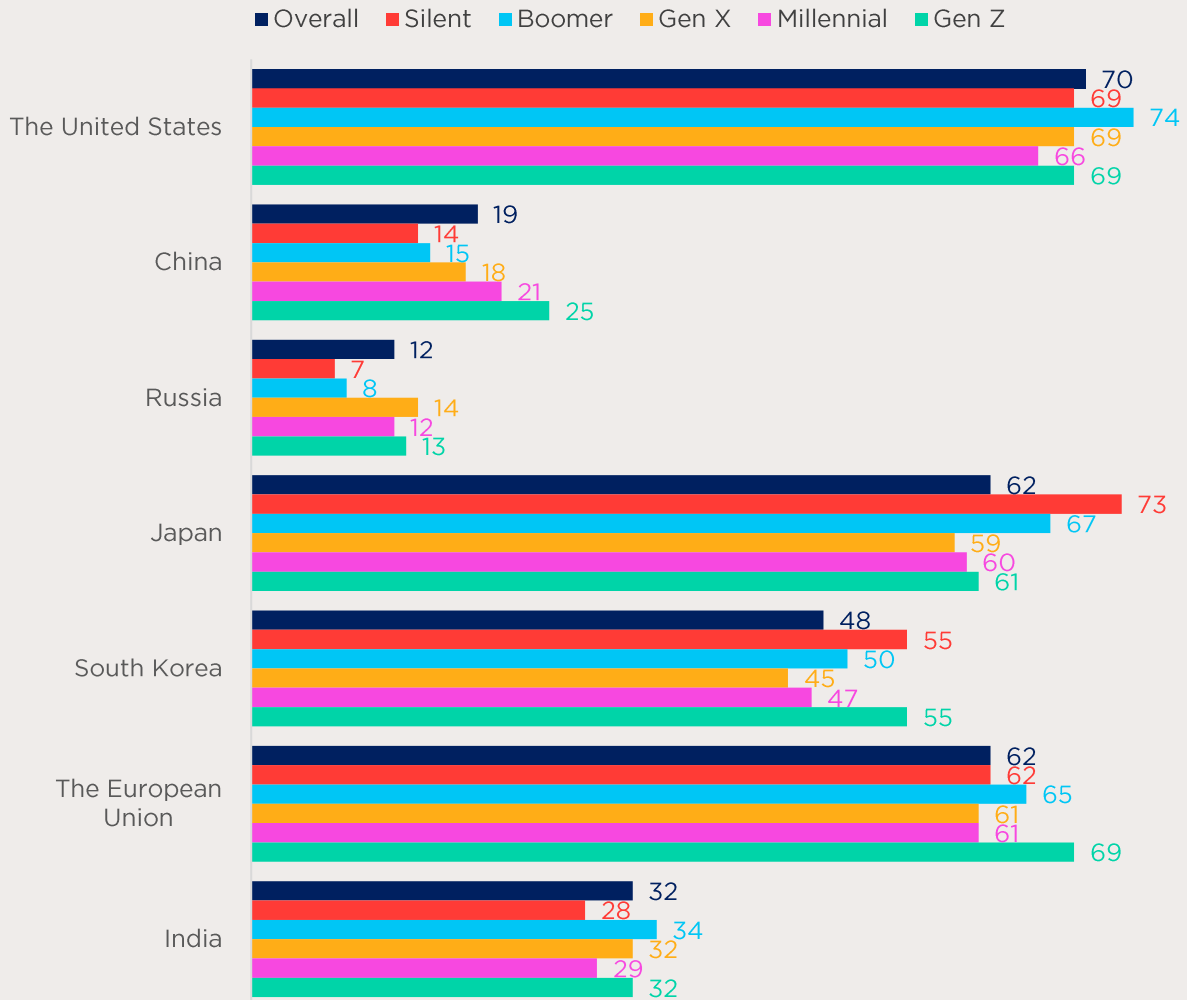
September 7-18, 2023 | n = 3,242

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Reflecting their rejection of American exceptionalism, young Americans are also almost as likely to have confidence in other countries' ability to deal with world problems responsibly as they are in the United States'. For example, the same percentage (69%) of Generation Z is confident in both the United States' and the European Union's ability to handle global challenges. Similarly, there is only a five-percentage point difference in the share of Millennials who say they are confident in the United States' (66%) and the European Union's (61%) handling of world problems. By contrast, the Silent Generation, Boomers, and Generation X are more likely to have confidence in the United States (69% Silent, 74% Boomer, and 69% Generation X) to deal with issues responsibly than the European Union (62% Silent, 65% Boomer, and 61% Generation X).

Confidence in Countries to Handle World Problems Responsibly

How much confidence would you say you have in the following countries and multilateral institutions to deal responsibly with world problems? (% a great deal + fair amount)

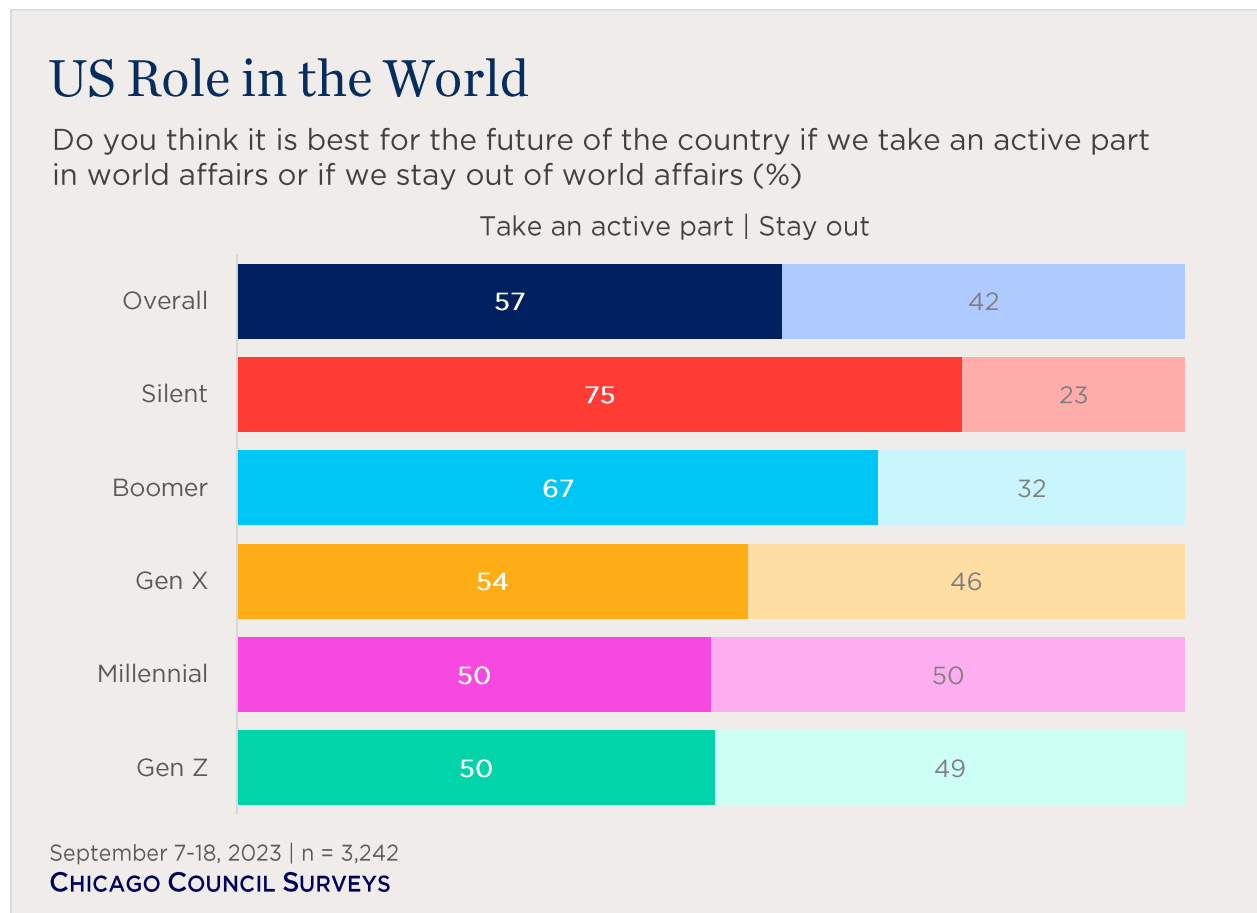


September 7-18, 2023 | n = 1,615
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Young Americans Express Tepid Support for US Internationalism

Similar to their attitudes toward American superiority, there are also generational differences in support for global engagement. Although most Americans (57%) think it is best for the future of the country if the United States takes an active part in world affairs rather than stay out (42%), support for an active role is stronger among

older Americans and quite tepid among younger Americans. Solid majorities of older generations of Americans, like the Silent Generation (75%) and Boomers (67%), strongly believe that taking an active role in world affairs is the best course of action. By contrast, younger generations of Americans, including Generation X (54%), Millennials (50%), and Generation Z (50%) are more divided.

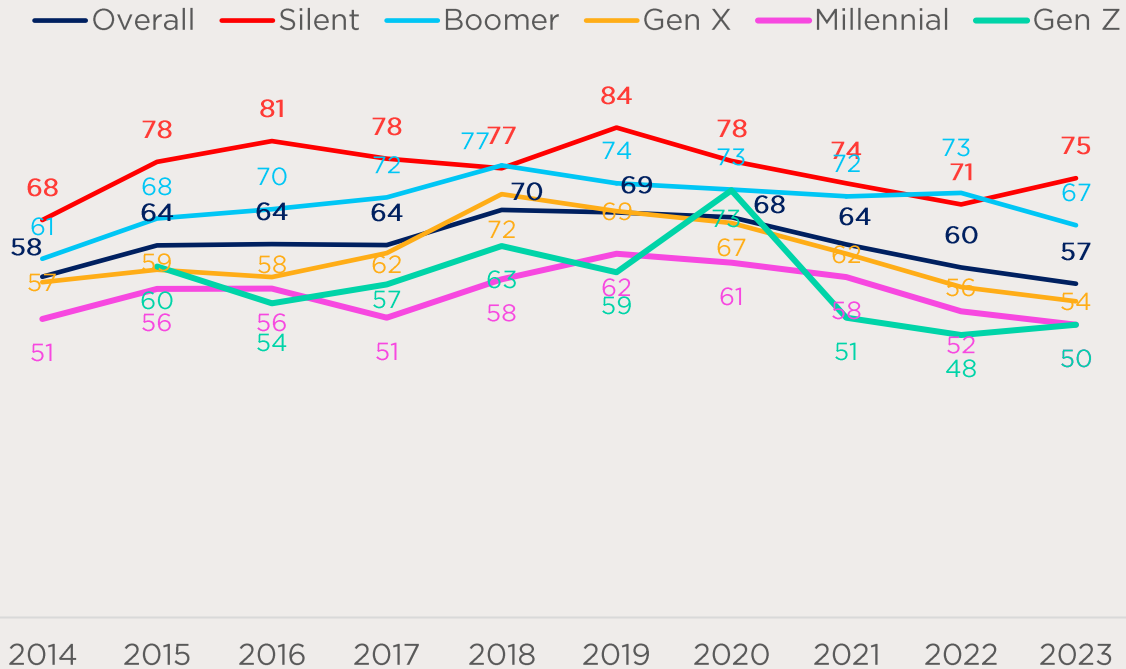


Over the last decade, support for taking an active role across generations of Americans rose between 2015 and 2018, perhaps, as a reaction to the antiglobalist rhetoric from candidate and then President Donald Trump. [Support for global engagement then fell](#) between 2019 and 2023, perhaps as a reaction to President Joe Biden’s more-activist foreign policies, especially in supporting Ukraine militarily and financially.

In previous surveys, Millennials and Generation Z tended to favor the United States taking an active part in world affairs, though to a lesser degree than their older counterparts and the overall public (with the exception of Generation Z in 2020 at 73%). However, in recent years, support for global engagement among young and even middle-aged Americans has declined to some of the lowest percentages recorded over the last nine years.

Attitudes toward Global Engagement Since 2014

Do you think it is 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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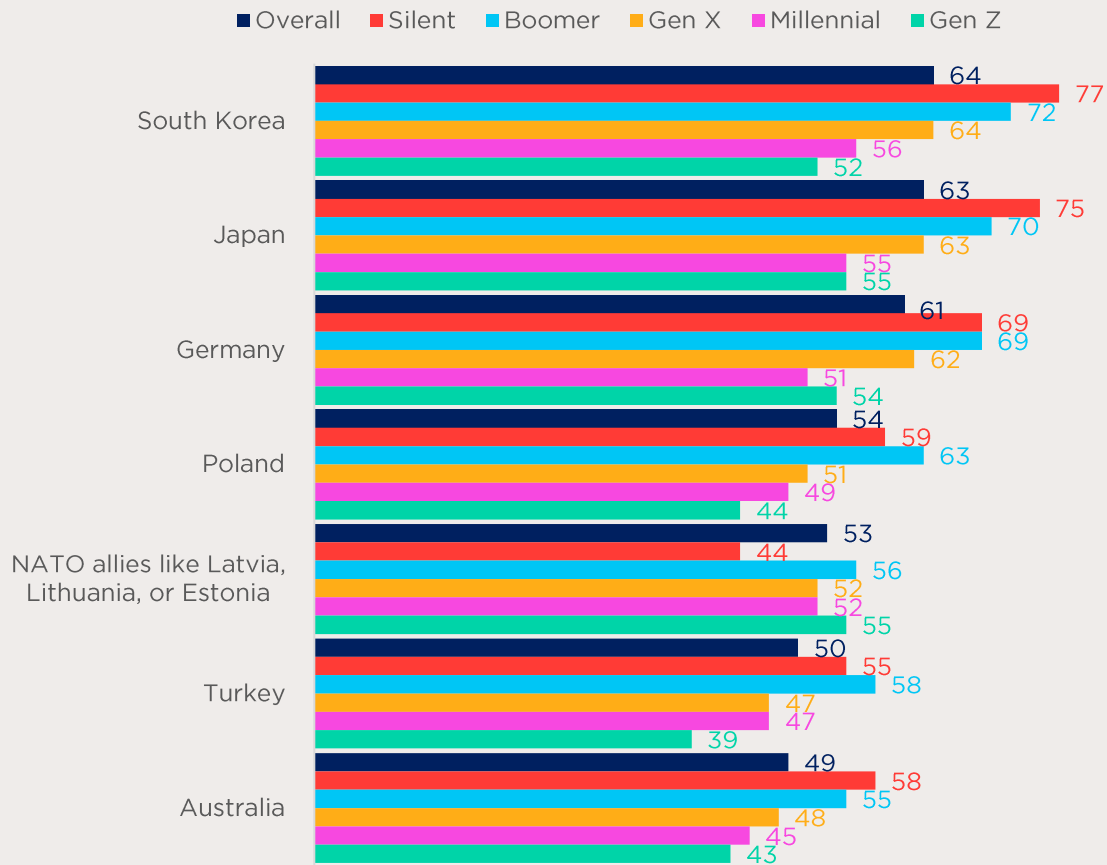
Millennials and Generation Z Are More Selective about International Involvement

On foreign policy, young Americans are more selective than their older counterparts when it comes to actions that would deepen US involvement internationally. The data show that Millennials and Generation Z are generally less likely to support having long-term military bases in various locations abroad than the Silent Generation, Boomers (with the exception of NATO-allied countries), and Generation X.

Older Americans, and particularly those from the Silent Generation, express much higher support for having military bases in countries like South Korea (77% Silent and 72% Boomer), Japan (75% Silent and 70% Boomer), and Germany (69% Silent and 69% Boomer), while young Americans express more tepid support for bases in those countries (see figure). While sizable, only minorities of Millennials and Generation Z say the United States should have long-term military bases in Turkey (47% Millennial and 39% Generation Z) and Australia (45% Millennial and 43% Generation Z).

US Military Bases Abroad

Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places? (% should have)



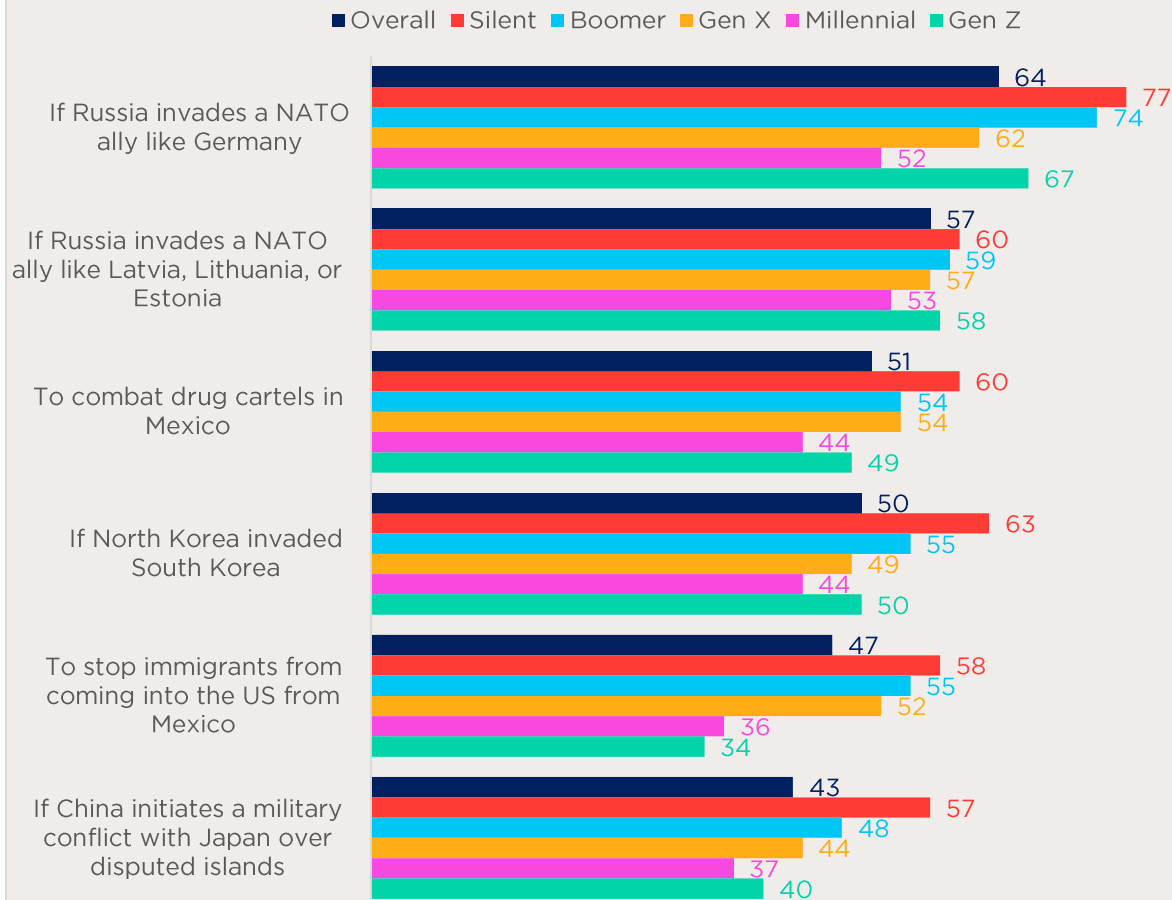
September 7-18 | n = 1,623

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Majorities of older Americans tend to support the use of US forces to defend allies compared to younger Americans, who are less willing to do so. In particular, Millennials and Generation Z are more selective about the circumstances that might justify the use of American troops; they only support sending service members overseas if it is to defend NATO allies against Russian aggression.

Use of US Troops

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify the use of US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you support or oppose the use of US troops: (% support)



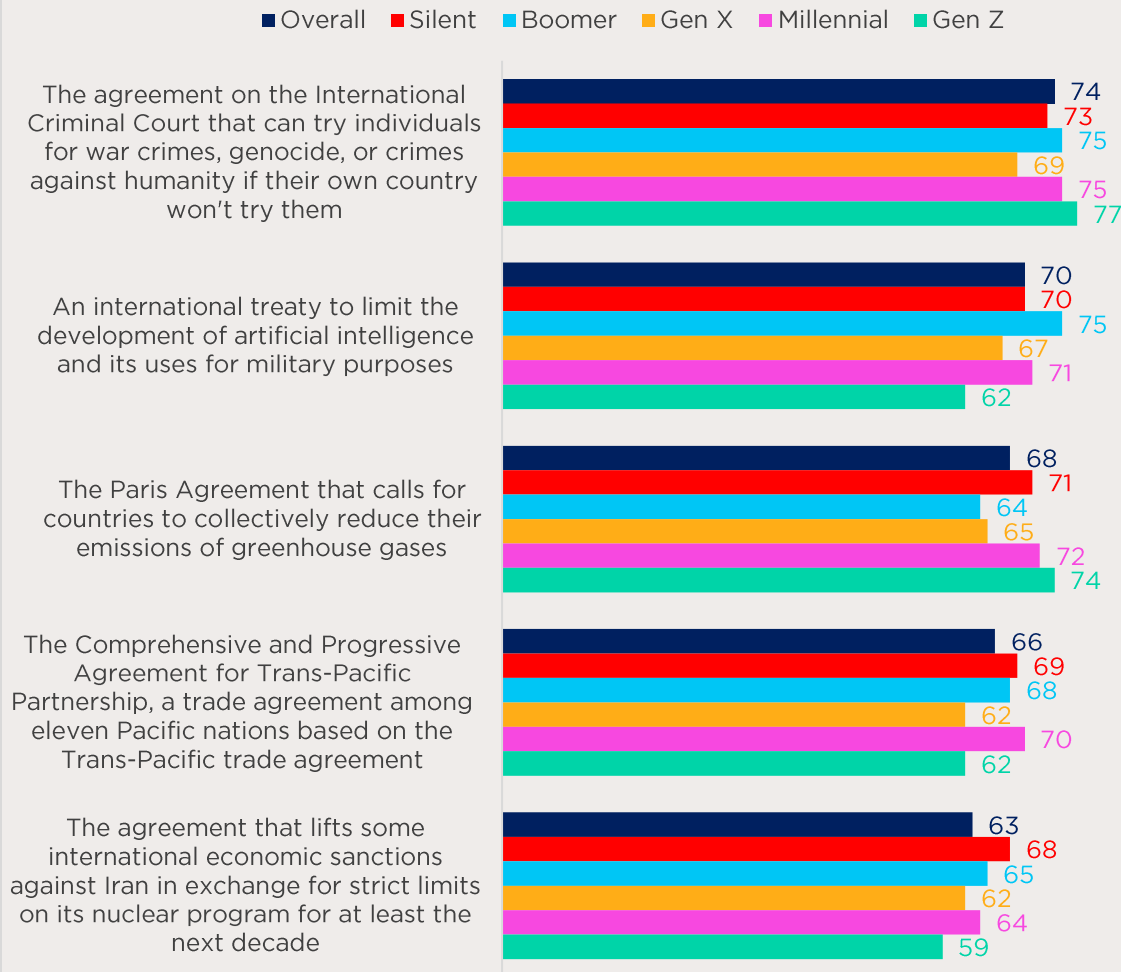
September 7-18 | n = 1,618 - 3,242

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While young Americans express less and more selective support for the use of US troops and having military bases abroad than their older counterparts, they show strong and consistent support for participation in international agreements. Millennials and Generation Z say the United States should participate in a myriad of international agreements, like the International Criminal Court (75% and 77%, respectively) and the Paris Climate Accords (72% and 74%, respectively), and even say so at slightly higher levels than their parents and grandparents. This indicates that young Americans may prefer a more diplomatic approach to internationalism, rather than military internationalism or isolationism as a whole.

Participation in International Agreements

Based on what you know, do you think the US should or should not participate in the following international agreements? (% should participate)

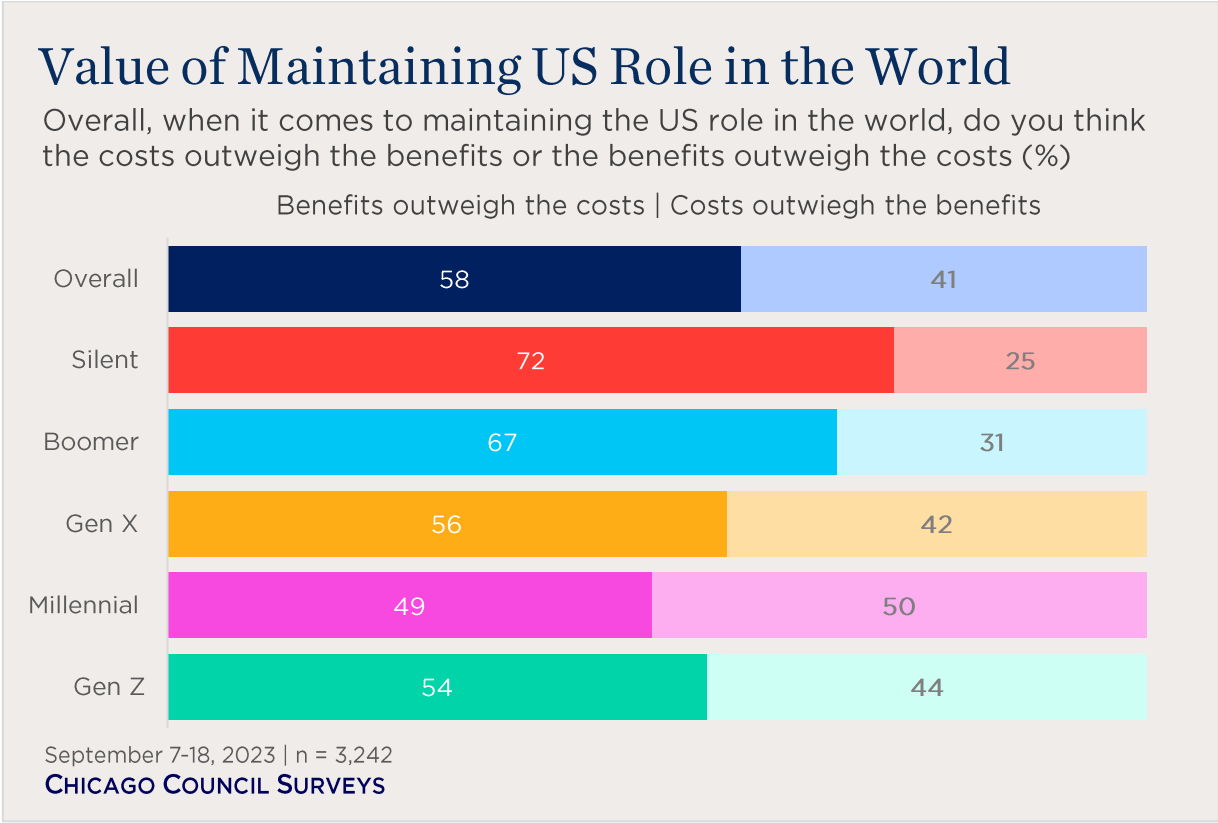


September 7-18, 2023 | n=1,619
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Perceived Costs of Global Engagement Aren't Worth It for Young Americans

Maintaining the US role in the world hasn't been without its economic, domestic, environmental, and social costs. For example, some estimate that the United States spent [more than \\$8 trillion on post-9/11 wars](#) in the Middle East alone—not accounting for macroeconomic costs to the US economy, civilian casualties, and sociopolitical costs. [Reports](#) also show that since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the US military has emitted more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than entire industrialized nations, like Sweden, Morocco, Peru, and New Zealand.

For climate-conscious and globally connected youth, many of whom are finding it increasingly difficult to purchase a home or pay off their student debt, the cost of global engagement may not be worth the expense. Compared to older Americans, Millennials and Generation Z express less support for activist foreign policies and the associated military spending; this could be because young Americans see less value in it and are less convinced by the utility of maintaining the US' role in the world.

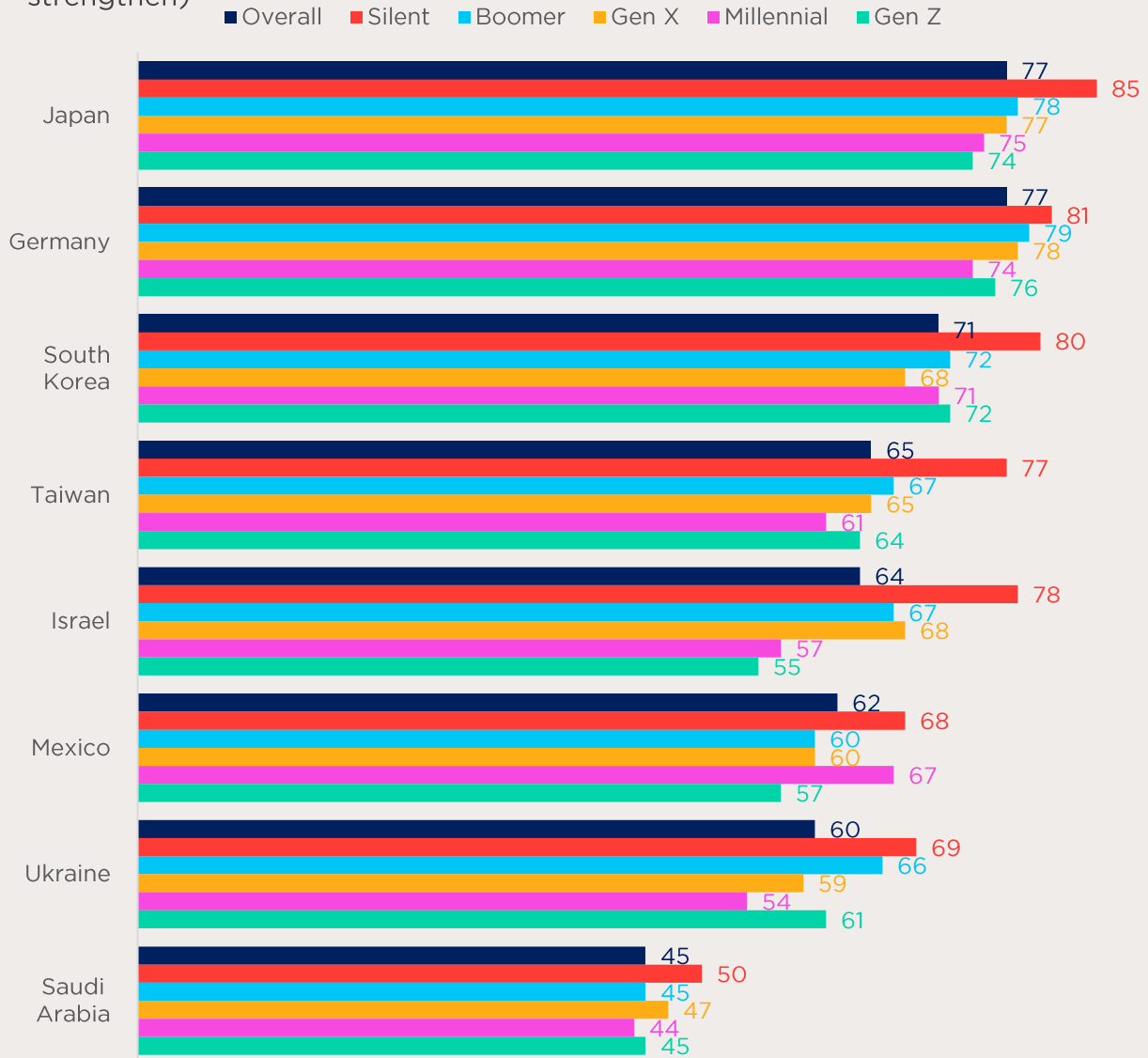


Young and even middle-aged Americans are far less likely than older Americans to say that when it comes to maintaining the US role in the world, the benefits outweigh the costs. Americans from the Silent Generation are the most likely to say the benefits outweigh the costs (72%) and are closely followed by Boomers (67%). Americans from Generation X and Generation Z are far less convinced of the value of maintaining the US role in the world (56% and 54%, respectively). Millennials are the least likely to agree with this sentiment and are roughly divided on the value of maintaining the US role in the world (49% benefits outweigh vs. 50% costs outweigh).

When it comes to US security relationships with other countries, majorities across generations think they strengthen US national security, but there are differences in degree among older and younger generations. Two-thirds or more think US security ties to Japan, Germany, South Korea, and Taiwan benefit US security, with members of the Silent Generation most appreciative of these relationships.

Value of US Security Relationships

Does the US security relationship with the following countries do more to strengthen US national security or weaken US national security? (% more to strengthen)



September 7-18 | n = 2,424 - 2,448
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By contrast, Millennials and Generation Z are significantly less likely to say that security relationships with various nations strengthen US national security. While majorities among these two generations say the US-Israeli security relationship

strengthens US security, they do so at a much lower rate than other Americans. Similarly, majorities among Millennials, Generation Z, and even Generation X, think US ties to Ukraine are beneficial to the United States, but they do so at relatively lower percentages than older generations. As for Saudi Arabia, Americans, regardless of generation, are at best, evenly divided.

Conclusion

Each generation of Americans has a unique perspective on the United States' place in the world, with specific events and experiences helping to shape their values and outlook over their lifetimes. Older Americans may take pride in the United States' role in WWII and stance during the Cold War, contributing to their greater embrace of US global engagement, the US military presence abroad and willingness to defend allies. Young Americans, on the other hand, express less confidence in the merits of global engagement and are more selective about how the United States engages internationally. Unlike their parents and grandparents, young Americans are much less likely to support military internationalism - especially since it may be perceived to be at a high cost to their own standards of living, the environment, and the populations of vulnerable countries. As they enter policymaking roles in the years to come, these data suggest that younger generations may push to demilitarize US foreign policy and instead, pursue more diplomatic and collaborative means of engaging with the world.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2023 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2023 Chicago Council Survey was conducted September 7–18, 2023, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel, KnowledgePanel, in both English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 3,242 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 2.0 percentage points including a design effect of 1.2908. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

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

Americans are categorized into generational cohorts based on their birth year. Those born between 1928 and 1945 are considered the Silent Generation; between 1946 and 1964 are considered the Baby Boom Generation; between 1965 and 1980 are considered Generation X; between 1981 and 1996 are considered the Millennial Generation; and finally, between 1997 and 2013 are considered Generation Z.

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