

Americans Have Not Turned Isolationist

By Steven Kull

What do Americans want the United States' role to be in the post-Cold War world? A widely expressed view among policymakers and journalists is that the public is going through a phase of wanting to disengage from the world. Some even describe it as a phase of isolationism. This view has contributed to the trend in US foreign policy toward international disengagement. Spending on foreign aid, diplomacy and other State Department activities has been cut, the US is deeply in arrears on its UN dues, and Congress has been resistant to the use of US troops for international peacekeeping missions.

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But is the policy-making community reading the public correctly? Apparently not. This was the primary finding of a major study, Foreign Policy and the Public, conducted by the Center for International Security Studies at the University of Maryland and its Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

Interviews with members of the policy-making community revealed that a very strong majority, especially in Congress, perceive that most Americans want to disengage from the world. However, a comprehensive review of polling data found no such overall trend—although there are indications that the majority does want some changes in the way the US engages with the world. Perhaps most striking, when members of the policy-making community participated in developing poll questions they thought would reveal this desire for disengagement, they found that the majority of the public still showed support for US international engagement.

No Trend Toward Disengagement

A review of polling data revealed little evidence that the American public favors US withdrawal from the world in the wake of the Cold War. For example, various polling organizations have for several decades now posed the question, “Do you think the US should take an active part in world affairs or stay out of world affairs?” During the Cold War Americans rather consistently, by a two- to-one margin, embraced the position that the US should “take an active part.” As the data on pp. 7-8 demonstrate, this attitude has remained largely unchanged with the end of the Cold War.

Even trend-line questions that make a one-sided statement affirming disengagement have not fared well. Over the last decades, by a two-to-one margin, the majority has rejected the argument that “we should go our own way in international matters not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not.” Most recently, in PIPA's September 1996 poll, 68% rejected the argument, with just 30% agreeing. A solid majority, usually in the 60% range, has rejected the statement that “the US

should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own.”

One-sided statements in favor of engagement, however, have received overwhelming support. Times Mirror regularly presented the argument, “It's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs” and elicited overwhelming agreement, most recently 90% in 1994.

Poll questions that do elicit a seemingly isolationist response are those that ask respondents to prioritize international and domestic problems. For example, a June 1995 Times Mirror poll found that an overwhelming 78% agreed “We should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home.” Since the respondent only had the option of agreeing or disagreeing, the respondent may have felt compelled to affirm the relative importance of addressing problems at home.

However, when paired with an argument which affirms the value of engagement, such isolationist arguments do not do well. When presented a pair of arguments in a June 1996 PIPA poll, only 36% opted for the one that read: *Now that the Cold War is over and communism has collapsed, it is no longer necessary to have such a large diplomatic establishment with embassies all over the world. Given the federal budget crunch it is better to spend these resources at home.*

A majority of 59% opted instead for the argument: *The end of the Cold War has unleashed new problems so that the world is still a dangerous place. Also, the US economy has become more interdependent with the world economy. Thus it is important for the US to maintain vigorous diplomatic efforts.*

America in the World

Rejection of Dominant World Leader Role

While a majority clearly rejects the idea that the US should withdraw from the world there is nonetheless criticism of the current perceived US role. A very strong majority feels that the US is playing the role of dominant world leader—or hegemon—more than it should be. For those in the policy-making community who view this role as intrinsic to US international engagement, its rejection can be read as a rejection of engagement per se, even though this is not how most Americans see it.

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This feeling is particularly pronounced in the rejection of a US role as “world policeman.” In a November 1995 PIPA poll, 71% said “the US is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be.” This attitude has been in place for some time. Even at the height of the Gulf War in March 1991, when Yankelovich Partners for *Time/CNN* asked whether “the US should be playing the role of world policeman,” 75% said “no” with just 21% saying “yes.” While the “world policeman” idea fared a little better in *Los Angeles Times* repeats of this question, it was always rejected by healthy majorities. (Sixty percent said no in February 1992; 57% said no in January 1993.) In a June 1995 poll by the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, when asked who should be “the policeman of the world,” only 19% said United States, while 76% said the United Nations.

Opposition to a hegemonic role is so strong that if Americans are only given the options of a hegemonic US role or disengagement, the majority is likely to choose disengagement. For example, in a January 1994 ABC/*Washington Post* poll, only 27% endorsed the statement: “Because the United States is the world’s strongest and richest country, it has the responsibility to take the leading role in world affairs,” while 67% preferred the statement, “Because the United States has limited resources and its own problems at home, it needs to reduce its involvement in world affairs.”

Support for Cooperative Engagement

So if the majority does not want the US to withdraw from the world or to be the dominant world leader, what does it

want? Most Americans prefer a third option, which is for the US to contribute to cooperative international efforts.

In a June 1996 PIPA poll respondents were presented three options for America’s role in the world. Just 12% chose the option that “the US should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems.” Similarly, only 13% embraced the idea that “as the sole remaining superpower, the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems.” However, an overwhelming 74% endorsed the view that “the US should do its fair share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.”

In June 1995 *Times Mirror* asked respondents about what kind of leadership role they would like to see the US play in the world. Similar to the PIPA results only 9% embraced the isolationist position that the US “shouldn’t play any leadership role.” Only 13% favored the United States being “the single world leader.” However, an overwhelming majority (74%) favored the US playing “a shared leadership role.”

In stark contrast to policy practitioners’ perceptions, this support for cooperative efforts leads to strong support for the United Nations and for US participation in it. When, in March 1994, CBS/*New York Times* asked, “Now that the Cold War has ended, how important do you think it is to cooperate with other countries by working through the UN?” 89% said it was “extremely” (50%) or “somewhat” important.

Contrary to policy practitioners’ perception that most Americans would oppose strengthening the UN for fear this would threaten US sovereignty, a June 1995 *Times Mirror* poll found that 81% felt “strengthening the United Nations” should be a “priority” (45%) or a “top priority” (36%) as a US foreign policy goal. An October 1994 poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found 84% support for strengthening the UN.

Support for working through the UN is particularly pronounced with regard to the potential use of military force. In an April 1995 PIPA poll, an overwhelming 89% agreed that, “When there is a problem in the world that requires the use of military force, it is generally best for the US to address the problem together with other nations working through the UN, rather than going it alone.” In contrast, only 29% embraced the argument that when military force is needed, “it is better for the US to act on its own rather than working through the UN, because the US can move more quickly and probably more successfully.”

“Fair Share” Concerns and Misperceptions

Another factor that may obscure support for international engagement stems from the rejection of the US hegemonic role. Very strong majorities feel that the US is doing more than its “fair share” in the international arena. Polls conducted by *Times Mirror* in June 1995 and by PIPA in January and April

1995 and June 1996 have found that 60% feel the US pays more than its fair share for “UN activities,” 50% for UN dues, 60% for troops to UN peacekeeping, and 81% for development aid.

But these judgments of unfairness seem to rest on major misperceptions, as respondents dramatically overestimate the US share of international efforts. The median respondent in PIPA’s June 1996 poll estimated that the US contributes 40% of all the aid given by the wealthy countries to developing countries (in fact, the US gives 12% of development aid, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]). In the April 1995 poll, the median respondent estimated that the US was contributing 40% of all the troops for UN peacekeeping (the actual proportion at the time was 4%). In the January 1995 PIPA poll, 81% estimated that the US contributes more of its GNP to development aid than most other industrialized countries (in fact, the US gives the lowest percentage of all OECD countries).

Particularly interesting is the fact that when Americans are asked to suggest an appropriate US share, they generally set a level much higher than the actual level. For aid to developing countries, the median respondent in the June 1996 PIPA poll said the US should give about a 20% share—nearly twice the actual amount of 12%. In January 1995, 81% said the US should give about the same amount or more of its GNP for development aid relative to other industrialized countries, and in April 1995 the median respondent said the US should contribute about 20% of all the troops to UN peacekeeping—both dramatically higher than the present levels.

When Americans are given correct information about the actual levels of US contributions relative to other countries, criticism falls off sharply. After hearing in June 1996 that, in fact, the US contributes 25% of UN dues because the US economy is 25% of the world economy, 56% found this fair, while just 37% found it unfair. In an April 1995

PIPA poll, when asked how they would feel about contributing 4% of the troops to UN peacekeeping (the actual amount at the time), only 9% thought this was too much.

A “fair share” position also translates into support for multilateral engagement, because group efforts are seen as a way to share the burden. For example, in the April 1995 PIPA poll 86% agreed with the statement, “The only way for the US to not always be the ‘world policeman’ is to allow the UN to perform some policing functions. UN peacekeeping is a way we can share the burden with other countries.”

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Sources of Support

So why do most Americans support a US foreign policy based on international engagement provided that the US does not play the role of dominant world leader and instead contributes its fair share? Polling data, as well as focus groups, suggest that Americans support such a policy out of altruistic concerns as well as the belief that, in the long run, an engaged foreign policy serves US interests.

Moral arguments in support of engagement do quite well. In a December 1995 CBS/NYT poll that provided four different reasons to send US troops to Bosnia, the one found to be a good reason by the largest number (64%) was based on “stopping more people from being killed in this war.” In a January 1995 PIPA poll a strong majority of 67% agreed with the argument that “As one of the world’s rich nations, the United States has a moral responsibility toward poor nations to help them develop eco-

nomically and improve their people’s lives.” A 1994 Belden and Russonello poll found that 62% of respondents agreed “each of us has a personal responsibility to help improve the lives of those in developing countries.”

Arguments that the US should only be engaged in ways that are tied closely to US national interests do not do well. In PIPA’s January 1995 poll an overwhelming 77% rejected the argument that “We should only make commitments to send aid to parts of the world where we have security interests,” while 76% agreed that “We should send aid to starving people irrespective of whether it will promote the national interest.” In an April 1995 PIPA poll, 61% rejected the argument, “Bosnia is far from the US and we have no real interests there. Therefore it would be wrong to risk the lives of American troops in a UN peacekeeping operation in Bosnia.” Even the notion of making sacrifices for a collective good is supported by an overwhelming majority. In PIPA’s July 1994 poll, 84% said that “sometimes the US should be willing to make some sacrifices if this will help the world as a whole.”

The second major source of support for an engaged foreign policy is derived from the belief that in the long run it serves US interests. Americans are very responsive to poll questions that make a bridge between national and global concerns. In the June 1996 PIPA poll, an overwhelming 79% agreed with the argument that: *Because the world is so interconnected today, the US should participate in UN efforts to maintain peace, protect human rights and promote economic development. Such efforts serve US interests because they help create a more stable world that is more conducive to trade and other US interests.*

Only 29% agreed with a counter argument that: *The world is so big and complex that such [UN] efforts only make a minimal difference with little benefit to the US. Therefore it is not in the US interest to participate in them.*

America in the World

Such bridging arguments have also been popular in support of foreign aid. In the January 1995 poll, 63% agreed that the US should give some foreign aid because "in the long run, helping Third World countries develop is in the economic interest of the US." A majority also rejects the counter-argument that giving foreign aid is not a good idea because it does not serve US interests. In a March 1993 poll by Intercultural Communication, Inc., 67% disagreed with the idea that it was "against our interests to help developing countries because they will compete with us economically and politically."

How Solid is Support for Engagement?

As part of our study, we conducted a series of workshops with members of the Washington foreign policy-making community in which we presented data showing evidence of support for international engagement. Workshop participants were then invited to suggest tests to be carried out in a subsequent poll. Most of the tests suggested focused on the question of whether this support was solid.

Briefly summarized, the results from the subsequent nationwide poll showed that support for engagement was indeed at least as solid as opposition. Presented a series of arguments challenging their positions, respondents who supported engagement held to their position slightly better than those who opposed engagement. Those who favored engagement also felt at least as intensely about their positions as those who were opposed.

Support was sustained when issues were presented in the context of an election. Hypothetical candidates who favored engaged policies did significantly better than those who were opposed, even when respondents were presented highly charged political attack ads that focused on international issues.

Workshop participants suggested that, even if Americans say they support

engagement in principle, when faced with the need to make trade-offs against domestic spending items in the context of the federal budget they will likely favor cutting international spending. However, when poll respondents were taken through a somewhat elaborate process in which they were given the opportunity to modify the current federal discretionary budget, in no international category did the majority cut spending. On average, for all international categories respondents increased spending substantially, in the case of the United Nations by threefold. Defense spending, however, was cut deeply.

Support for engagement cropped up in unexpected places. PIPA carried out a poll in four congressional districts which were considered, for a number of reasons, to be highly likely to oppose engagement. In each district the congressional representative had co-sponsored legislation to have the US withdraw from the UN and had consistently voted against foreign aid and other forms of engagement. Further, a representative of each congressional office, when interviewed, expressed confidence that the majority of their constituents favored withdrawing from the UN and eliminating foreign aid entirely. Polls taken in these four districts found only 1 in 5 wanted to withdraw from the UN, and only 1 in 12 wanted to eliminate foreign aid. Overall, on all but a few questions, these districts did not differ significantly from the national sample.

Conclusion

So why do so many policymakers perceive the public as favoring international disengagement when polling data say otherwise? One key factor stands

out. Based on interviews we conducted, it appears that the policy-making community has a flawed system for gaining information about public attitudes. The primary means members of Congress use involves paying attention to the small, self-selected group of people who telephone or write them, or attend public meetings. Composed disproportionately of those angry with present policies, this "sample" does call for a lower level of US international engagement. Unfortunately, many members of Congress believe it is representative. They rarely do polls in their own districts on foreign policy issues and dismiss national polls as irrelevant for understanding their districts.

When Congress takes action based on this misperception, the misperception is exacerbated. Journalists we interviewed explained that they get their sense of public attitudes largely by watching the behavior of Congress. Many believe that members of Congress, by virtue of their constant contact with constituents, are a better mirror of public attitudes than national polls. Making the dynamic even more complicated, members of Congress said in interviews that in addition to constituent contacts they also get to know public attitudes by reading what is said about the public in the press. Because the public for the most part does not vote based on foreign policy decisions, there is no effective mechanism to correct this self-perpetuating misperception. Perhaps only when members of the policy-making community, especially in Congress, gain more confidence in their ability to discern public attitudes on foreign policy through polls, will they be able to discount the claims of a nonrepresentative but vocal minority.



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