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ON US FOREIGN POLICY

OK, Boomer: Youth Hesitant to Use Force, Shun US Exceptionalism in Foreign Policy

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Millennials, the oft-referenced generation born in the '80s and '90s, are the first generation to have access to the internet in their youth and are the largest and most diverse generation in American history. Now for the first time, Millennials are running for US president: Pete Buttigieg and Tulsi Gabbard were born in 1982 and 1981 respectively, putting them at the upper limit of the Millennial range.

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey data provide insight into how this group views key foreign policy issues compared with previous generations. While there is some evidence that younger Americans are more hesitant to engage in the world and more likely to oppose the use of force than their elders, time will tell whether the post-Cold War and 9/11 experiences have shaped a new generation with enduring preferences for a more restrained, less military-focused foreign policy.

Key Findings

- Sixty-two percent of Millennials say the United States should take an active role in world affairs. This is a smaller majority than any of the older generations but similar to Boomers' levels when Boomers were the youngest Americans.
- Millennials are the only generation in which a majority say the United States is no greater than other countries (57%).
- Some of the largest gaps between the oldest and youngest generations emerge on perceived threats from climate change, immigration, instability in the Middle East, and the development of China as a world power.
- Threat perceptions increase with age, and so does backing for military action to address critical threats. Millennials are more dovish than older generations and are the least likely to favor using US troops if North Korea invaded South Korea, if China invaded Taiwan, or if Russia invaded a Baltic NATO ally.

- While majorities in each generation believe that maintaining alliances and military superiority make the United States safer, Millennials are the least likely to say this about military superiority.

Introduction: Political Leanings of Various Generations

Of all the generations in this analysis,¹ Millennials (those born from 1981 to 1996) are, by a wide margin, the most likely to self-describe as Democrats (42%) and liberals. Thirty-seven percent of Millennials describe themselves as some degree of liberal (7% extremely liberal, 19% liberal, 11% slightly liberal), although a combined majority says they are either middle of the road (36%) or conservative (26%). They are also the most likely to disapprove of President Donald Trump, according to Pew surveys.²

Generation X-ers (born between 1965 and 1980) are most likely to identify as either Democrats (32%) or Independents (38%), and as political moderates (38%) or conservatives (33%). The bulk of Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) self-describe as either Democrats (36%) or Independents (35%), and as either conservative (6% very conservative, 20% conservative, 13% slightly conservative) or middle of the road (34%, 26% liberal). Looking at trends over time, Boomers initially identified as Independents more than Democrats; over time these differences have narrowed (for full Boomer party ID trend, see appendix figure C).

The Silent generation (born between 1928 and 1945) stands out as the group that is most likely to lean conservative (50%), though its members are about as likely to identify politically as Republicans (36%) as they are as Independents (34%).³

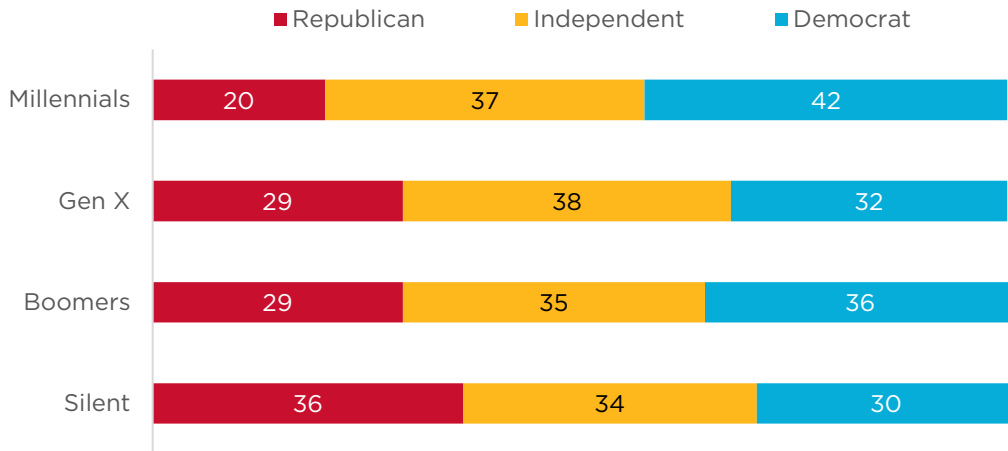
¹ Generation Z—those born between 1997 and 2012—are not included in this analysis due to an insufficient number of respondents falling into this age range.

² Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kily, Olivia O’Hea, “The Generation Gap in American Politics”, *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/03/01122435/03-01-18-Generations-release.pdf>.

³ Those who self-identified as Independents were asked a follow-up question about which party they leaned toward. Majorities of Millennials (50%) and Gen X-ers (57%) and a plurality of Boomers (39%) said they lean toward neither party, while a plurality of Silents (45%) said they lean toward the Republican Party.

Party Affiliation and Generation

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



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Youth Less Inclined toward Active Engagement

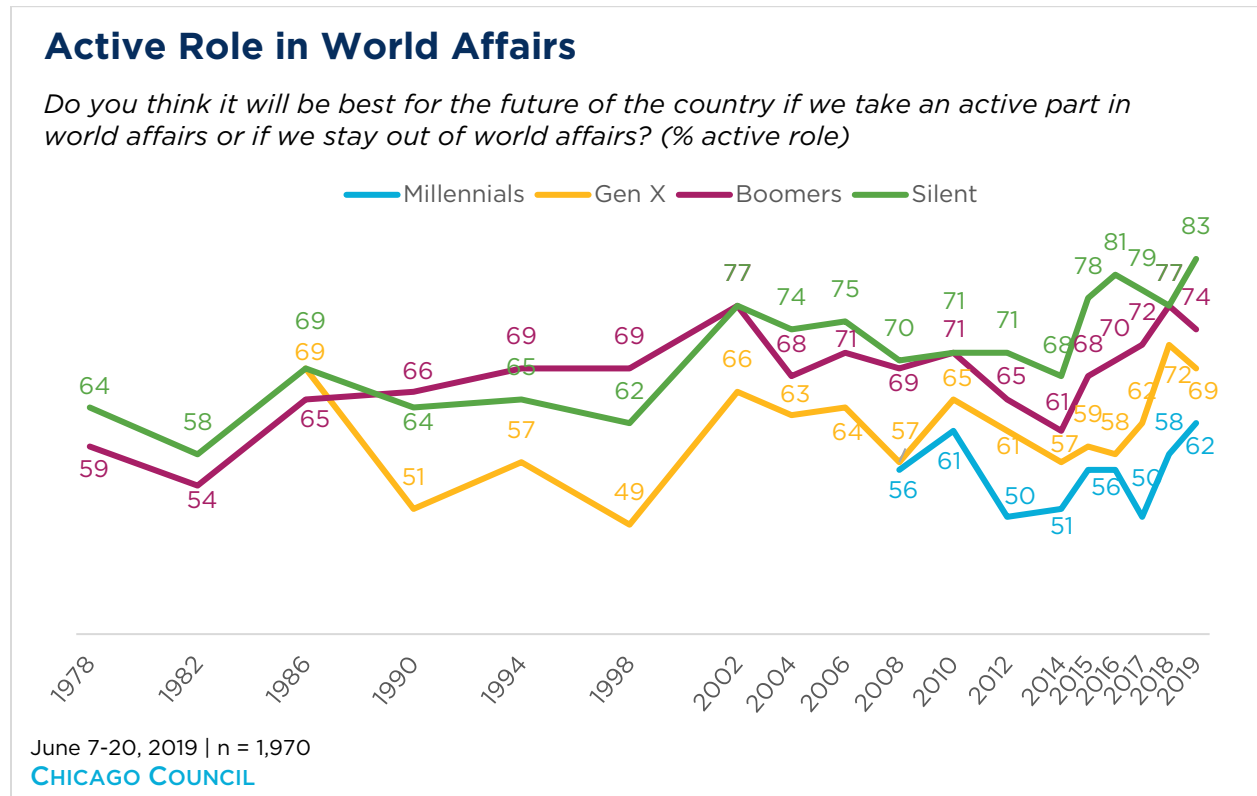
While partisanship and ideology certainly drive views toward foreign policy, there is still an underlying influence of birth year that set the generations apart from each other. A [2019 Pew article](#) highlights the effects of shared formative experiences on individuals' perspective and interaction with the world.

For example, Millennials experienced the closing chapter of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks, and the genesis of several unpopular wars in the Middle East as children. These events likely affect their views toward US participation in world affairs. While a majority (62%) of Millennials support the United States taking an active part in world affairs, this is a smaller majority than any other generation.

In fact, each older generation is more likely to favor active engagement than the cohort preceding it, rising to 83 percent among the Silent generation who say the United States should take an active role in world affairs.⁴

⁴ In open-ended explanations to this question, those who prefer to stay out of world affairs typically referenced a need for greater emphasis on domestic issues like job security and government over-spending. Others want to avoid interfering in other countries' affairs. Those who opt to take an active role usually cite national security concerns and the United States as a model for freedom and humanitarianism.

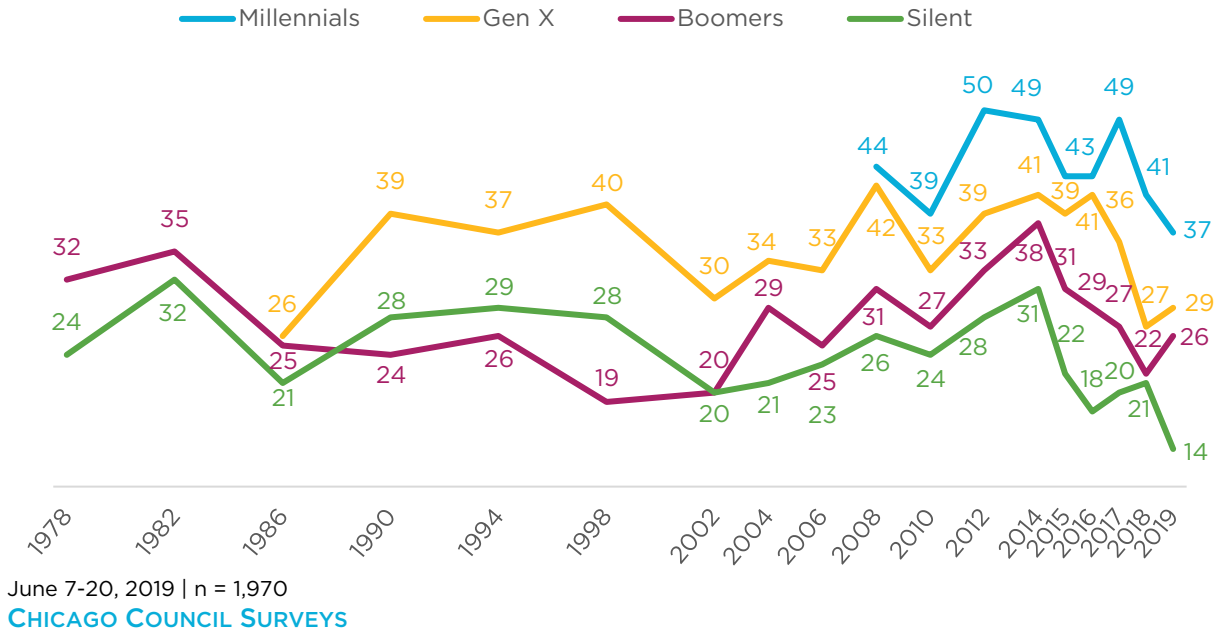
Longitudinal data could suggest that a cohort's particular stage in the life cycle influences opinion toward US engagement, meaning that as people age they increasingly favor active US participation in world affairs. Looking at the results of the 1978 Chicago Council Survey, for example, the Boomers, then the youngest generation, were the most hesitant to favor US engagement in world affairs: about 32 percent favored staying out of world affairs (and 59% supported an active role), nearly the same proportion as Millennials today. Moreover, Millennial support for active US participation in world affairs is now at a higher level of support compared to their younger years.



At the same time, Millennials have been more likely to say the United States should stay out of world affairs than any other generation, with about half saying the United States should stay out of world affairs in 2012 (50%), 2014 (49%), and 2017 (49%).

Stay Out of 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? (% stay out)



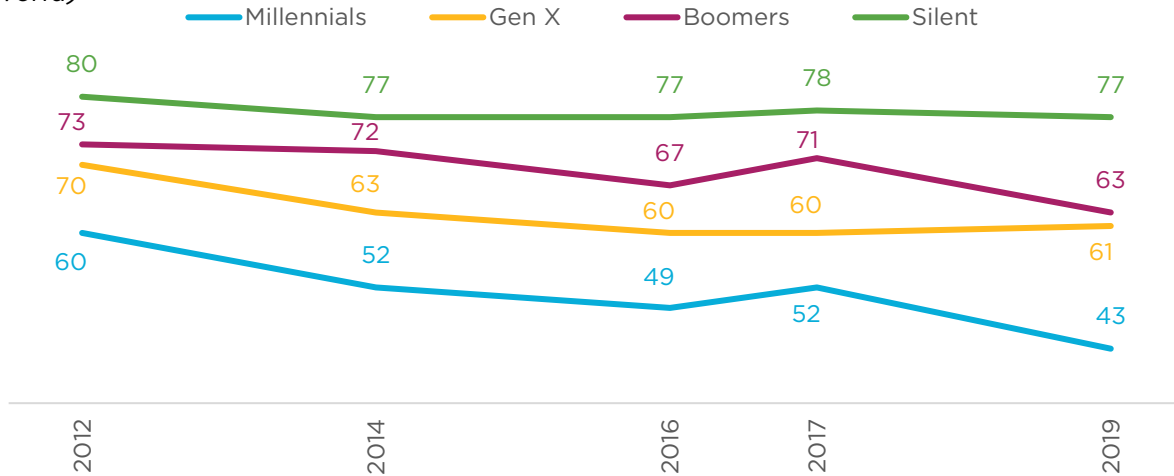
There are other differences between younger and older generations. The remainder of this report demonstrates that Millennials are the least likely of the generations to see the United States as greater than other countries (43%), to perceive threats to national security as critical, and to favor military intervention. Millennials and Gen X-ers are also the least likely to view immigration as a critical threat and the most likely to consider climate change a critical threat.

Greatest Country? Millennials Don't Think So.

Despite the nationalism inherent in President Trump's political message, fewer Americans now view the United States as an exceptional country than when first asked in the 2012 Chicago Council Survey. Asked whether the United States is the greatest country in the world or whether it is no greater than other countries, a shrinking majority of Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers say the United States is the greatest. Notably, Millennials and Boomers have declined the most from 2017 to 2019 while the Silents and Gen X-ers have remained at relatively steady levels since 2014.

Greatest Country by Generation

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? (% greatest country in the world)



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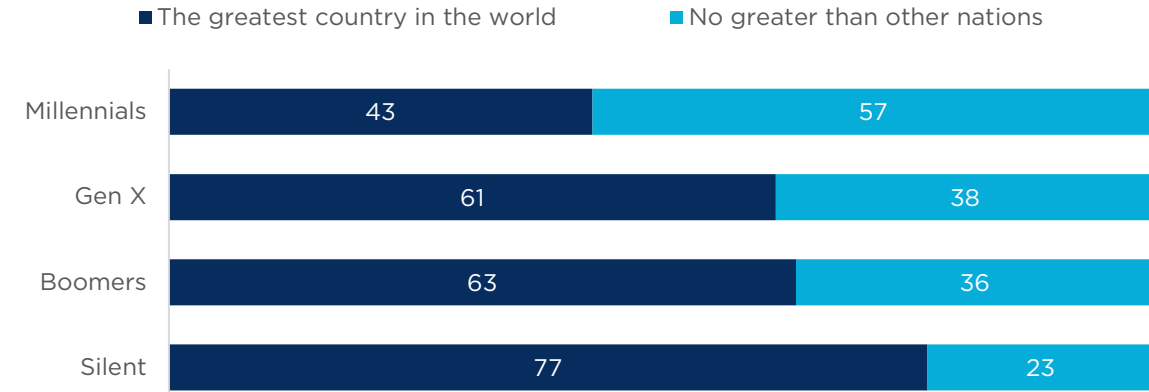
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In particular, Millennials seem to reject the idea of American exceptionalism. They are the only group to respond in majority numbers that the United States is no greater than other countries (57%). Moreover, in 2018, asked how proud they are to be American, Millennials were the least likely to respond that they were extremely proud (32% Millennial, 45% Gen X, 54% Boomer, 55% Silent).⁵

⁵ These differences coincide with a 2017 Pew survey, that found Millennials to be the least likely to agree that the United States stands above all other countries in the world (18% vs. 30% Gen X, 34% Boomer, 46% Silent). See Doherty, Kiley, O'Hea, "The Generation Gaps", Pew Research Center, March 1, 2018, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/03/01122435/03-01-18-Generations-release.pdf>.

Greatest Country or Not?

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? (%)



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The decline in exceptionalism may be related in part to domestic concerns rather than the US position in the world. One potential source of discontent may be economic equality, an issue emphasized by leading Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. In general, Americans who say the distribution of wealth in the United States is becoming less fair are more likely than others to say the United States is no greater than other nations (54%). An even larger majority of Millennials who say the distribution of wealth is becoming less fair believe the United States is no greater than other countries (68%, 51% of total Millennials).

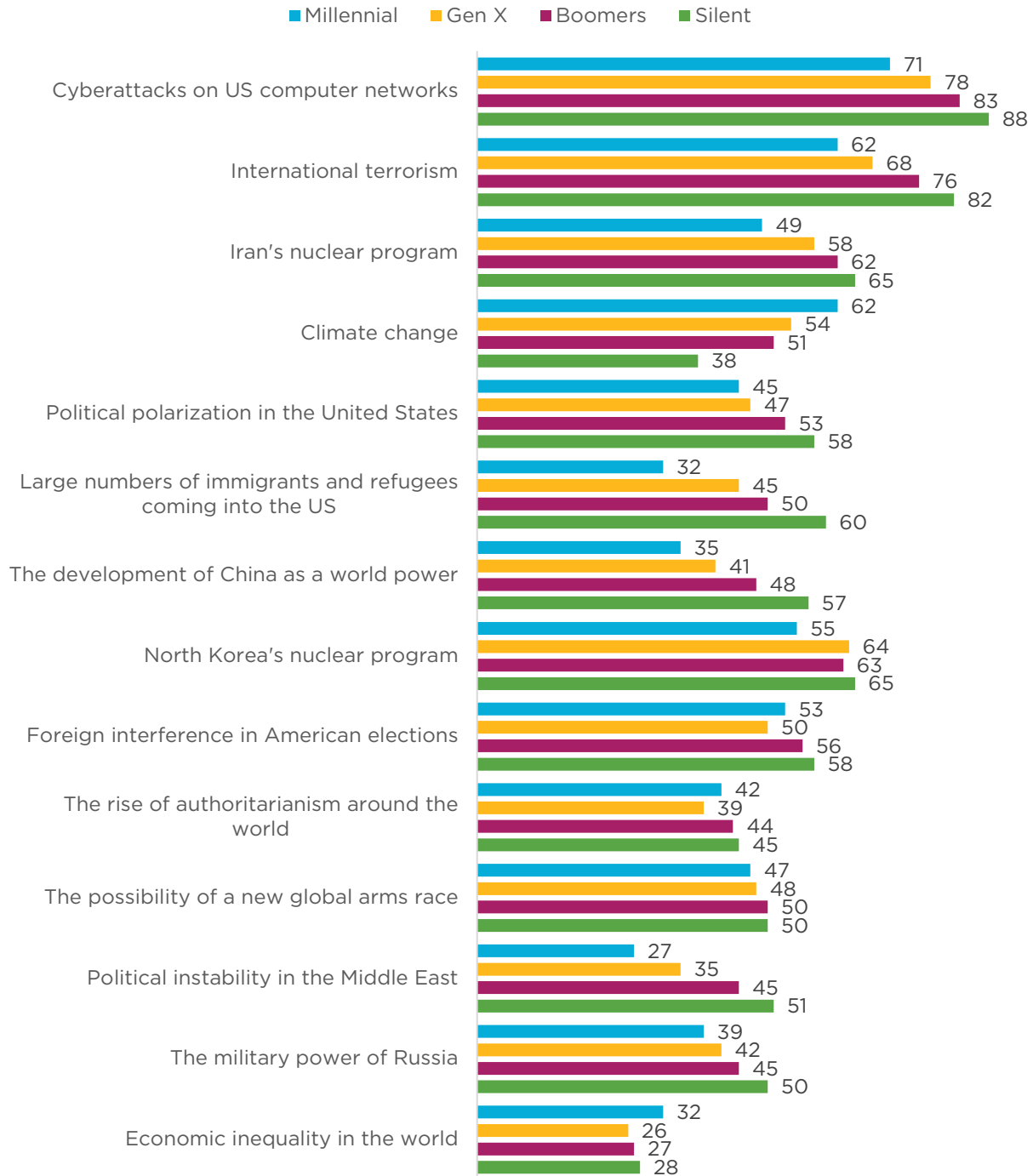
Fewer Security Concerns among Millennials

In past Chicago Council Surveys, the youngest generations have often been the least likely to perceive potential threats as critical to the United States (for full threat figures, see appendix figure E). This correlation generally holds for most potential threats in the 2019 data, but there is one significant exception to this pattern: climate change. On this issue the pattern is reversed, with younger generations most concerned about it. To see the embodiment of this, one need look no further than Greta Thunberg, the teenage activist from Sweden who has become a famous advocate for combatting climate change.

Majorities of all generations consider terrorism and cyberattacks to be critical threats. But there is a difference of intensity between the oldest and youngest generations—with gaps of up to 20 percentage points. The largest generational differences besides climate change are on the threats posed by immigration, political instability in the Middle East, and the development of China as a world power. In each of these cases, there are at least 20-percentage-point gaps between the oldest and youngest Americans.

Critical Threats to the United States

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest 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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The Council's longitudinal data allow for some retrospective analysis of threats as generations age. Around the end of the Cold War in 1990, just 33 percent of Boomers viewed Russia's military power as a critical threat, and 36 percent viewed China's development as a critical threat—similar to 2019 Millennial ratings about Russia and China's power today (39% Russia a critical threat, 35% China a critical threat). Today, nearly half of Boomers view those as critical threats (45% military power of Russia, 48% development of China). On the other hand, Gen X-ers hardly shifted at all in this same time frame; for the military power of Russia, they said 40 percent critical threat in 1990 and 42 percent in 2019; for the development of China as a world power, they said 46 percent in 1990 and 41 percent in 2019.

Chicago Council Surveys and other research have indicated that part of the corresponding link between age and threat perceptions could reflect increases in news consumption. As Americans age, they seek out news and information about world affairs more often. In the 2018 Chicago Council Survey, Boomers and the Silent generation were most likely to be very or somewhat interested in international news, while Millennials were the least likely to be (see appendix figure F). Similarly, a 2016 Pew study found that the older people get, the more likely they are to follow the news all or most of the time.⁶

As Age Increases, So Does Support for Military Intervention

Just as threat perceptions increase with age, so does backing for military action to address potential threats. Across all questions, older generations—either Baby Boomers or Silents—are more likely to favor using US troops in a variety of circumstances.

Millennials are the least likely to favor using US troops if North Korea invaded South Korea, if China invaded Taiwan, if Russia invaded a NATO ally, or in several other hypothetical scenarios. (For full troop-use figures, see appendix figure G.)

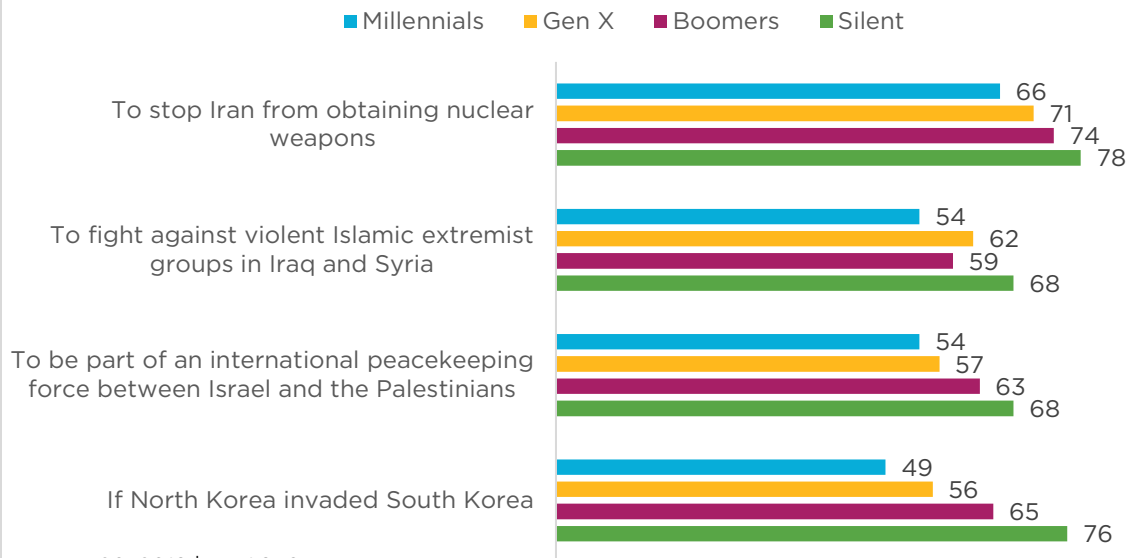
However, there are three circumstances where there is majority Millennial support for using US troops: to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (66%),⁷ to fight violent Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria (54%), and to be part of an international peacekeeping force to uphold a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians (54%).

⁶ "Young adults are less enthusiastic about news, but they are more likely to get news online", *Pew Research Center*, July 6, 2016, https://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/pj_2016-07-07_modern-news-consumer_6-01/.

⁷ Asked in a separate question about a series of specific actions against Iran, only 40 percent of the overall public and 36 percent of Millennials support sending US troops to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities.

Use of US Troops

Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: (% favor)



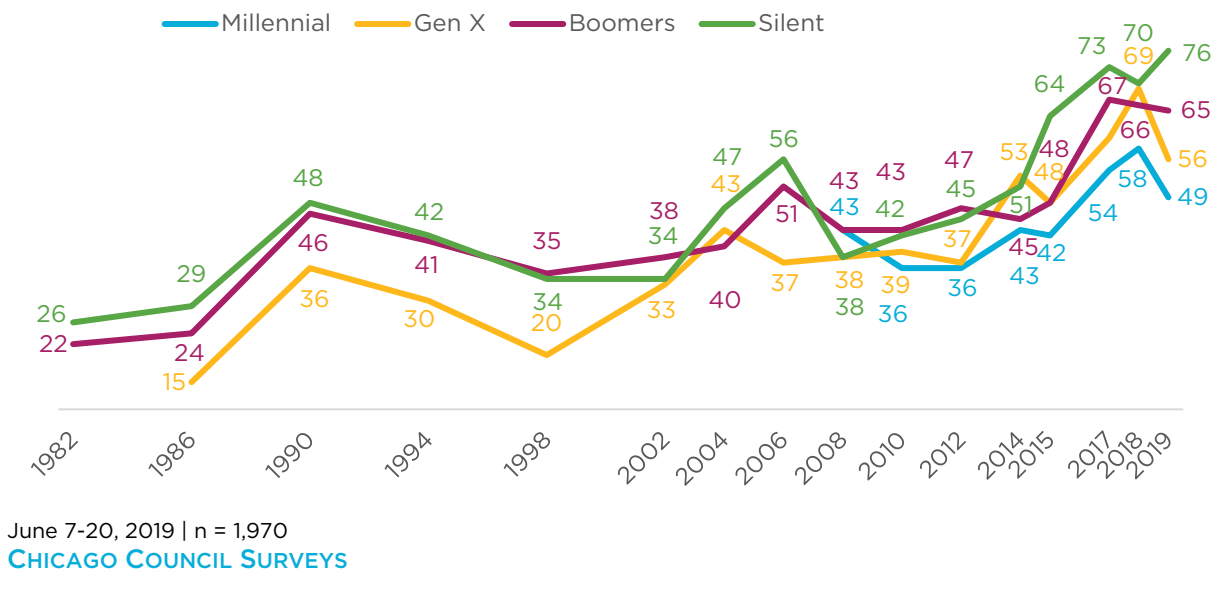
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Older generations' support for the use of US troops has changed over the course of their lives, sometimes dramatically. For example, while majorities of Boomers and the Silent generation are now in favor of using US troops if North Korea invades South Korea, their younger selves were strongly in opposition to such action. In 1982, only 22 percent of Boomers and 26 percent of the Silent generation favored military action in this scenario. In this case, support for the use of force against North Korea has grown across the board with escalating nuclear threats from Pyongyang.

If North Korea were to invade South Korea

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: *if North Korea invaded South Korea* (% favor)



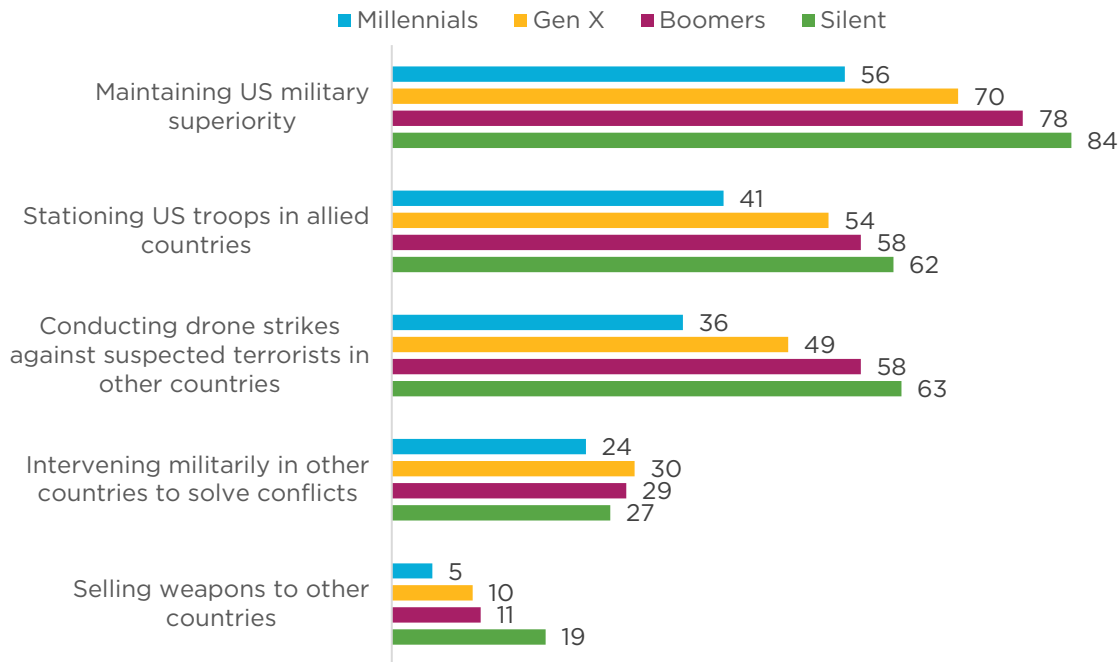
Young Are Less Comfortable with Military Superiority and Spending

Despite these specific cases illustrating public support for the use of US troops, relatively few Americans of any generation believe that US military interventions in other countries make the United States safer. No more than three in ten Americans from any generation say these interventions make the United States more safe; even fewer say the same about US weapons sales to other countries.

In contrast, there are prominent gaps between Millennials and older Americans on whether stationing troops in other countries (41% Millennial, 62% Silent) and conducting drone strikes against suspected terrorists in other countries (36% Millennial, 63% Silent) make the United States more safe.

US Foreign Policy and Safety

In your opinion, do each of the following policy approaches make the US more safe, less safe, or do they not make a difference? (% more safe)



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While majorities across age divides believe that maintaining US military superiority makes the United States safer, there is a glaring difference in the degree to which Millennials and the older generations believe this is true (56% of Millennials versus 84% of the Silent generation). A 2018 Chicago Council report on generational divides found that younger Americans, reflecting a broader hesitance to rely on military tools, were consistently less likely to prefer expanding defense spending than their older compatriots.⁸ A 2017 Pew survey similarly found that Millennials were much more likely than other generations—especially the Silents—to say that good diplomacy, rather than military strength is the best way to ensure peace.⁹

Support for Alliances, Multilateralism Spans All Generations

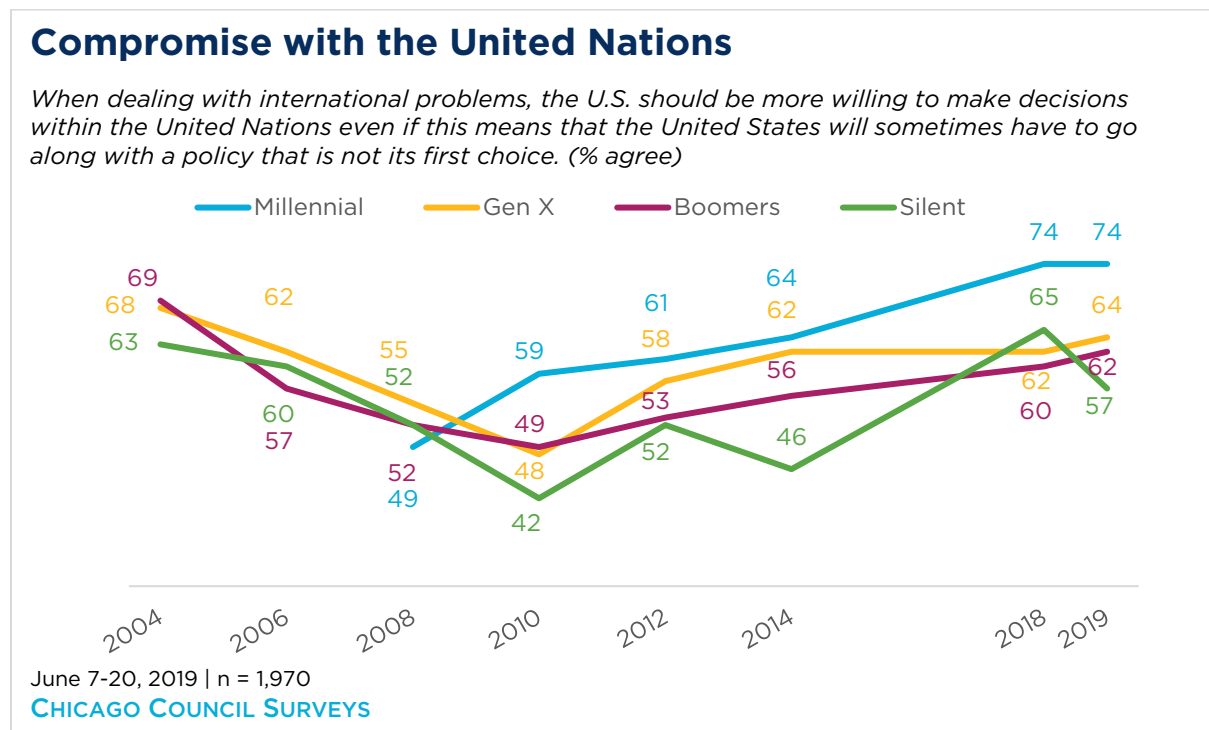
On the other hand, majorities across all generations believe that maintaining US alliances, promoting democracy and human rights around the world, and participating in international organizations makes the United States safer. Large majorities of every generation say NATO is still essential to US security (71% Millennial, 70% Gen X, 76% Boomer, 76% Silent) and even higher proportions of each

⁸ Trevor Thrall, Dina Smeltz, Erik Goepner, Will Ruger, Craig Kafura, “The Clash of Generations? Intergenerational Change and American Foreign Policy Views”, *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/clash-generations-intergenerational-change-and-american-foreign-policy-views>.

⁹ Doherty, Kiley, O’Hea, “The Generation Gaps”, Pew Research Center, March 1, 2018, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/03/01122435/03-01-18-Generations-release.pdf>.

generation say the United States should increase or maintain its commitment to NATO.

Millennials are also the most likely to support compromise on policy decisions with the United Nations even if that means the United States sometimes forgoes its first choice. In this case, Millennials (74%) are 17 percentage points more likely to agree that the United States should compromise than the Silent generation (57%). Moreover, this pattern of younger generations, and Millennials in particular, being more willing to compromise with the United Nations has grown consistently since 2010.



Across generations, willingness to engage in multilateralism manifests itself in support for international agreements. The 2018 Chicago Council Survey asked respondents whether the United States should participate in various accords, and for each one—including the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris agreement, and the Iran nuclear agreement—majorities of every generation responded that the United States should participate. (See appendix figure H for full numbers.)

Conclusion

American attitudes toward foreign policy are subject to change throughout people's lives due to many factors, including their interest in world news, historic events that occur during their life, and the zeitgeist of the times. Those generations that experienced the brunt of the Cold War grew familiar with a bipolar world where the Soviet Union was understood to be an existential threat. The younger generations have largely experienced a unipolar world where the United States has called the shots. These different backdrops have influenced attitudes on key policy issues.

There has undoubtedly always been a passing of problems from one generation to the next, but after 17 years of being included in the Chicago Council Survey sample, Millennials remain less likely than older generations to support international engagement, militarism, and American exceptionalism. Perhaps this is simply a product of the times, and younger Americans will develop greater support for these activities as they go through life much like the Boomers have. But if that does not happen the implications of a generation hesitant to commit to an American spirit of dominance and unilateralism could fundamentally reshape the global geopolitical landscape.

Appendix

Figure A

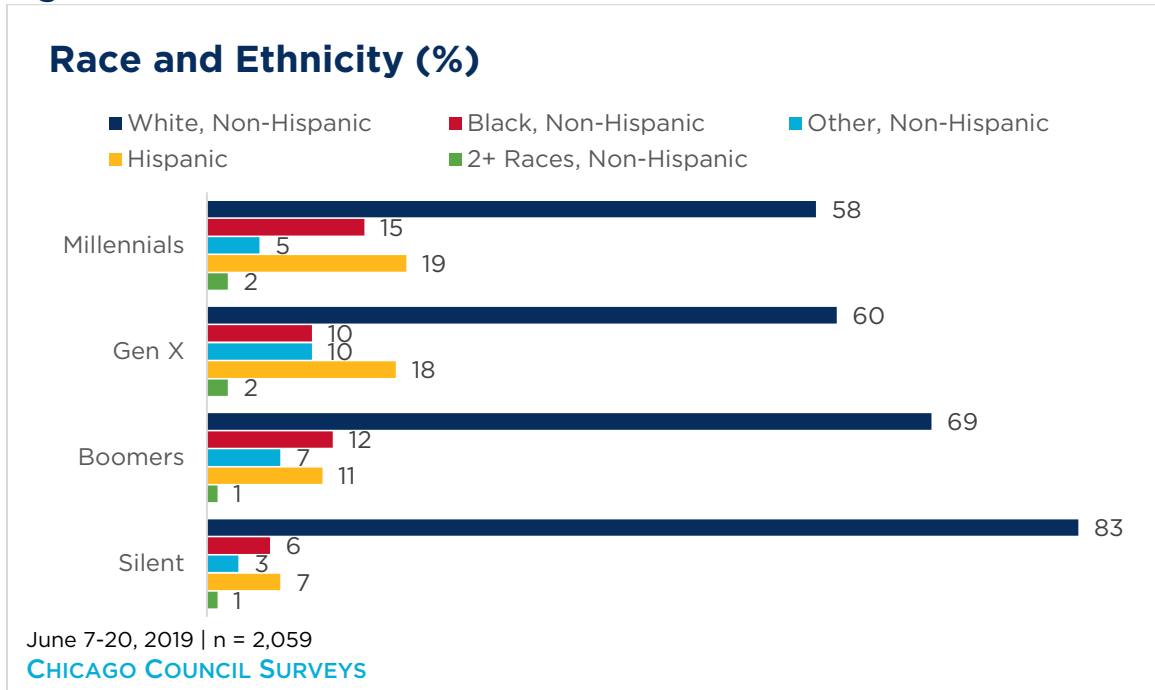


Figure B

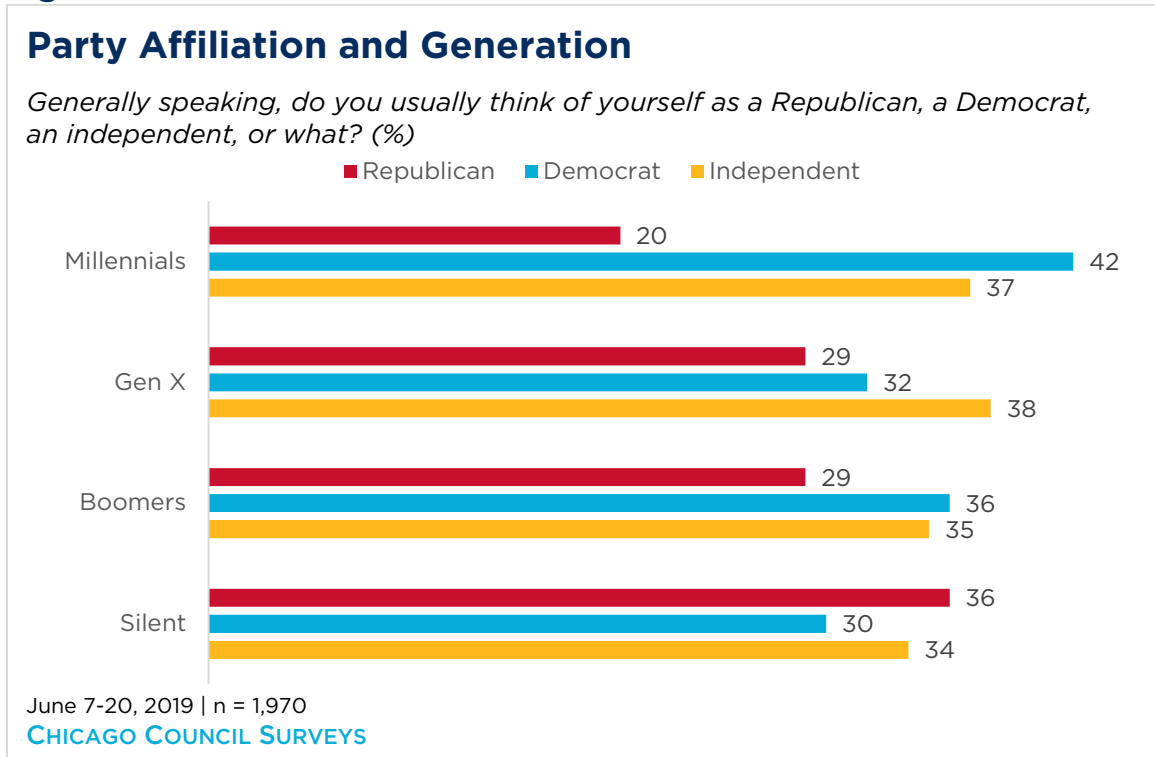
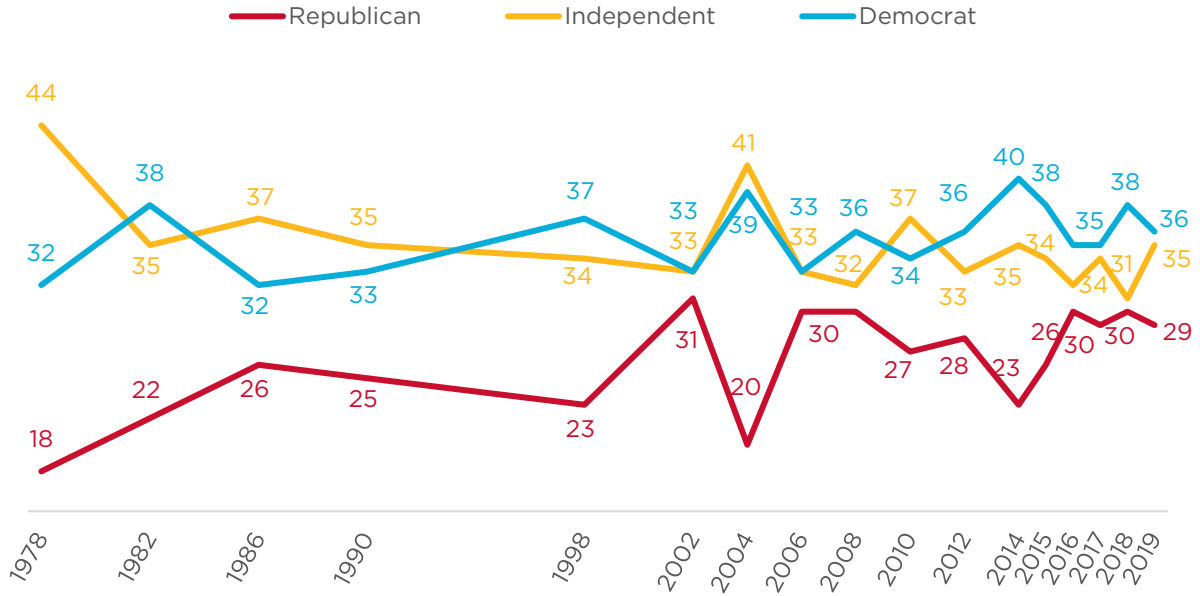


Figure C

Baby Boomer Party Affiliation over Time

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

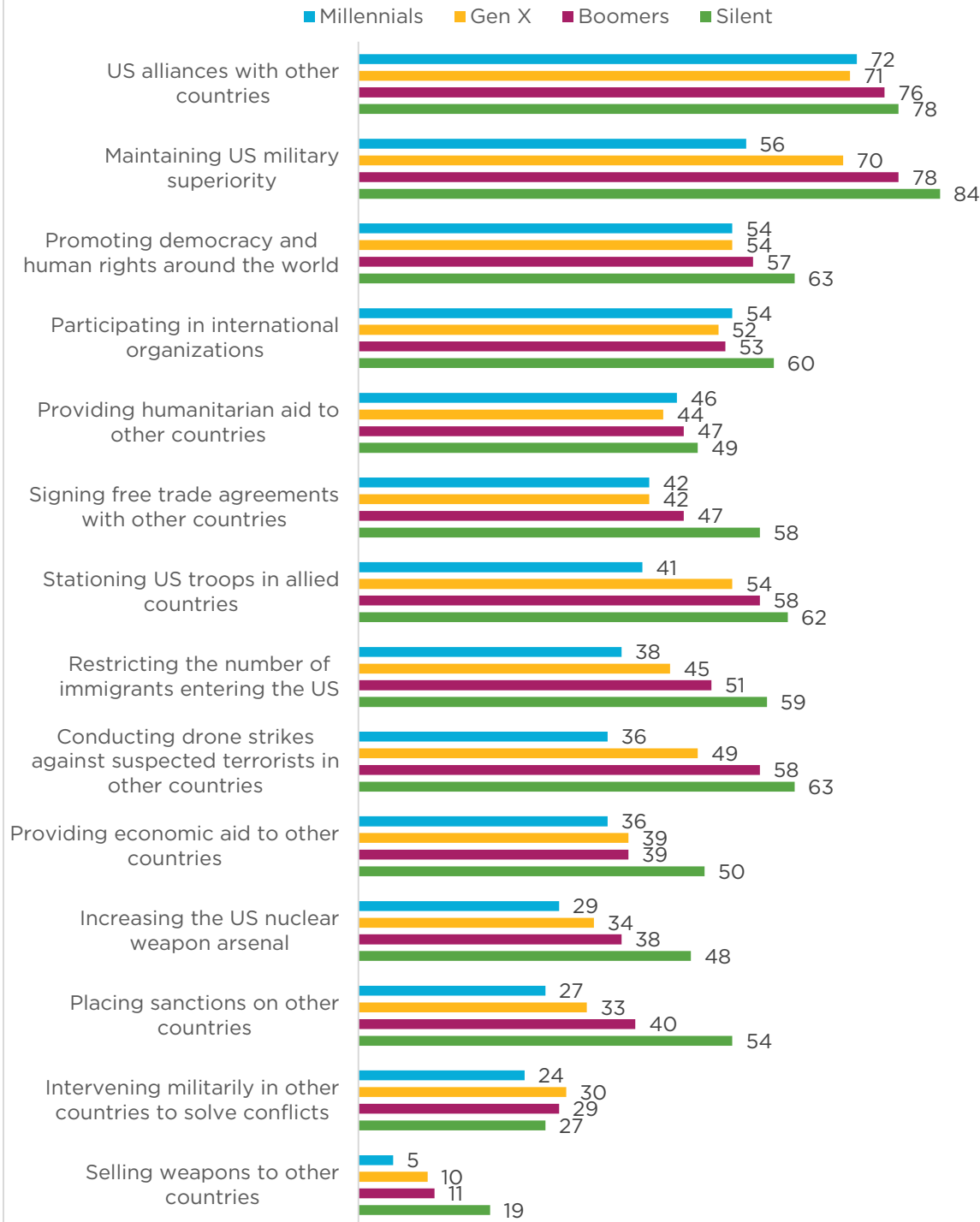


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Figure D

US Foreign Policy and Safety

In your opinion, do each of the following policy approaches make the US more safe, less safe, or do they not make a difference? (% more safe)



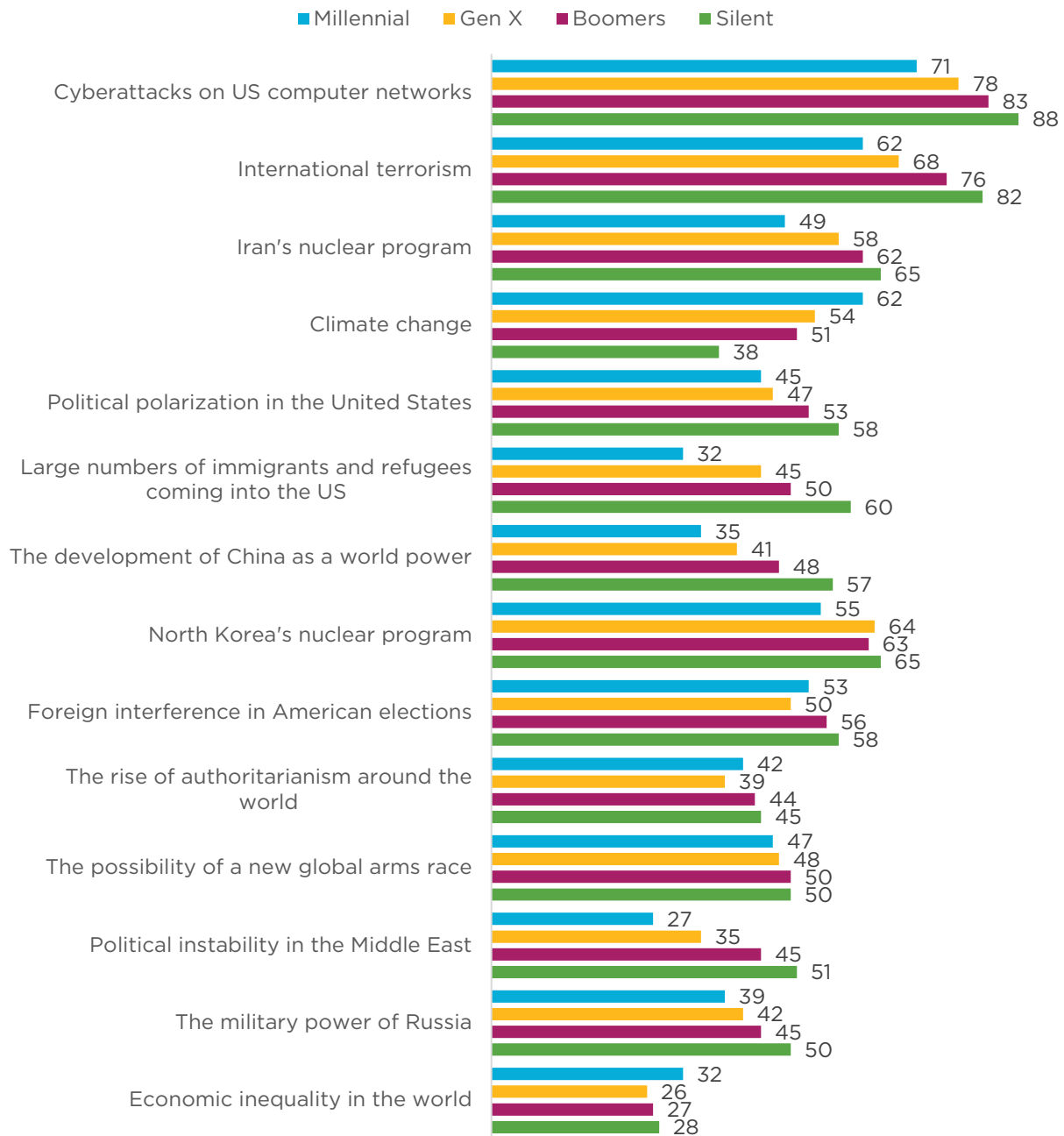
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Figure E

Critical Threats to the United States

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest 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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Figure F

Interest in the 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? (% very interested+ somewhat interested)

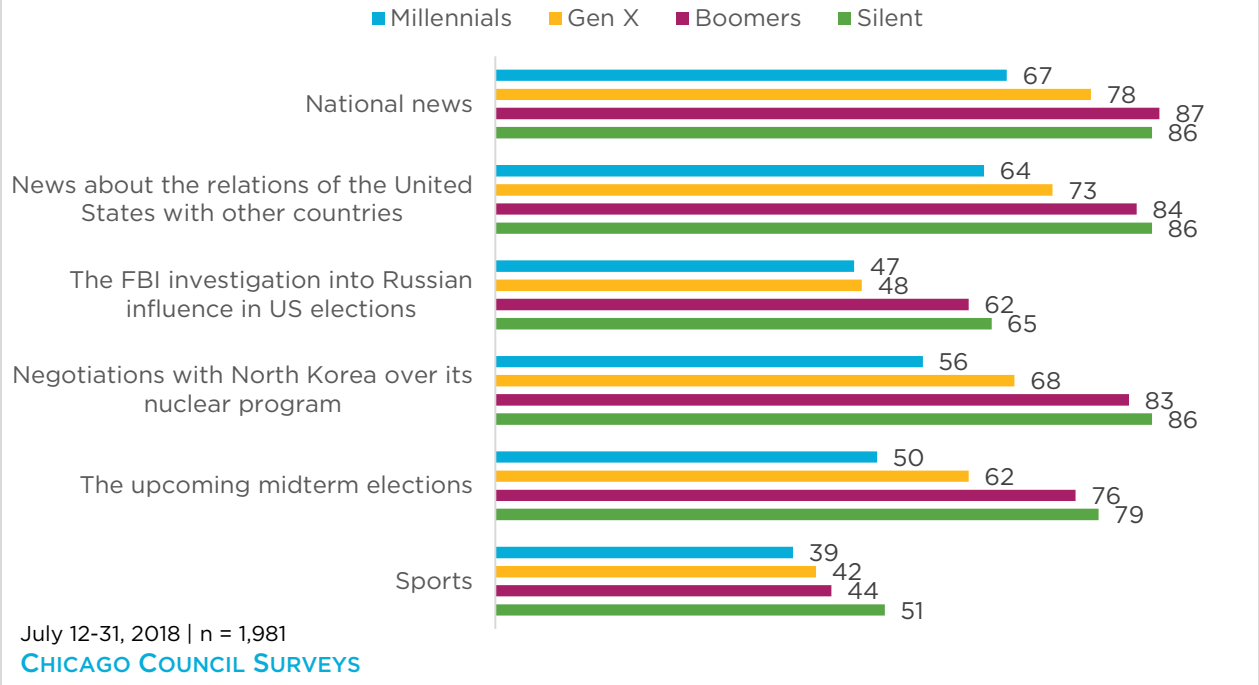


Figure G

Use of US Troops

Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: (% favor)

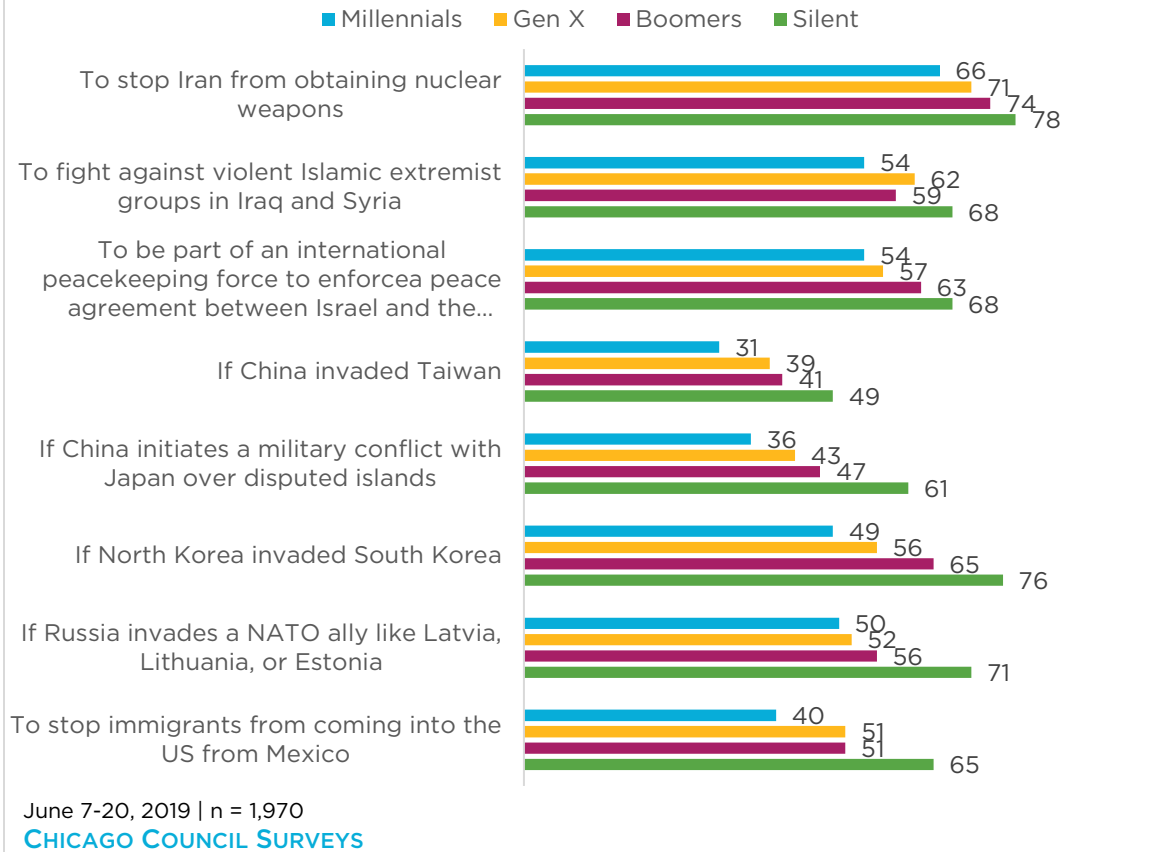
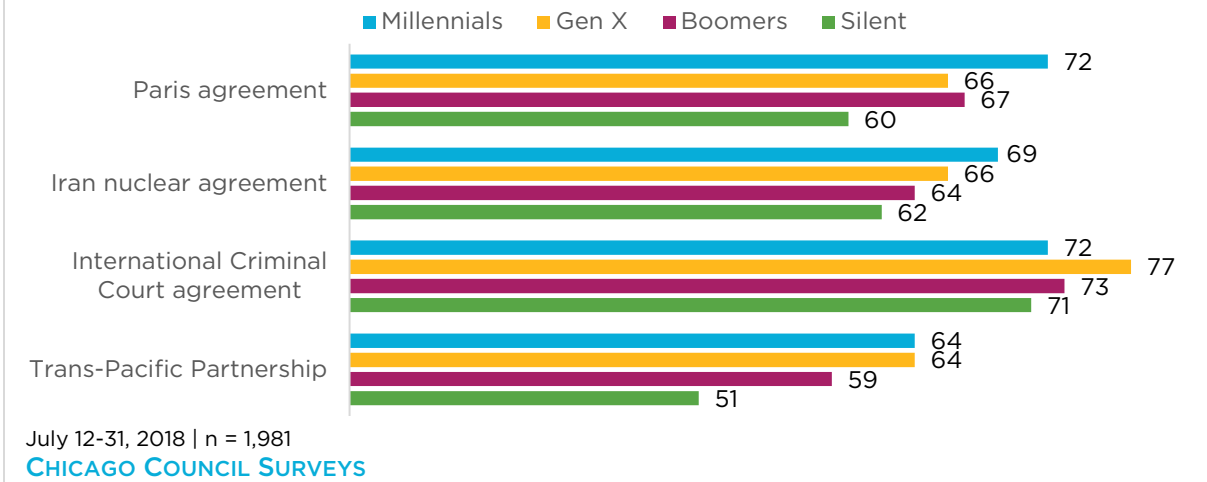


Figure H

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)



Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California, using its large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 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 ± 2.3 , including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Respondents provided their age and the generation variable was determined as follows: Millennials are those born from 1981 to 1996; Gen X-ers are those born between 1965 and 1980; Baby Boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964; the Silent generation are those born between 1928 and 1945. Gen Z—those born between 1997 and 2012—are not included in this analysis due to an insufficient number of respondents falling into this age range.

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

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