

New Poll Finds Americans Favor U.S. Isolationism, Acting Alone

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A new poll shows that a growing number of Americans feel that the United States should “mind its own business internationally” when it comes to foreign affairs.

The title of the Pew Research Center poll, which asked 2,000 U.S. citizens about United States’ role in the world, says it all: “Isolationist Sentiment Surges to Four-Decade High.”

The survey found that almost half of Americans (49 percent) think the United States should stay out of foreign affairs and let other countries get along the best they can on their own. That number is the highest in 40 years and represents an increase from 30 percent who felt that way just seven years ago.

Andrew Kohut, the director of the Pew Center, calls it “an extraordinary spike in isolationist” sentiment and thinks he knows why.

“I think part of the reason here is the American public’s focus on a bad economy, also feeling badly about the world,” Kohut says.

“There are two wars that the public thinks are not going well, terrorist concerns are even greater than they were four years ago, so the American public is not looking fondly at the rest of the world.”

Paralleling the rise in isolationist sentiment among Americans is a sharp rise in unilateralist feelings.

Fully 44 percent of Americans — the highest percentage in more than 45 years — say that because the United States is “the most powerful nation in the world, we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying about whether other countries agree with us or not.”

Skepticism On Afghanistan

The survey’s results also reveal a distinct lack of public enthusiasm for President Barack Obama’s foreign-policy approach, especially toward Afghanistan.

The poll, which was conducted before Obama announced that he is sending an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan, found that only 32 percent of the public favored adding more U.S. soldiers to the fight. Forty percent said they would like to decrease the size of the U.S. force.

There is also skepticism that the war is worth fighting. Fewer than half (46 percent) of those surveyed said they think Afghanistan will be able to stand on its own and resist the Taliban and other extremist groups once there is no longer an outside force like the United States to help them.

James Lindsay, the director of studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, which co-sponsored the poll, said those results could mean problems for Obama as he tries to make the case that the country must deepen its involvement in the Afghanistan.

“My guess is as long as the public and influential [thinkers] are persuaded that Afghanistan can’t be fixed, it’s going to be very hard to sustain strong public support for staying in Afghanistan,” Lindsay says.

The survey also found that just half of Americans (51 percent) approve of Obama’s overall job performance on foreign-policy issues.

Americans also think the United States’ role in the world has diminished considerably in the last decade. Forty-one percent said the United States plays a less important and powerful role as a world leader than it did in 1999 — the highest number who have ever said so, according to the polling agency.

China’s Rise

By comparison, more Americans than ever now see China’s role in the world, especially economically, as having grown. Forty-four percent said China is now the world’s leading economic power, compared with 27 percent who said the United States is.

In February 2008, before the global recession hit, 41 percent of Americans considered their country the world’s leading economic power.

But Americans also see China’s new role as an economic powerhouse as something to fear. A majority of those surveyed (53 percent) believe China is a threat to the United States.

Kohut says Americans don’t necessarily see China negatively, but they do worry about what its rising power means for the United States.

“I think in an era where the public feels that China has surpassed the United States economically, and people are feeling very, very badly about the American economy, it’s not unreasonable that people would conclude that China represents a threat,” Kohut says.

Americans’ top three foreign fears, according to the survey, are: Islamic extremist groups like Al-Qaeda, Iran’s nuclear program, and international financial instability.

Russia, on the other hand, is no longer seen as an enemy.

“Russia has obviously over the years declined as a threat in the view of the public. The public certainly doesn’t put it at the top of its list as it once did, and we only get 2 percent of the public saying, ‘Russia represents the greatest danger to the United States,’” Kohut notes.

“You get 21 percent saying Iran represents the greatest danger to the United States.”

A little more than a third of Americans are worried about the growing tensions between Russia and its neighbors, while two-thirds say North Korea's nuclear program constitutes a major threat to the United States.

Obama's declaration that, "under [his] administration the United States does not torture," doesn't seem to have changed many Americans' minds about the necessity of using harsh interrogation techniques.

The proportion of the public that says torture is at least sometimes justified against suspected terrorists has actually increased slightly over the past year.

Just over half of Americans (54 percent) say torture is at least sometimes justified to gain important information from suspected terrorists, compared with 44 percent who said so 10 months ago.

The Pew survey was conducted between October 28 and November 8 of this year.

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