



# INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

## Something in the Air: “Isolationism,” Defense Spending, and the US Public Mood

Carl Conetta, CIP Project on Defense Alternatives, October 2014

*Abstract:* The report reviews current and historical U.S. public opinion polls on global engagement, military intervention (including ISIS), and defense spending conducted by the Pew Research Center, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Gallup, and the Center on Policy Attitudes, among others. It identifies and analyzes opinion trends in light of changes in policy, strategic conditions, and the U.S. economy.

**Main report:** [http://www.ciponline.org/images/uploads/publications/Something\\_in\\_the\\_Air.pdf](http://www.ciponline.org/images/uploads/publications/Something_in_the_Air.pdf)

**Executive Summary:** [http://www.ciponline.org/images/uploads/publications/Something\\_in\\_the\\_Air\\_ExecSum.pdf](http://www.ciponline.org/images/uploads/publications/Something_in_the_Air_ExecSum.pdf)

### MAIN POINTS

- Public opinion polls show a decline in support for U.S. global engagement over the past decade. However, this is not evidence of "neo-isolationism," as some political leaders and commentators have suggested.
- Despite the decline, polls continue to show majority public support for U.S. global engagement and for a U.S. global role comparable to that of other major powers. Public dissent has focused narrowly on America's recent wars and on the notion that the United States should assume a uniquely assertive or “top” global role.
- Americans favor cooperative, diplomatic approaches to resolving conflict and they tend toward a "last resort" principle on going to war. However, the U.S. public will rally to support a forceful response to violent attacks on perceived vital interests. Americans also support forceful action to stem genocide – at least in prospect.
- Americans do not favor involvement in most third-party interstate wars or in any civil wars. They also do not support regime change efforts, armed nation-building, or persisting constabulary roles abroad. On balance, the U.S. public lacks a "crusading spirit" with regard to the use of force abroad – whether the aim is posed in moral, humanitarian, political, or geopolitical terms.
- To gain public support, military goals must be seen as realistic, pragmatic, and cost-effective. Ongoing support requires that the perceived costs of war match the perceived benefits. Domestic economic conditions are key in shaping the perceived "opportunity cost" of war.
- Current support for bombing ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria is consistent with the limits outlined above. Support will waver if the mission grows or fails to show real progress.

- Polls show a chronic gap between elite and public views on military intervention and America's global role. Foreign policy elites express a stronger preference for military activism and a dominant U.S. role. More common among the general public are selective engagement, cooperative leadership, and isolationist views. These differences may reflect differences in how costs and benefits are experienced.
- Singular events such as the 9/11 attacks can temporarily close the elite-public gap. It re-emerges if the public feels that the costs of military activism are exceeding its benefits. Economic and fiscal crises increase public sensitivity to cost-benefit issues and to trade-offs between competing goals, domestic and military.
- One consequence of recession, federal deficits, and the experience of recent wars has been reduced support for defense spending. Counter-balancing this is enduring majority support for superior defense capabilities. However, the public views military superiority as a deterrent and an insurance policy, not a blank check for military activism.
- A plurality of Gallup respondents in 2014 continue to desire less Pentagon spending. This may soon change. Public perceptions of threat and of the health of the U.S. military are pivotal in determining attitudes on spending and such perceptions are quite susceptible to manipulation.
- Partisan political dynamics significantly affect public opinion on defense spending. During polarized election campaign periods, security policy debate becomes more hawkish, carrying public opinion with it.
- Political actors seeking bigger Pentagon budgets and a more confrontational foreign policy can frame issues in several ways to bias debate. A common stratagem is to frame discussion of budget issues in terms of averting a "hollow military." Another is to use Second World War metaphors – references to Hitler, Munich, and isolationism – to frame current security challenges and policy options.
- Top presidential candidates for 2016, both Democratic and Republican, are likely to promote significantly higher levels of defense spending: more than \$600 billion for Fiscal Year 2018.
- Historical precedent suggests that, given partisan allegiances and the hawkish turn in the security policy debate, a plurality of Americans may come to support higher spending levels. However, precedent also suggests that majorities will not soon support new large-scale protracted military campaigns abroad. Moreover, support for increased spending, should it emerge, will soon evaporate if national leaders continue to over-reach abroad.

**CONTACT:** Carl Conetta, Project on Defense Alternatives, [cconetta@ciponline](mailto:cconetta@ciponline)

© Copyright 2014 by the Center for International Policy (CIP). All rights reserved. Any material herein may be quoted without permission, with credit to CIP.

The Center for International Policy, 2000 M Street NW, Suite 720 • Washington, DC 20036 • Phone: (202) 232-3317  
• Fax: (202) 232-3440