American Millennials and Foreign Policy

The Cato Institute has recently released a study of a collection of public opinion surveys from the last several years of American Millennials on their views on U.S. foreign-policy.¹ The findings of this study accord with my own anecdotal observations of my students, so I think it is worth discussing in some detail, even though generalizing about tens of millions of people runs the risk of oversimplification. The so-called “Millennial generation” is now the largest American generation eclipsing even the Baby Boom generation. Like all generations, Millennials’ worldviews have been profoundly impacted by the world in which they have grown up, with the experiences of the Obama administration informing their worldview to a considerable degree.

The Cato study had three main findings. First, Millennials perceive the world as being less threatening than do members of older generations. Second, they seem to be much more supportive of international cooperation (as opposed to unilateral action or maintaining adversarial relationships) than previous generations. They tend to see competitor nations more as partners than true competitors, and are inclined to believe that seeking opportunities for cooperation rather than confrontation should be the rule of the day. And third, Millennials appear to be far less supportive of the use of military force to achieve foreign-policy objectives than the previous generations. This is undoubtably a product of the mixed results achieved by intervention in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. This study describes this internalization of these foreign-policy failures as being a potentially permanent case of “Iraq aversion,” which seems akin to “Vietnam syndrome.” As with all generations, these views will undoubtedly change over time as individuals grow older—at least collectively, as studies consistently demonstrate that Americans tend to grow more conservative as they age—but these foreign-policy experiences will, I suspect, have some interesting permanent effects on many members of the Millennial generation.

Anecdotally, I can say that my students have no memory of the Cold War, having been born after it ended; the freshmen entering college in 2016 were mostly all born in the late 1990s. I have found that in querying students about the Cold War, at least before we begin discussing it in earnest in my classes, students tend to think about the Cold War as being an alien episode, a peculiar time that holds little meaning or understanding for them. I have also found that my students’ memories of even the September 11 attacks have grown fuzzier with each new entering freshman class. Now, those entering college for the first time in 2016 were just toddlers when those attacks happened. They have no direct memories of what was such a formative event for my generation (Generation X). The views of this generation have been shaped by profoundly different set of events than those that shaped my own fellow Gen Xers’ experiences, and of course are radically different from those of the Baby Boomers.

In terms of how Millennials view U.S. foreign-policy, the Cato study found that while Millennials tend to be not particularly worried about future foreign-policy events or the state of

the future international system, they tend to perceive profound constraints on American options for achieving foreign-policy goals. I suppose this probably shouldn’t be much of a surprise, given the relatively restrained successes that the United States has had in the post-9/11 environment under both the Bush and Obama administrations. After all, Millennials have yet to see the United States achieve any tremendous successes in the realm of foreign policy during their lifetimes. Even successes achieved through the application of direct military force have been decidedly limited. One could cynically attribute the relative lack of concern about foreign policy to either ignorance or self-absorption. Though that may be true for a minority of Millennials, I have found many of my students to be profoundly interested in matters of defense policy, strategy, and foreign affairs, even while some of their perspectives may differ sharply from my own.

While the U.S. defense policy circles in the second half of the 1990s were concerned with a rising China, which seemed poised to become a peer competitor to the United States, in the wake of September 11 the American public has been much less consumed with this issue then with the potential threats from terrorism. It is probably no surprise then that Millennials do not tend to see a rising China as particularly threatening to the United States or to the international system as a whole, at least according to the Cato study. Regarding the threat of international terrorism, polling data indicates that Millennials are the generation least concerned about terrorism, despite the seemingly ever-present attacks by terrorists in the West and elsewhere. Data from the last few years suggest that the rate of international terrorist attacks is on the rise, though it remains a rare occurrence. It would be interesting to conduct a similar set of polls a few years from now, depending on what the general trends are in international terrorism in the medium term.

One of the most significant findings of the Cato study suggests that Millennials strongly prefer restraint to action, especially unilateral action, regarding the use of military power. Undoubtedly these feelings will change over time, as it has with previous generations, but these findings may suggest a lessening of support for military adventures abroad as well as maintaining current U.S. force levels and defense spending. When military power is to be used at all, Millennials expressed a strong preference for doing so within a cooperative regime, with the United States as part of a coalition rather than acting unilaterally. While coalitions are undoubtedly more useful than unilateral military actions for a variety of reasons, the experiences of the last decade and a half have clearly demonstrated the difficulties in both creating and maintaining those coalitions over time, suggesting that a future United States politically dominated by Millennials and their cohort successors might tend to shy away from unilateral military action altogether. Millennials also represent the generation containing the greatest number of individuals who advocate that the United States should remain out of world affairs entirely. While the Millennial generation is not a generation of isolationists, they do evince a strong preference against interventionism. As with all of these views, the question of persistence remains; it may simply be that as Millennials age into their 30s, they might come to support greater intervention and use of military measures abroad as their predecessor generations have tended. Only time will tell.