

## MNI POLITICAL RISK ANALYSIS - US Daily Brief 13-02-26

by Adam Burrowes

### The White House *(times subject to change)*

-	President Trump departs the White House for North Carolina
13:30 ET 18:30 GMT	President Trump delivers remarks to Fort Bragg Military Families
19:45 ET 00:45 GMT	President Trump participates in a private dinner, Mar-a-Lago

### Key Dates:

- ❖ February 13: Funding for DHS expires
- ❖ April 16: New Jersey Special Election
- ❖ March 3: Texas/North Carolina Senate Primaries
- ❖ March 10: Georgia Special Election

### Washington

US President Donald Trump will depart the White House this morning for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he will meet military families and deliver remarks at 13:30 ET 18:30 GMT. Trump is wrapping up an uncharacteristically quiet week, with yesterday's White House event [nixing an EPA climate finding](#) being the only time he took live questions from reporters.

- Following engagements in North Carolina, Trump will travel to his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, where he will spend the weekend. Trump's weekend schedule notes 'private meetings' at Mar-a-Lago on Saturday and Sunday.
- Axios is out with a [useful piece](#) outlining a recent uptick in resistance to Trump policies. The report offers the caveat, "To be clear, the number of House and Senate Republicans willing to cross Trump publicly remains tiny. But everywhere else, resistance is growing."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio arrived in Germany today for a three-day trip that includes meetings today and an address to the Munich Security Conference on Saturday. Rubio will continue his trip in Slovakia and Hungary.

- At 09:00 ET 14:00 GMT, Rubio will meet with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. At 11:00 ET 16:10 GMT, Rubio will meet his Syrian counterpart. At 12:40 ET 17:40 GMT, Rubio will host a reception for US Congressional delegations.

### Munich Security Conference

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio leads a large delegation of US officials and lawmakers at the Munich Security Conference, which kicked off in Germany today.

- Last year's conference was the venue for a speech by Vice President JD Vance, which accelerated a rupture of the transatlantic relationship. In addition to a raft of punitive tariffs on European trading partners, Vance accused European leaders of ignoring the will of the people and opening borders to mass migration.

- The transatlantic relationship has continued to fray. Along with Trump's claims to sovereignty over Danish-controlled Greenland, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent were scathing in their assessment of European power at last month's World Economic Forum. Bessent largely dismissed Europe's concerns as [irrelevant](#), and Lutnick [announced](#) that Europe's economy was dead.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and French President Emmanuel Macron have been the most assertive in calling for allies to reduce exposure to US influence and forge a more self-sufficient defence and foreign policy path.

- German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who opened the conference with a speech, said last week, "Trans-Atlantic relations have changed, and no one in this room says this with more regret than I do. But nostalgia and reminiscing about bygone better times won't help us."

The Security Conference's official [report](#) said, "the US-led post-1945 international order is now under destruction," specifically citing Trump as a "wrecking ball" and one of the "demolition men" destroying the norms and institutions of that international order.

- The report also pondered, "whether destruction is really clearing the ground for policies that will increase the security, prosperity, and freedom of the people."

A [Politico survey](#) this week found that far more people in Europe described the US as an unreliable ally than a reliable one. And they are no longer confident that partnership with the US is sufficient to deter adversaries.

- The New York Times notes on a recent French survey, "A large majority backed sending European troops to defend Greenland, if tensions there escalate. Fifty-one percent said Trump was an enemy of Europe; only 8 percent called him a friend."
- Semafor notes, "European nations have sought to club together to [boost defense capabilities](#), [reduce reliance on US technology](#), and [diversify trade ties](#). Weaning off the US will be tough, but as one veteran diplomat told the journalist Noah Barkin, "We need to plan for a world where [the US is seeking to undermine everything we hold dear](#).""

The broad expectation is that Rubio will continue the broad thrust of the Trump administration's approach to Europe. But he is unlikely to be as combative as Vance. Rubio is likely to focus on the administration's primary gripe with Europe – that they abrogate their own defence responsibilities in favour of domestic political priorities.

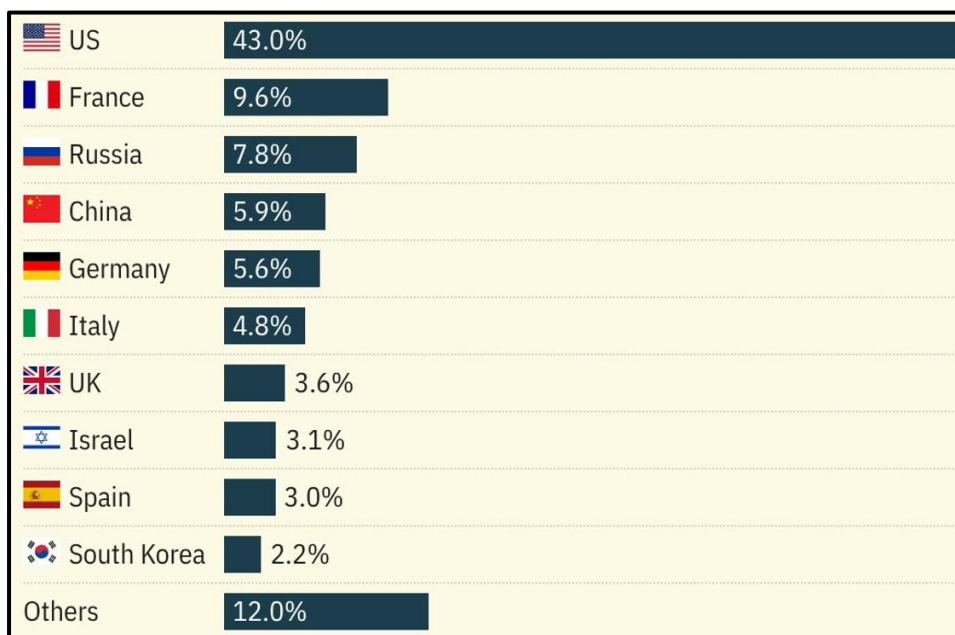
- Rubio told reporters yesterday, "*The world is changing very fast right in front of us. The old world is gone – frankly, the world that I grew up in – and we live in a new era in geopolitics, and it's going to require all of us to sort of reexamine what that looks like and what our role is going to be. And it's – we've had many of these conversations in private with many of our allies, and they are our allies, and we need to continue to have those conversations.*"

The administration's commitment to supporting MAGA-aligned political movements in Europe appears to be supported by Rubio's choice of bilateral meetings following the conference. First, he will travel to Slovakia for a meeting with Prime Minister Robert Fico and

then to Hungary for a meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Both of whom have been sympathetic to Russia and regularly obfuscated EU policy. The latter's party is currently [trailing in the polls](#) ahead of Hungary's April 12 general election.

- Rubio noted yesterday that he expects to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at some point during the conference.
- Politico notes, "Over the past three years, the MSC has served as a venue for high-stakes negotiations on Russia's war in Ukraine. This year, it's likely to serve as a glaring reminder of just how stuck talks are."

**Figure 1: Global Share of Exports of Major Arms, 2020-24**



Source: Semafor, SIPRI

Key political speakers on day one of the Munich Security Conference, with timings. Livestreams will be available [here](#) or [here](#).

- **06:45 ET 11:45 GMT:** German Chancellor Friedrich Merz
- **07:30 ET 12:30 GMT:** European High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, US Ambassador to the UN Michael Waltz, Colombian Minister of Defence Pedro Arnulfo Snchez (Panel disc: 'Breaking Point: The International Order Between Reform and Destruction')
- **08:10 ET 13:10G MT:** Japanese Defence Minister Shinjir Koizumi
- **08:30 ET 13:30 GMT:** German Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Finnish President Alexander Stubb, US Senator Thom Tillis (R-SC) (Panel disc: 'Tariff-fying Times: Managing the Weaponisation of Trade')
- **10:30 ET 15:30 GMT:** Swedish PM Ulf Kristersson, Moldovan President Maia Sandhu, Chair of the NATO Military Committee Adm. Giuseppe Cavo Dragone (Panel disc: 'Destructive Ambiguity: Deterring and Countering Hybrid Warfare')

- 11:30 ET 16:30 GMT: Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrii Sybiha, French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Noël Barrot, British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs Yvette Cooper, Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs David van Weel, US Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) (Panel disc: Spotlight on Security Guarantees for Ukraine)
- 12:00 ET 17:00 GMT: French President Emmanuel Macron
- 15:00 ET 20:00 GMT: US Permanent Representative to NATO Matthew Whitaker, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D), Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) (Panel disc: Breaking (With) the Past: Seismic Shifts in US Foreign Policy)

## Tariffs

Bloomberg [reports](#) that, “The Trump administration is working to narrow its broad tariffs on steel and aluminum products that companies find difficult to calculate and the European Union wants reined in as part of its pending trade deal with the US.”

- Bloomberg notes, “Trump last year imposed a 50% levy on foreign steel and aluminum in a measure aimed at Chinese overcapacity. The step wound up hitting other major trading partners hard, including Canada, the EU, Mexico and South Korea.
- “Later added to the list were so-called derivative products that contained the metals, creating an arduous task for companies to identify the percentage of the materials in goods they sourced from overseas.”
- The move appears similar to a November drawdown of tariffs on beef, coffee, tropical fruits, and other commodities in November to combat rising prices. AP noted in November that Trump’s “abrupt retreat from his signature tariff policy on so many staples key to the American diet is significant, and it comes after voters in off-year elections this month cited economic concerns as their top issue.”

## China

Reuters reports that the Trump administration has “shelved a number of key tech security measures aimed at Beijing ahead of an April meeting between the two countries' presidents. The measures include a ban on China Telecom's US operations and restrictions on sales of Chinese equipment for US data centers.”

- According to the [report](#), “The US has also put on hold proposed bans on domestic sales of routers made by TP-Link and the U.S. internet business of China Unicom and China Mobile along with another measure that would bar sales of Chinese electric trucks and buses in the US.”

Semafor notes that the tech moves reflect, “Trump’s broader efforts at rapprochement with Beijing ahead of his April summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. SCMP [reported](#) yesterday that, “China has confirmed that discussions were under way about [Trump’s] planned visit in April, when sources said the two sides were expected to extend their current trade truce by up to one year.”

- Reuters notes, “While the administration's actions are likely aimed at helping to defuse trade tensions related to Trump's costly trade war, some critics say they also

leave US data centers and other technology vulnerable to Chinese threats as data center construction surges to meet exploding demand for AI.”

## Department of Homeland Security

The Trump administration announced yesterday that it is ending its deployment of federal immigration agents in Minnesota. The move was welcomed by Democratic leaders in the state, but it does not appear to be enough to prevent a shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security at midnight tonight.

- Yesterday, Senate Democrats blocked a House-passed funding bill for the department, saying negotiations had not delivered sufficient reforms to immigration enforcement.

The Wall Street Journal notes, “DHS oversees Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection as well as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Transportation Security Administration and the US Coast Guard. While the failed vote sets the stage for funding to lapse at DHS for at least a week, there isn’t expected to be any significant impact on border enforcement from the shutdown.” The Journal has a rundown of the impacts of a DHS shutdown [here](#).

- As we have noted in previous editions of this newsletter, the impact of the shutdown is unlikely to bit until mid-March, when DHS Secretary Kristi Noem’s department begins to exhaust funds for key agencies.

As the political imperative to end the shutdown is limited, the lapse of appropriations is likely to extend for weeks. Lawmakers departed Washington yesterday for a weeklong recess. Democrats are expected to send a counteroffer to the White House this weekend outlining their demands.

- Politico notes, “But despite the rhetoric, both sides are largely keeping the details private — a sign that officials are taking the talks seriously,” with a senior administration official telling reporters Thursday, “We’re sort of just waiting for the next phase from the Democrat.”

## Congressional Business

The House is OUT

The Senate is OUT

Committee Schedule –

## Antitrust

The Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust at the Department of Justice announced in a [statement on X](#) yesterday that she has left her role amid a dispute with Attorney General Pam Bondi. Her departure suggests that the White House will become more deeply involved in future antitrust actions. Axios notes, “This is being viewed as a victory for big business, including tech giants, over some of MAGA’s more populist voices.”

- Slater's appointment was touted at the time as a credible bridge between conservative and progressive approaches to antitrust. Unherd wrote, "her reputation as a fierce enemy of monopolies, Trump's choice of Slater for the job drew cheers from the market-sceptical corners of the so-called New Right."
- The Daily Caller's White House correspondent noted yesterday, "The antitrust office has been at the center of some MAGA division for months. Critics have said that under Slater, mergers have ended favorably for the companies who have lobbied to other Trump officials. Others argue Slater has done great work to break up monopolies. The friction continues to grow."

Last week, Bondi overruled a decision by Slater to dismiss a top official within the department. Semafor [characterised](#) the episode as "the latest flashpoint in an escalating war inside the Trump administration's competition agency."

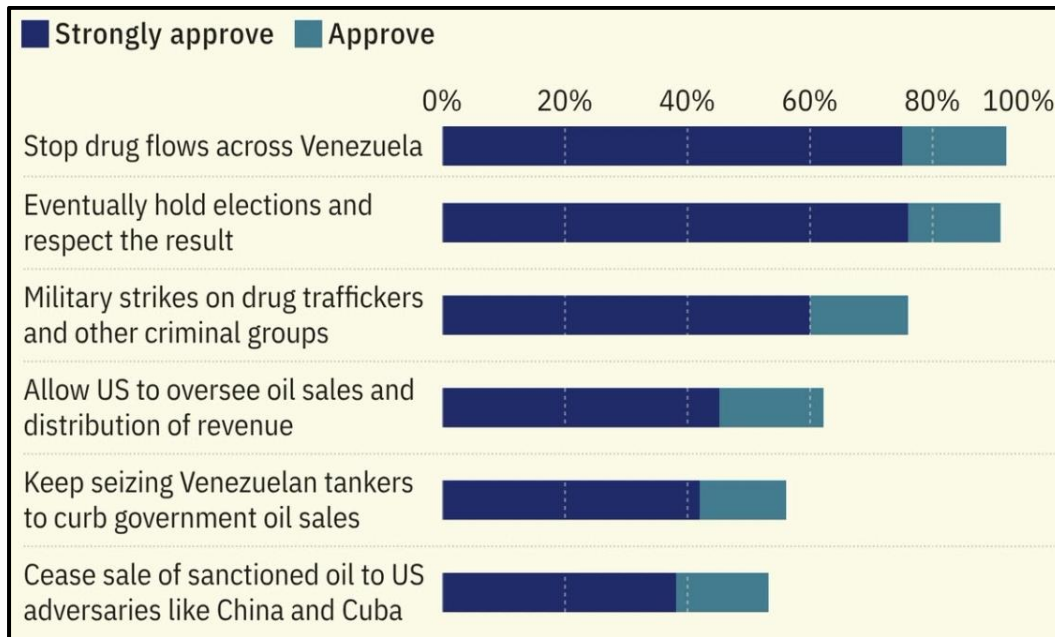
- Semafor noted last week, "The highest-profile antitrust case, involving HPE and Juniper, resulted in two of Slater's deputies being pushed out. One of them, Roger Alford, has accused the DOJ of "pervert[ing] justice" in its handling of mergers, saying in a scathing speech in August that decisions are made "depending on whether the request or information comes from a MAGA friend.""
- The New York Times noted in December that a potential sale of Warner Bros was "ratcheting up the pressure" on Slater as Trump's involvement "upended the usual process for reviewing major business deals like this one."

## Venezuela

Optimism in Venezuela is surging, following the US ouster of former President Nicolas Maduro. Trump wrote on [Truth Social](#) yesterday, "Relations between Venezuela and the United States have been, to put it mildly, extraordinary! We are dealing very well with President Delcy Rodriguez, and her Representatives."

- The Financial Times reports, "Venezuelans are much more optimistic about the future after the US seized authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro, and want free elections held this year, according to the first face-to-face opinion poll since Washington's military intervention."
- "Seventy-two per cent of those polled felt Venezuela was moving in a positive direction after Maduro's capture, although 58 per cent thought security had worsened, according to the poll by Gold Glove Consulting, a firm run by the former Latin America adviser to president Barack Obama."
- Semafor notes, "Washington's intervention has led to a surge in crude production — which last year accounted for almost all of Venezuela's exports — despite oil majors saying greater economic reforms were needed. Caracas' tight grip on civil society has eased somewhat too, notably with the release of some political prisoners, which would have been "unthinkable" before the US ousted Maduro, The Wall Street Journal reported."

## Figure 2: Venezuelan Views on US Demands or Policy Options



Source: *Semafor, FT*

## Iran

President Trump indicated to reporters yesterday that he will give Iran around a month to agree to a new nuclear deal. When pressed for a timeline on talks, Trump said, “I guess over the next month, something like that.”

- Later, Trump added, “I’ll talk to them as long as I like and we’ll see if we can get a deal with them. And if we can’t, we’ll have to go to phase two. Phase two will be very tough for them. I’m not looking for that.”
- Without expanding on what ‘phase 2’ could entail, Trump reiterated nonspecific threats of military action, “We have to make a deal otherwise it’s going to be very traumatic, very traumatic. I don’t want that to happen, but we have to make a deal. They should have made a deal the first time and they got Midnight Hammer instead, and this will be very traumatic for Iran if they don’t make a deal. Look, if they don’t make a deal, then uh it’ll be a different story.”

Trump said, “We had a very good meeting [Wednesday] with [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi Netanyahu and he understands, but it’s ultimately up to me. If the deal isn’t a very fair deal and a very good deal with Iran, then it’s going to be, I think, a very difficult time for them. In the back.”

- Speaking to reporters before departing Washington yesterday, Netanyahu expressed scepticism that Iran will be willing to strike and deal and stressed that any new nuclear accord must also cover Iran’s ballistic missile programme and support for regional proxy groups. Netanyahu’s comments broadly aligned with recent statements from Trump administration officials.

CNN, the New York Times, and AP have all reported that a second US carrier group is en route to the Middle East. CNN [notes](#), “the US is sending a second aircraft carrier strike group

to the Middle East in an effort to pressure Iran's leadership on its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.”

- James Jeffrey, a former US Ambassador to Turkey who served as a US envoy during Trump's first term, told a panel hosted by the SETA think tank yesterday, “Trust me, Trump will get some kind of deal with the Iranians on nuclear that he will declare a victory, and for the moment, will deal with the nuclear program, most of which is, of course, still buried,” per Laura Rozen at Diplomatic.
- When asked if he thought that a deal would be reached through negotiations or after military action, Jeffrey said: “Diplomatically. I am almost certain the ‘armada’ is a bluff.”

Alan Eyre, former State Department Persian language spokesperson now with the Middle East Institute, told an Iran panel hosted by George Washington University on Tuesday, “The downside of a military strike in Iran is so much greater than any possible, realistic upside.”

- Eyre continued, “The worst reason to strike —and the U.S. does this far too often — is to preserve legitimacy. You know, I say I'm going to do something stupid, and damn, I guess I have to do something stupid because I said I would do something stupid. And if I don't do something stupid, I lose face.”
- Eyre added, “The driving reality, at least as far as I can see, is that we do not have an internally consistent and coherent policy in terms of what we're trying to get in Iran. I can fathom no reason whatsoever for the US to strike Iran militarily. ... You cannot bomb Iran into a democracy.”

## Ukraine War

The Kremlin said this morning that a new round of peace talks on Ukraine will take place next week. On 12 Feb, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy raised the prospect of tripartite talks between the US, Ukraine, and Russia taking place in the US on 17 or 18 Feb, but said it was unclear if Russia would accept.

- Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov said, "There's an agreement that it will indeed take place next week. We'll let you know the location and exact dates. But it will indeed be next week."
- The New York Times [reported](#) earlier today, “Ukrainian officials say the Trump administration is ramping up pressure on them to make concessions to Russia in a push to end the war by early summer.”

Peskov declined to comment on reports that European countries could look to hold separate talks with Russia. Speaking to [Le Monde](#) earlier in the week, French President Emmanuel Macron said, "It is important to structure the resumption of a European discussion with the Russians, without naivety, without putting pressure on the Ukrainians, but so as not to depend on a third party."

- These efforts have made little progress to date, with France's E3 partners, Germany and the UK, both wary of resuming talks with Russia with concerns it could undermine the US and Ukrainian efforts to reach a peace deal.

Following on from [reports](#) on 12 Feb that Russia could embrace the US dollar again in an effort to boost economic ties with Washington, Peskov said that the two countries have

discussed trade and economic cooperation, but that "it's unlikely that such discussions will move beyond talk before the conflict in Ukraine is settled."

- Nevertheless, Peskov said "it's obvious that Moscow is proposing cooperation", and that "Russia did not decide to stop using the dollar, the US imposed restrictions."

### Chart of the Day

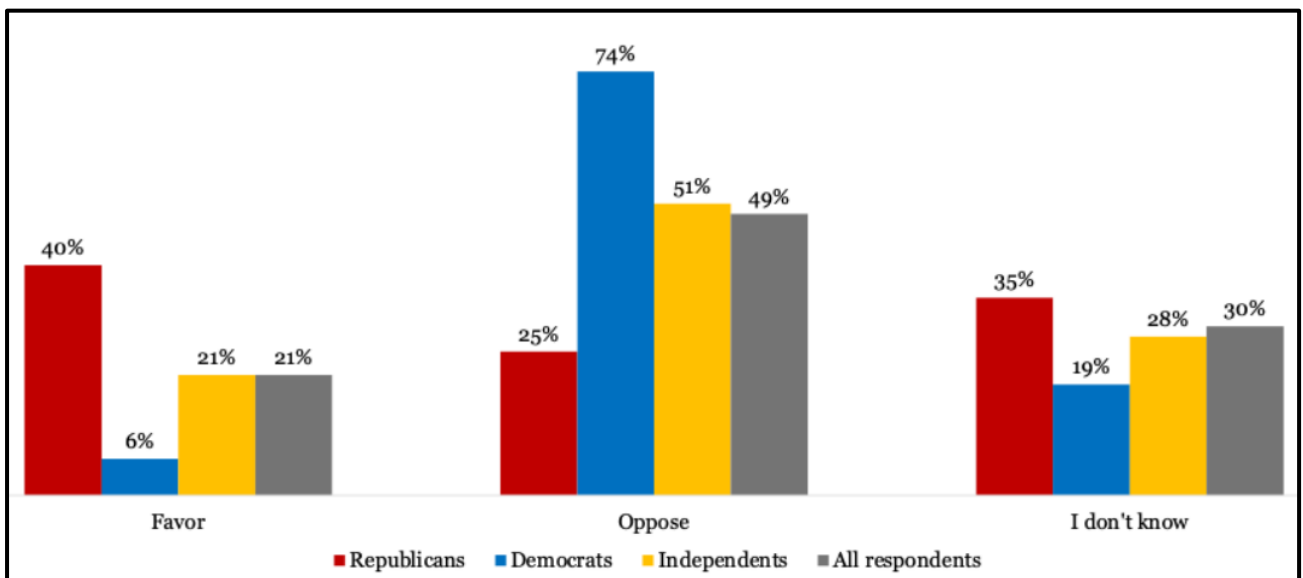
A new survey from the [University of Maryland](#) has found 21% of Americans said they favoured an attack on Iran, including 40% of Republicans, 6% of Democrats, and 21% of independents.

- "Meanwhile, 49% said they opposed an attack, including 25% of Republicans, 74% of Democrats, and 51% of independents. Notably, many more Republicans (35%) than Democrats (19%) said they didn't know," according to the report.

The survey followed up by asking, "Under the current circumstances, whose interests do you think would be most advanced by a war with Iran?"

- "Americans were divided with roughly one-third each saying war would most advance American interests (31%), most advance interests of other parties (35%), and those who said they didn't know (33%). The other parties whose interests Americans said would be most advanced included Israel (16%), the Iranian people (11%), and some Arab states (3%). Far more Republicans (20%) said the interests of the Iranian people would be most advanced than Democrats (4%); and far more Democrats (22%) said Israeli interests would be most advanced than Republicans (11%)"

**Figure 3: "Do you favour or oppose the US initiating an attack on Iran under the current circumstances?"**



Source: University of Maryland

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