BSA 42 | Security threats and military spending: New dimensions of old political divisions

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Security threats and military spending

This report considers the impact of recent international conflicts and tensions, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war and the Gaza conflict, on attitudes towards military spending and security threats. It explores how global events have influenced perceptions of various countries as threats to global peace and examines political divisions regarding defence priorities and expenditure.

There is high acceptance of defence spending

People are more likely to favour an increase, rather than a decrease, in military spending, while the proportion who believe defence should be the top priority for extra government spending has reached a record level.

- 40% favour increasing military spending, while 20% support a decrease

- 9% think that defence should be the top priority for extra government spending, prioritising it over areas such as education or health

Russia is perceived as the main security threat

The public's perceptions of threats to global peace have intensified, with a significant majority viewing countries such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, Israel and China as serious security concerns.

- 90% regard Russia as a serious threat to global peace. 78% view Iran as a serious security threat, compared with 77% for North Korea, 73% for Israel and 69% for China

- The perception that the US is a security threat has increased since the election of Donald Trump; in our regular British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey last autumn (during the presidential election campaign) 36% held this view, compared with 72% in a follow-up survey conducted in the spring of 2025

Attitudes to military spending, by political identity, 2024

Legend: Spend more or much more | Spend less or much less
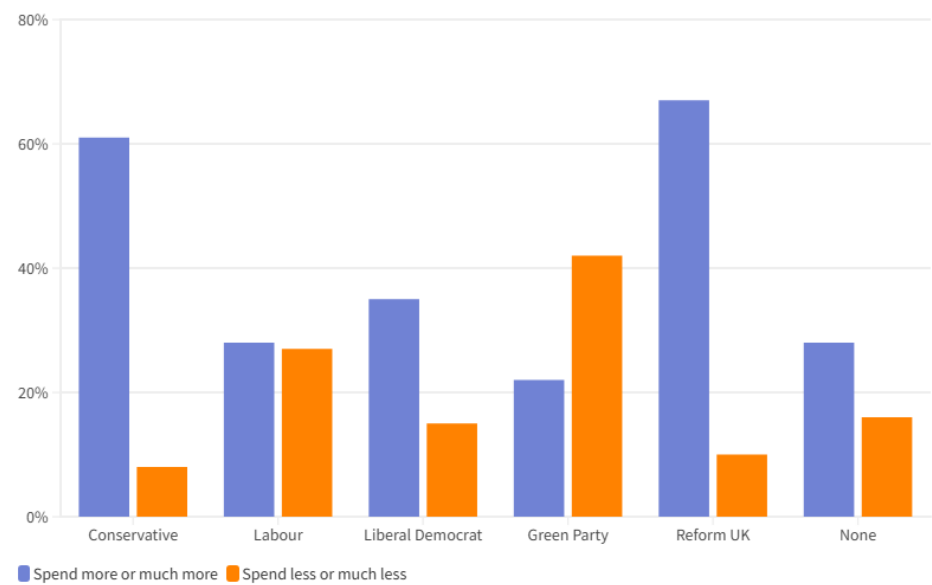
A divisive political topic

The topic of military spending and perceived security threats has created notable divisions within the British political landscape – as well as within the Labour Party itself.

- Supporters of the Conservatives (61%) and Reform UK (67%) are predominantly in favour of increased military spending, while Green Party supporters (42%) are more likely to want a reduced defence budget

- Labour supporters are divided on the issue of military spending, with equal proportions endorsing an increase (28%) or a decrease (27%)

- The perceptions that Israel and the US are serious threats to global peace are more common among Labour and Green Party supporters, compared with Conservative Party and Reform UK supporters

Introduction

International insecurity has increased in recent years, due to developments in a range of regional conflicts and a series of non-military events. From the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe, from North America to the Middle East, new tensions are reopening old wounds, with consequences felt worldwide.

In February 2022, Russia invaded the south-eastern regions of Ukraine. This regional conflict, the first large-scale conflict on the European continent since the end of the Second World War, resounded globally. The United States (US) and European countries – including the UK – started to ship military equipment in support of the Ukrainian war efforts and applied economic sanctions to Russia in an attempt to reduce Russian military capabilities. In turn, Russia has found new trading partners in Asia, with states like China and Iran supplying military components for the Russian arms production (SIPRI, 2024; Lopez, 2024) and North Korea offering military assistance to Russia, through the deployment of over 10,000 soldiers on the Russo-Ukrainian front (McCurry, 2024).

The Gaza War has led to additional international instability. On 7th October 2023, Hamas launched an attack on Israel, killing 1,195 people and taking 251 hostages. This event triggered a full-scale invasion of Palestinian territories in Gaza, leading to a conflict that has lasted until today. The destruction caused by the invasion of Gaza, a small and densely populated area where military installations and civilian buildings often overlap, is hard to estimate. Jamaluddine and others (2025) have counted over 70,000 direct casualties in the first nine months of the conflict, but it is difficult to quantify the number of indirect victims, suffering from malnutrition, absence of clean water, or disruptions to the health services. This conflict was not limited only to Gaza; military engagement extended to the West Bank, and to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Yemen, increasing the risk of a regional escalation.

Developments in the Pacific have also impacted on the international order. The rivalry between Taiwan and China extends over generations, but China has recently re-ignited the tension through the deployment of military forces on the border and increasingly hostile declarations. Taiwan is strategic for China

from a military perspective, as it is the keystone of the 'first island chain', or a system of territories – Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, and the Philippines – politically aligned to the US who can shut China's maritime access (Toshi, 2012). However, Taiwan is also important from an economic perspective, especially for its semiconductor industry which, together with Samsung, controls 70% of the global market (Mudassir, 2021) and can therefore play a crucial role in China's industrial strategy.

Non-military events are also contributing to international insecurity. Trade wars began in early 2025, when the Trump administration first introduced tariffs on goods entering the US from a range of countries, including Mexico, Canada, and European states, then applied tariffs on all imports, with varying values depending on the country of origin. These led to retaliatory measures, reciprocated in the US with additional tariffs. The tariff escalation was particularly strong between China and the US; at the time of writing, the tariffs of the US on China's export reached 50%, after peaking at 135% in April-May 2025, while Chinese tariffs on US exports were at 30%, from 145% in the previous months (Brown, 2025). Such economic uncertainty adds to the mistrust and insecurity caused by digital security threats, such as the use of bots or AI-generated fake content (Chang and Vaduva, 2024) to foster misinformation on social media and interference in elections (Wolff, 2025).

In this deteriorating international context, the UK is seeking to improve its preparedness and reinforce security mechanisms and systems of alliances. Clearly, these solutions cost money. In early 2025, the UK government announced an increase in military spending to achieve these security objectives, committing to increasing the defence budget to 2.5% of GDP within two years (Kirk-Wade, 2024, Prime Minister's Office, 2025a). This initiative has been taken alongside talks with the European Union (EU) focusing on the establishment of a defence partnership extended to the UK (Macaskill et al., 2025).

The international events of recent years have impacted upon the British public, creating new societal cleavages. The biggest division appears to be caused by the conflict in Gaza, with London becoming the stage of several large-scale national demonstrations in support of Palestine, each one attracting over 250,000 participants in the streets of the capital (Meagher, 2024). The public also appear divided in their willingness to invest resources

in supporting Ukraine, with Reform UK voters appearing less willing to continue funding support, especially if the US were to withdraw their military aid to the country too (Keate, 2025).

The primary objective of this report is to describe these emerging social divisions, by examining how the public are perceiving these emerging international threats and their attitudes towards military spending. This investigation will be carried out in five steps. By way of setting the scene, we will begin by reviewing current levels of military spending in the UK, and how these have changed over time. Next, we will examine how attitudes to military spending have evolved since the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey first asked about this topic in 1983, observing how attitudes have changed in the aftermath of key international events, such as the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attack, and the invasion of Iraq. Thirdly, we will explore to what extent different countries are perceived by the public to be threats to global peace, and if and how people can be categorised on the basis of the sets of countries which they consider to be a threat. Next, we will review the relationship between perceptions of threats and attitudes towards military spending, in order to understand whether different perceptions of security threats are associated with levels of acceptance of greater military investment. The report will conclude with a review of how these attitudes unfold in the political arena – and we will seek to understand to what extent the divisions in attitudes to security threats and military spending map across people's political identities.

Military spending in the UK

Over recent decades, political parties have not placed military spending at the centre of their policy agendas. Consequently, it is likely that a large proportion of the public have been unaware of the volume of resources being spent on defence and security. This means that we might not expect actual levels of military spending to be correlated with public views regarding its priority and whether it should be increased. Nevertheless, a review of recent trends can help us contextualise and understand the decisions taken by the government in recent decades, and the political messages that have been communicated to the public.

SIPRI, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2025), has tracked military spending across the globe since 1949. As signified by the blue line in Figure 1, in 2024, military spending in the UK reached a financial value of £64 billion, equivalent to 77 billion of US dollars in 2023 prices. However, the share of military spending over the GDP of the country (signified by the orange line) has fallen over time, from over 10% in the early 1950s to 2.3% in 2024, although it has remained relatively steady for the past 20 years.

For the last decade at least, this picture of relative stability is unusual across NATO countries. In 2013, the year preceding the Russian occupation of Crimea, military spending in the UK as a share of the GDP, at 2.3%, was the same as it was in 2024. All other NATO countries, except for the US and Turkey, have increased their military spending in the same period, with the rate of change being much greater in countries bordering Russia, such as Poland (from 1.8% to 4.2%), Latvia (from 1% to 3.3%), Lithuania (from 0.8% to 3.1%), and Estonia (from 1.9% to 3.4%). In those years, the UK moved from being the third largest NATO spender in defence relative to the country's GDP, to being the eighth after Poland, Estonia, the US, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, and Denmark – most of them, countries sharing their border with Russia.

Figure 1 Military spending in the UK, 1950–2024
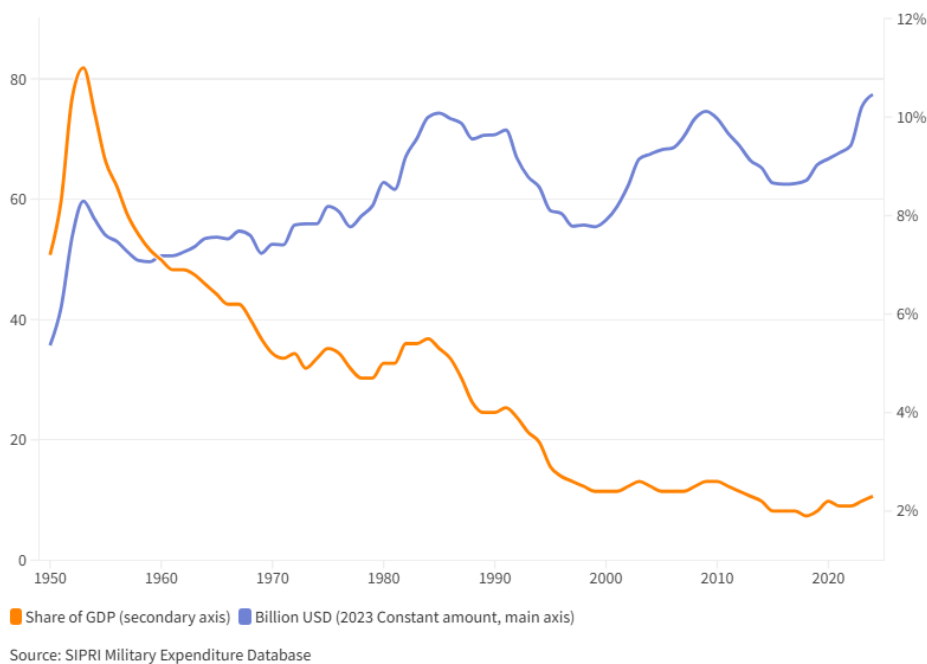
However, the reliability of NATO has come under fire in recent years, raising questions on the extent to which the defence mechanism that has covered the continent over the last 70 years can be trusted in the future. President Trump, during his first term, destabilised the cohesion of the alliance, claiming that the US may not intervene in the defence of NATO countries that do not spend at least 2% of their GDP in defence (Flockhart, 2018), the threshold required by the NATO alliance of its members. In his second term, the US president hinted that the threshold should move to 5% of GDP (Webber, 2025) and that the US military support for an attacked NATO member should be proportional to what the country spends in defence (Kube et al., 2025). These events pushed members of the EU to supplement the NATO defence umbrella with a regional defence mechanism, with the UK being part of these discussions (Wolff and Malyarenko, 2025).

Given the current security threats and the uncertainty of the security mechanisms in place since the end of the Second World War, the UK has committed to increasing its spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 (Kirk-Wade, 2024, Prime Minister's Office, 2025a). Prime Minister Starmer's speech announced this change and did not leave any doubts as to what was driving this decision:

"Putin's aggression does not stop in Ukraine. Russian spy ships menace our waters, Russian planes enter our airspace, Russian cyber-attacks hit our NHS, and just seven years ago there was a Russian chemical weapons attack, in broad daylight on the streets of Salisbury. We can't hide from this."
(Prime Minister's Office, 2025b)

If we are entering a new era of military spending, the cost of defence is likely to become a more salient political theme. On this basis, we next turn to examine the public's attitudes to this topic, and how these have evolved over time.

Attitudes to military spending and defence

The recent increase in the defence budget described above has brought military spending to the centre of the political debate. Is this increased attention reflected in a change in people's attitudes? Since the early 1980s, the BSA survey has included two questions which can help us to explore this issue.

Since 1983, participants have been regularly asked which, of a series of ten items, would be "your highest priority for extra government spending", with the listed items being education, defence, health, housing, public transport, roads, police and prisons, social security benefits, help for industry, overseas aid or "none of these".

As shown in Figure 2, 9% of people currently believe that defence should be the highest priority for extra government spending – the highest proportion registered to date. This answer was given by about one percent of the public between the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Support for extra spending on defence began to increase after 2003, with the proportion of adults selecting defence as their main priority peaking at 6% in 2009. This figure remained relatively high until the COVID-19 pandemic, when it dropped somewhat before rising again.

Figure 2 Defence should be the highest government priority for extra spending, 1983–2024
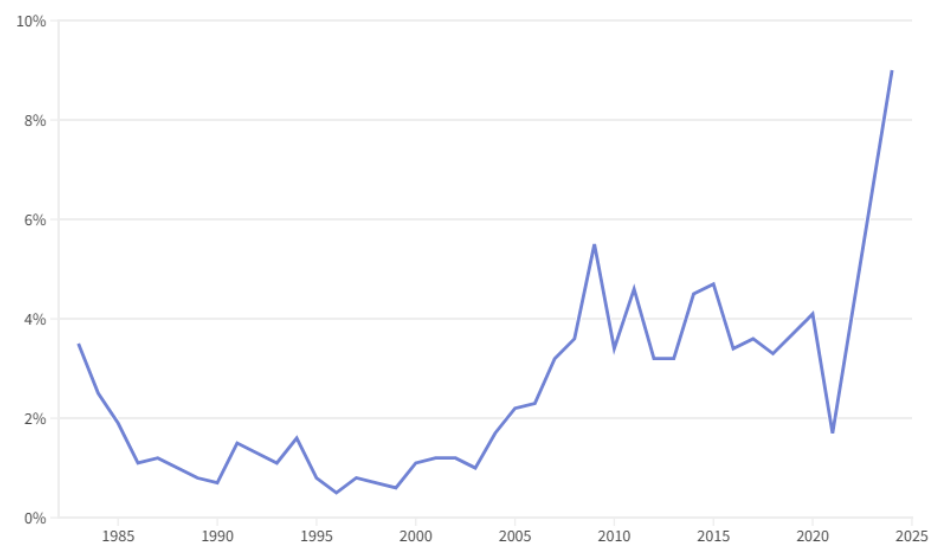

Figure 2 Defence should be the highest government priority for extra spending, 1983-2024

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.6 of this report.

Inevitably, responses to this question will be influenced not just by the importance an individual ascribes to spending on defence, but the comparative priority they give to the wide range of other areas listed as answer options. For this reason, the BSA survey has also frequently featured a question, that seeks to tap attitudes to military spending in isolation. In 1985, and on nine subsequent occasions, we have asked participants:

Would you like to see more or less government spending in military and defence?

Data for this question are presented in Table 1. Currently 40% of people would like to see the government "spend more" or "spend much more" on military and defence, with around half of this proportion (20%) preferring the government to spend less. As was the case with the proportion prioritising defence as an area for extra government spending, the proportion favouring more military spending has been comparatively high in recent years; prior to 2016, the proportion favouring increased military spending had never

exceeded three in ten. Indeed, in 1996 and all previous years, the balance of opinion was, in fact, in favour of a reduction in military spending.

Table 1 Attitudes to government spending in military and defence, 1985-2024

	1985	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	2006	2016	2022	2024
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Spend much more	5	2	4	4	5	3	9	13	13	13
Spend more	12	6	10	16	14	14	20	26	29	26
Spend the same as now	43	39	39	40	45	46	43	37	35	38
Spend less	24	32	29	23	24	23	16	13	13	13
Spend much less	12	16	15	10	8	8	6	6	5	7
Don't know/Refused	5	4	4	6	4	5	6	4	6	3
Spend more/much more	17	8	14	21	19	17	28	39	42	40
Spend less/much less	36	48	43	33	32	31	23	20	18	20
Unweighted base	*1530*	*2430*	*1224*	*1261*	*975*	*989*	*930*	*1563*	*1052*	*1022*

In both cases, then, we can see the public exhibiting greater support and prioritisation for spending on defence – initially from the mid-2000s and, more recently, in the past eight or so years – although changing attitudes in

the latter time period are more pronounced for the item regarding increasing military spending.

The trends in public support for spending on defence can clearly be linked to international events. The proportion of people who believed that defence should be the top priority for government spending first increased after the beginning of the War on Terror in 2001 and – more clearly – after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which interrupted nearly two decades of international optimism. A similar trend can be observed at that time in relation to support for extra spending on defence.

In 2006, the year after the terror attack in London and three years after the invasion of Iraq, for the first time the proportion of people who said that military spending should increase was higher than the proportion who believed it should decrease. Meanwhile, recent conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza appear to have produced further increases in the proportions prioritising military spending; this change is particularly marked for those identifying defence as their top priority for extra spending.

In other words, it appears that people's attitudes to military spending are influenced by the existence of particular security threats – or their perceptions of them. While there were undoubtedly security threats in the 1990s, reflected in the perceptions relating to individual countries which we discuss in the next section, it appears that these did not influence attitudes to defence spending in the same way as those that followed them in subsequent decades did.

Security threats

To ascertain how far different countries are perceived to be security threats by the public, we asked respondents, in relation to China, the US, Iran, Israel, Russia, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia, to:

Please say how serious a threat to world peace you think each of these countries is likely to be over the next ten years or so?

Respondents could rate each country as "a very serious threat", "quite a serious threat", "not a very serious threat", or "no threat at all".

Data for this question are presented in Figure 3. At the outset, it should be noted that these data were collected in September and October 2024. In those months, the presidential electoral campaign in the US was drawing to a close, Northern Gaza was under intense siege, and the Ukrainian army was trying to break the stalemate on the front with the occupation of the area of Kursk in Russian territory.

In this context, almost all (96%) people considered at least one of the countries included in the study to be a "very serious" or "quite serious" threat. This figure is primarily driven by perceptions of Russia, deemed as a threat to global peace by 90% of the public. However, around seven in ten or more people considered Iran, North Korea, Israel and China as "very" or "quite" serious threats to world peace.

Figure 3 Proportions regarding specific countries as very or quite serious threats to world peace in the next 10 years, 2024
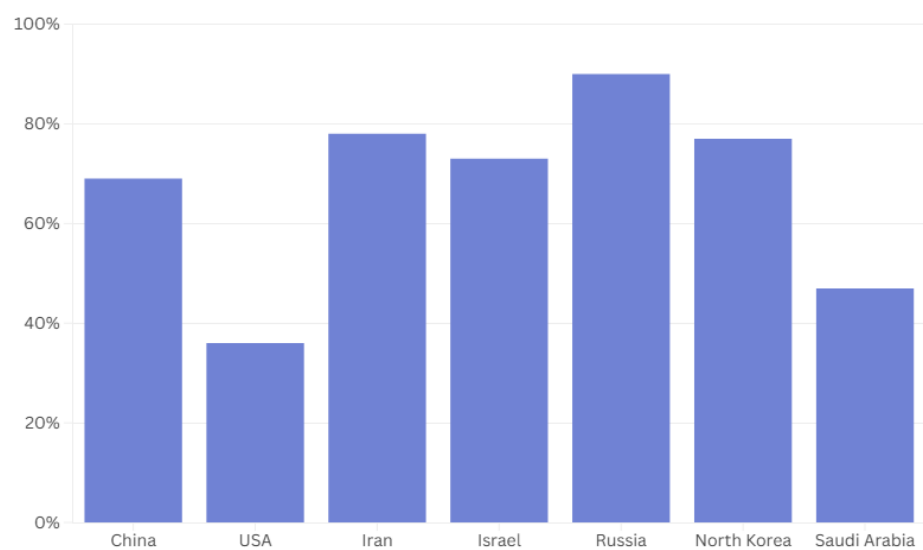
The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.7 of this report.

The US, conversely, is the country least likely to be seen as a threat to global peace, but is still perceived as such by 36%, a share that is somewhat larger than those who consider the US to be "not a serious threat" or "not a threat at all" (26%). In recognition of the fact that these data were collected immediately before the presidential election, this question was included in a comparable survey using the NatCen Opinion Panel in April 2025[1] . Four months into the second term of Donald Trump's presidency, the proportion who consider the US as a serious threat to global peace has doubled from 36% to 72%.

Data on the extent to which different countries are perceived to be threats to global peace have been collected in previous rounds of the BSA survey, with different combinations of countries asked about in each instance, depending upon the particular circumstances of the time. These data are presented in Figure 4, alongside data collected in 2025 from the NatCen Opinion Panel.

Historical data clearly indicate that perceptions that individual countries represent serious threats to world peace have never been so widespread. In previous rounds of the survey, Iraq has been the country most likely to be perceived as a threat to global peace; 74% deemed Iraq as a "very" or "quite" serious threat to global peace in 1994, three years after the end of the Gulf War, while 59% considered it to be a threat in 2005, two years after the beginning of the military invasion of Iraq with Mission Iraqi Freedom. In both cases, the UK had an active military role in Iraq, and each of the other countries included in the study were perceived as a threat by less than half of the British public. Today, the situation is different — with five of the seven countries included in the study considered to be as significant a threat to global peace – if not greater – as Saddam Hussein's Iraq was in the early 1990s.

The perception of Russia as a security threat appears to be the most significant increase over time. In 1994, two years after the Soviet flag stopped waving on top of the Kremlin, only 41% considered Russia to be a threat to global peace. This proportion (now 90%) has more than doubled in 30 years.

The perceptions that China and Israel constitute "very" or "quite" serious threats to global peace also increased between 2005 and 2024. However,

unlike the US, the extent to which the public deem these three countries – China, Israel, and Russia – as security threats did not change between September/October 2024 and April 2025.

Figure 4 Proportions regarding specific countries as very or quite serious threats to world peace in the next 10 years, 1994–2025
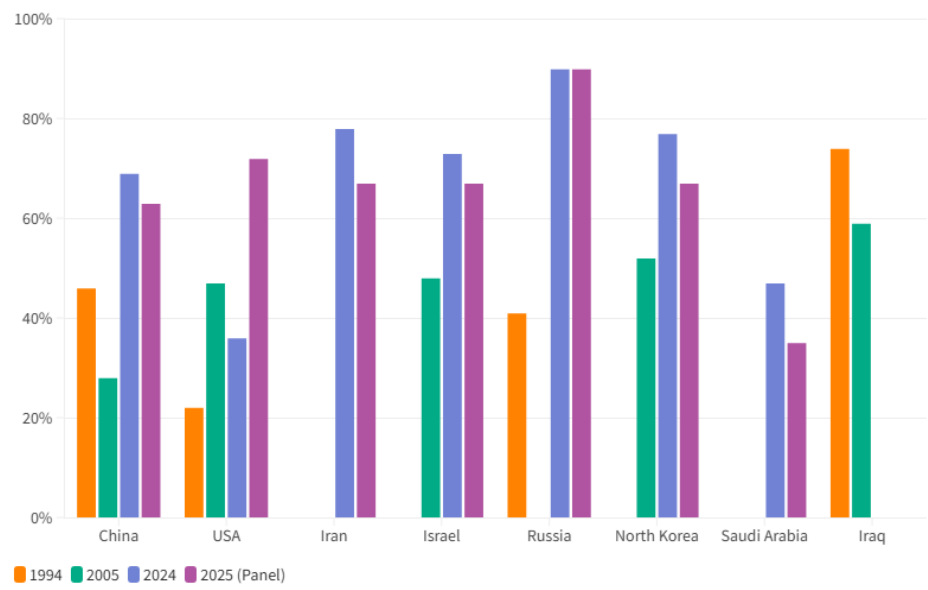
The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.8 of this report.

Categorising people by their perceptions of security threats

The analysis thus far has focused on the extent to which different countries are perceived as threats to global security and how this has changed over time. But can people be categorised by the range of countries which they perceive to be threats? Recent years have been characterised by frictions in different areas of the globe and some individuals may feel concerned about the level of threat posed by some countries, but not others. For instance,

some individuals may perceive the events in Ukraine as a threat to global peace and see Russia as a serious threat, but may be unconcerned about the tension on the Pacific, and perceive China not to be a threat. In addition, some scenarios, such as the war in Gaza, have divided the public; these divisions could manifest in the perception of countries like Israel, Iran or Saudi Arabia as being threats, or not.

To understand if and how society is divided in its perception of security threats, respondents were classified into groups, based on how strongly they perceive different countries to represent threats to global peace. The analysis, conducted using a method called Latent Class Analysis (see the Appendix for further details), led to the identification of five groups, or classes, of respondents, depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5 Classes of security threat perception
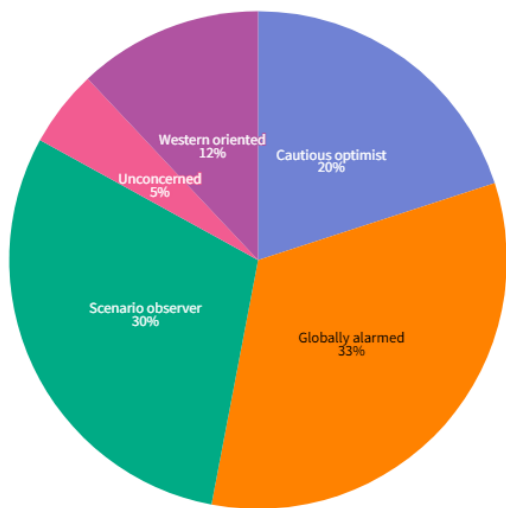
The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.9 of this report.

The typical or most likely answers, and thus the patterns of answers, provided by the five classes in response to our questions on how far different countries represent a risk to global peace, are described below.

Globally alarmed

33% of people can be classified as being 'globally alarmed', making this the largest of the five groups. Individuals in this 'globally alarmed' class identify all of the countries included in the study as a "quite" serious threat to global peace, with two exceptions: they are likely to see Russia as a "very serious" threat, while the US is likely to be seen as "not a serious" threat.

Scenario observer

Alongside the 'globally alarmed', the second largest group is that of the 'scenario observer', encompassing nearly a third of people (30%). Respondents in this 'scenario observer' group express concerns for global peace primarily driven by the conflict in Ukraine and a possible escalation in the Middle East. They are extremely likely to perceive Russia, North Korea, Israel and Iran as "very serious threats". The other countries, including the US, are seen as threats but not necessarily very serious ones.

Cautious optimist

The 'cautious optimist' class includes 20% of respondents. This class tend to not view countries as serious threats to global peace, with the exception of Russia and Israel.

Western-oriented

Twelve percent of people are classified as being 'Western-oriented'. Individuals in this group express views on the perception of threats that appear to be attitudinally aligned to US foreign policy positions, cascading from the Cold War order. US and Israel are not seen as a threat, and Saudi Arabia is not seen as a serious threat to peace. On the other hand, Russian, China, Iran, and North Korea are all considered to be "very serious" threats.

Unconcerned

The 'unconcerned' class is the smallest of the threat perception classes identified in our analysis, with just 5% of people estimated as belonging to this

class. People in this class typically consider all of the countries not to be a threat, or at least not a serious threat. If any of the countries are considered a serious threat, the 'unconcerned' are more likely to perceive the US and Israel as such.

It is interesting to note, in the aftermath of the War on Terror, that no class emerges which distinctively identified as global threats the two countries of Muslim faith – Iran and Saudia Arabia. The fact that such a class does not exist suggests that religion may be less important for the public as a key demarcation line for what would be considered as a security threat. Instead, the demarcation lines for the classes described above are seen to be drawn primarily by the geographical proximity of the threat and common identity – such as the invasion of Ukraine and the security concerns it brings for European countries.

Perceptions of security threats and views on military spending

In recent years, we have seen that the public have grown both more accepting of increases to military and defence spending, and more concerned about security threats arising from different countries. Might there be a link between perceptions of threats to global peace and attitudes to military spending? For instance, we might anticipate people will be more willing to accept increases to military spending when they perceive countries to be a greater threat to global peace.

Table 2 analyses attitudes towards defence spending by whether or not each country is regarded as a security threat. It shows that, for most countries, if people consider it to be a "very" or "quite serious" threat, they are more likely to support extra spending on military and defence. For example, almost half (49%) of those who perceive China to be a "very" or "quite" serious threat advocate more military spending, compared with 20% of those who regard China as not a serious threat or "no threat at all".

However, the pattern in relation to Israel and the US is rather different. For these two countries, the proportions of people who would increase military

spending are greater among those who do not consider the countries to be a threat, than they are among those who deem them as a "very" or "quite" serious threat to global peace. Indeed, among those who consider Israel or the US to be a serious threat, substantial proportions of people would endorse reductions to military spending. The same pattern is evident in the third column of Table 2 – which presents the extent to which defence should be prioritised for extra government spending by whether or not each country is regarded as a security threat.

Table 2 Attitudes to military spending and defence by perception of threat from different countries

	Spend more / much more	Spend less / much less	Defence highest priority	*Unweighted base*
China	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	49	14	12	*721*
Not a threat/not serious threat	20	33	2	*301*
USA	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	32	25	5	*369*
Not a threat/not serious threat	44	17	11	*653*
Iran	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	45	16	11	*829*
Not a threat/not serious threat	19	35	1	*193*
Israel	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	38	21	7	*764*
Not a threat/not serious threat	44	16	13	*258*
Russia	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	41	18	9	*931*
Not a threat/not serious threat	26	37	3	*91*
North Korea	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	44	16	10	*793*
Not a threat/not serious threat	27	31	5	*229*
Saudi Arabia	%	%	%	*n*
Very/quite serious threat	41	18	9	*495*
Not a threat/not serious				

As well as being related to views on the security threats represented by individual countries, attitudes to military spending appear to be distinct for the five different security threat perception classes detailed in the previous section. The endorsement of additional military spending seems to increase with the average level of perceived risk. The 'unconcerned' believe most of the countries not to be a threat and are the class with the lowest proportion of people advocating greater military spending[2] . The "cautious optimists" deem most countries as a "not serious" threat and represent the group with the second lowest proportion of people favouring more military spending. The endorsement of military spending is higher among the 'globally alarmed', who consider most of the countries to be quite serious threats. Meanwhile, 51% of people in the 'scenario observer' class, greatly concerned about the events in Ukraine and the Middle East, would like to see an increase in military spending, while this is the case for a similar proportion (56%) in the 'Western-oriented' class, who perceive a 'Cold War' divide between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran on the other.
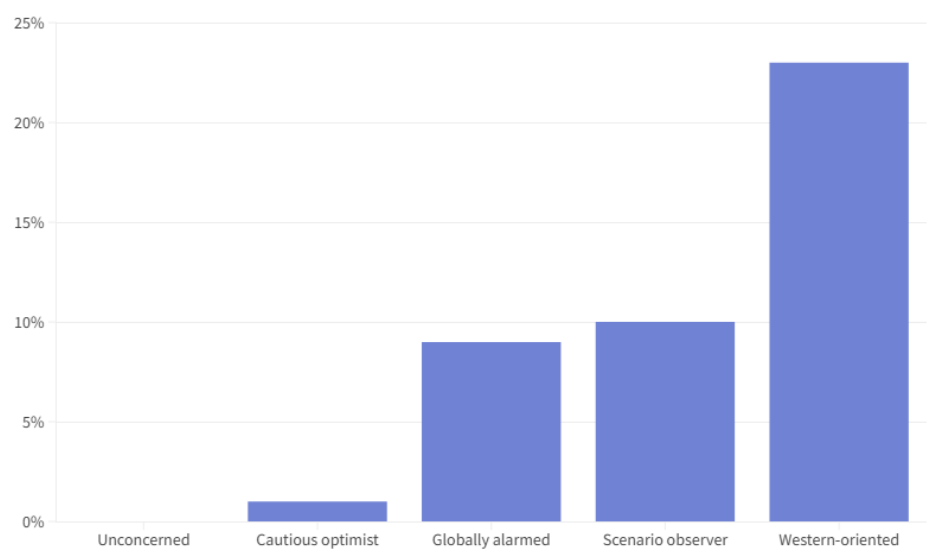
Figure 6 Attitudes to military spending, by security threat perception classes
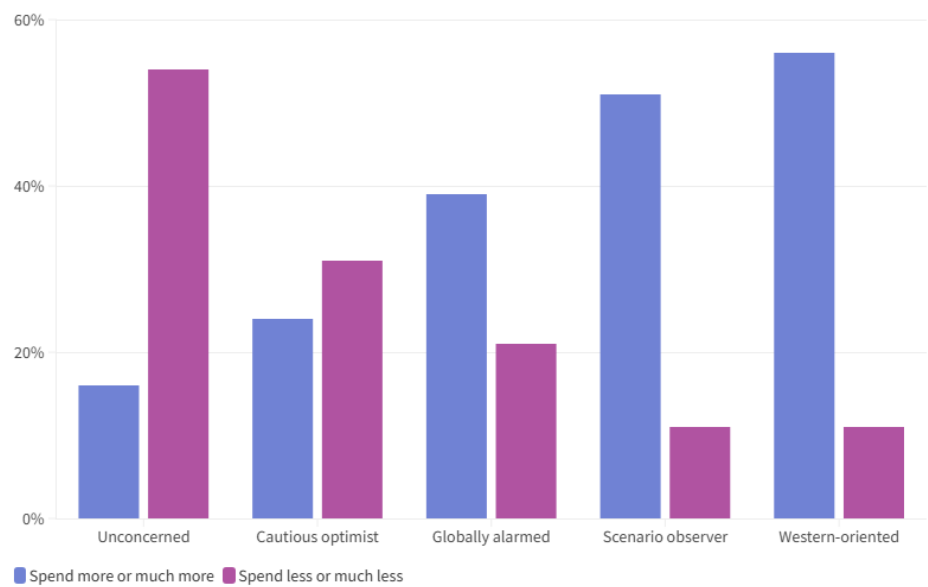
The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.10 of this report.

The same pattern can be seen in Figure 7, which depicts the proportions of the different security threat perception classes which believe that defence should be the top government priority for extra spending. The proportion expressing this view ranges from 0% in the 'unconcerned' class to 23% in the 'Western-oriented' class. The only important exception is the 'scenario observer' class; while they support an increase in spending on defence to a similar degree to the 'Western-orientated' class, they are less likely to see it as being a priority.

Figure 7 Proportion selecting defence as the highest government priority for extra spending, by security threat perception classes

The data on which Figure 7 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.10 of this report.

Threats and military spending in the political divide

Clearly then, attitudes to military spending and perceptions of security threats are interlinked. People who perceive certain forms of security threats to global peace are more likely to endorse further military spending, while those who do not would prefer to see a reduction in the defence budget. With the government's commitment to increase public resources allocated to military spending, this divide is likely to become more salient in the UK in the coming years. How is it situated in the current political landscape?

Previous analysis of BSA data (Curtice and Scholes, 2023) has identified a political divide between Conservative and Labour supporters in relation to military spending, with Conservative supporters being much more likely than Labour supporters to endorse an increase and much less likely to support a decrease. This is in line with the academic literature on threat perception, which links perception of threats and responses to them to one of the established demarcation lines of the political compass: the libertarian-authoritarian dimension. Authoritarian attitudes – stronger among Conservative supporters (Curtice, 2024) – are influenced and reinforced by the perception of security threats (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011), such as terrorism or wars, as well as economic threats (Autor et al. 2013; 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Ballard-Rosa et al. 2022, 2023; Kuziemko et al., 2021; Margalit, 2019). This happens as part of the frustration-aggression mechanism (Berkowitz, 1989), which indicates that people who feel threatened show an increase in authoritarian attitudes as response to the threats.

Moreover, data from Curtice and Scholes (2023) seem to indicate that the division between Conservative and Labour supporters on military spending has grown larger from 2006 onwards; in the decade following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2005 terror attacks on London, Addario and Wilson (2024) found in BSA survey data an increase in authoritarian attitudes in Great Britain, when controlling for age and birth-cohort effects. (Our BSA report on *Britain's democracy: A health check* considers the significance of the libertarian-authoritarian divide on political views more widely in greater detail).

This final section, then, is dedicated to understanding how this political divide manifests itself today, exploring how attitudes to military spending, perceptions of countries as threats, and the distribution of the classes of security threat perception vary across British political identities.

Military spending across political identities

In line with the literature and previous findings, the data presented in Figure 8 demonstrate that people who support the Conservatives and Reform UK overwhelmingly express preferences for an increase in military spending; this is the case for 61% and 67% respectively. On the other side of the political spectrum, supporters of the Green Party – who are considered attitudinally more libertarian (see our BSA report on *Britain's democracy: A health check* for further details) – are likely to desire a reduction in military spending; this is the case for 42%.

Figure 8 Attitudes to military spending, by political identity, 2024
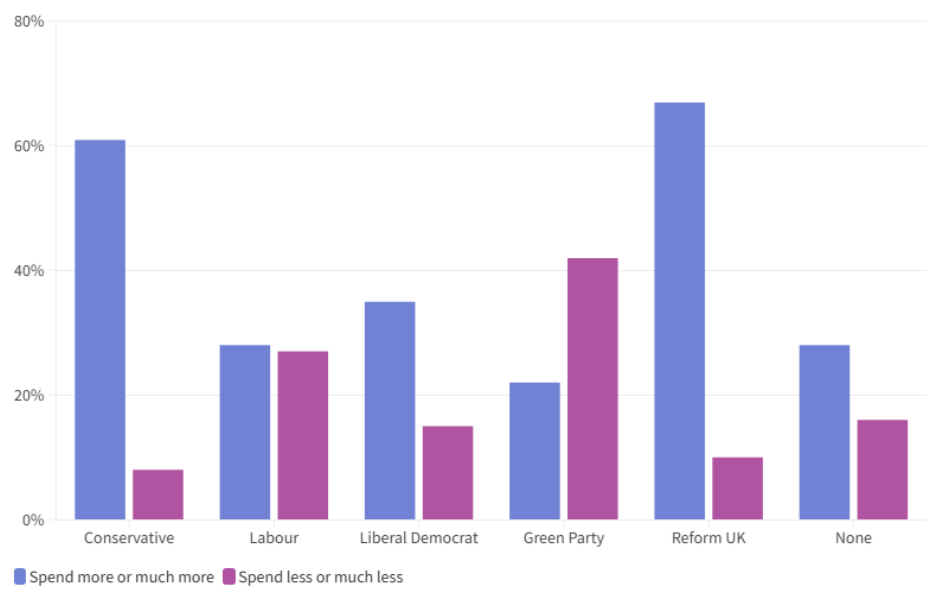
The data on which Figure 8 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.11 of this report.

As shown in Figure 9, the same patterns are evident when we examine the proportions of supporters of different political parties who see defence as the highest priority for extra government spending; this option is selected by 22% of Conservatives and 15% of Reform UK supporters, compared with just 3% of those who support the Green Party.

Figure 9 Proportion identifying defence as the highest government priority for extra spending, by political identity, 2024
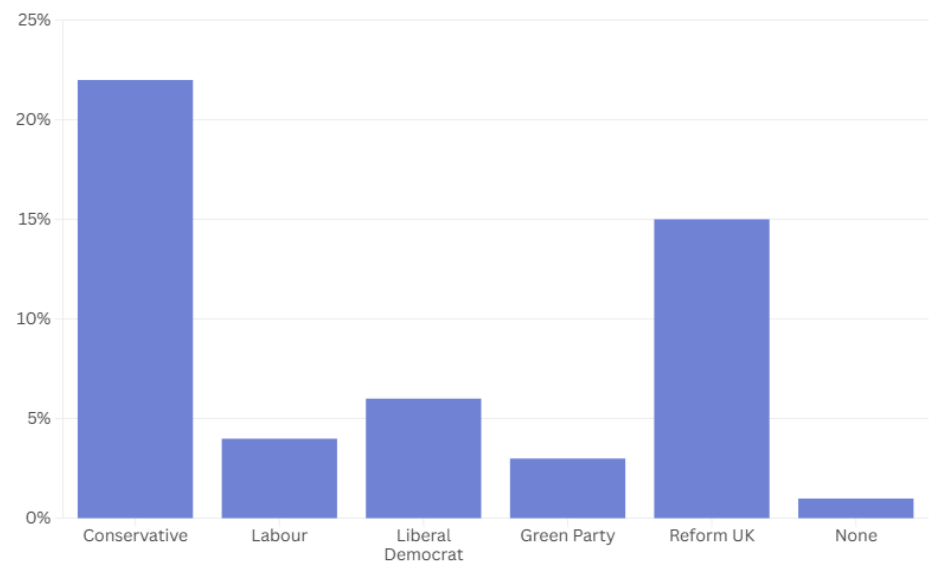
The data on which Figure 9 is based can be found in Appendix Table A.11 of this report.

However, an interesting pattern emerges when observing the attitudes expressed by supporters of the Labour Party. Those who identify with Labour are among the least likely to want the government to prioritise defence for extra spending (Figure 9) – yet they are also the most divided group of party supporters regarding what should happen to military spending, making this issue potentially very divisive within the party. Historical data (Curtice and Scholes, 2023) indicate that this division between the party first appeared, and has remained fairly consistent, since 2006.

Perception of countries as threats across political identities

Supporters of the different political parties also diverge on the extent to which they perceive some of the countries included in the survey to be threats to global peace. As shown in Table 3, political party identity in 2024 is

associated with different perceptions regarding Israel, Iran, the US, and China – although no evidence was found of variation by political identity for perceptions of the risks represented by Russia, North Korea and Saudi Arabia.

The perception of Israel as a serious threat is particularly prevalent among supporters of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, followed by Green Party supporters and Conservatives. Reform UK supporters are the least likely to perceive Israel as a serious threat to global peace compared with supporters of other parties – nevertheless, even a majority of them consider Israel to be a serious threat (59%). If we look back at the data for earlier years, presented in Table 3, it is clear that the biggest increase in the perception that Israel is a "very" or "quite" serious threat to global peace in the last two decades has occurred among Labour Party supporters. Forty-eight per cent considered Israel to be a serious threat to global peace in 2005, compared with 80% now.

The perception of Iran as a serious threat is higher among supporters of the Conservative and Reform UK parties, probably (as shown below) linked to the higher likelihood that individuals identifying with these parties fall in the 'Western-oriented' class. As the 2024 BSA survey was the first in the series to ask about perceptions of Iran as a threat to global peace, it is not possible to analyse how these perceptions have changed over time.

Meanwhile, China is more likely to be perceived as a serious threat to global peace by those who support parties at the authoritarian end of the libertarian-authoritarian dimension — the Conservatives and Reform UK. While historical data are not available for Reform UK, it seems that Conservative supporters have always been particularly concerned about China as a serious threat to global peace.

Table 3 Identification of countries as "very" or "quite serious" threats to global peace, by political identity, 1994, 2005, 2024 and 2025

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	Reform UK	None
China	%	%	%	%	%	%
1994	52	41	47	*	*	36
2005	35	27	25	*	*	21
2024	83	65	65	54	79	62
2025	75	68	66	52	74	55
USA	%	%	%	%	%	%
1994	14	26	17	*	*	30
2005	42	48	58	*	*	39
2024	25	44	38	53	26	27
2025	68	81	65	96	41	68
Iran	%	%	%	%	%	%
2024	88	76	78	68	87	71
2025	81	61	76	45	91	62
Israel	%	%	%	%	%	%
2005	51	48	54	*	*	44
2024	71	80	80	75	59	67
2025	58	77	71	74	51	64
Russia	%	%	%	%	%	%
1994	45	38	40	*	*	40
2024	96	92	93	93	88	84
2025	95	97	99	90	82	84
North Korea	%	%	%	%	%	%
2005	61	50	54	*	*	38
2024	87	74	79	70	79	73
2025	76	66	81	47	65	66
Saudi Arabia	%	%	%	%	%	%
2024	44	49	52	39	52	47

| 2025 | 36 | 34 | 42 | 34 | 32 | 35 |

Unweighted bases

|						
1994	*294*	*362*	*163*	*<25*	*<25*	*76*
2005	*210*	*353*	*113*	*<25*	*<25*	*108*
2024	*206*	*302*	*100*	*76*	*106*	*142*
2025	*182*	*210*	*53*	*50*	*57*	*360*

Source: 2025 NatCen Panel

The perception of the US as a serious threat to global peace is particularly high among Green Party and Labour supporters. Moreover, although the perception that the US is a serious threat declined between 2005 and 2024 among Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters, it remained largely unchanged among Labour identifiers.

As noted previously, the election of Donald Trump as US President has influenced the perception of the US as a serious security threat among the British public; 36% considered the US to be a "very" or "quite" serious threat in 2024, this proportion rose to 72% in April 2025 (according to data collected by the NatCen Opinion Panel). How do these proportions vary across supporters of the different political parties and have they changed in a uniform way between the two points in time?

Figure 10 presents data for the two points in time, as are also included in Table 3, and depicts how perceptions of the US as a security threat have changed in the interim. Among those who identify with the Conservative, Labour, or Green parties, the perception that the US represents a serious threat to global peace has increased by a comparable amount – 43 percentage points for the Conservatives and for the Green Party and 37 points for Labour. The observed increases were somewhat less marked among supporters of the Liberal Democrats (27 points) and Reform UK (15 points).

Figure 10 Change in the perception of the US as "very" or "quite" serious threat to global peace between 2024 and 2025, by political identity
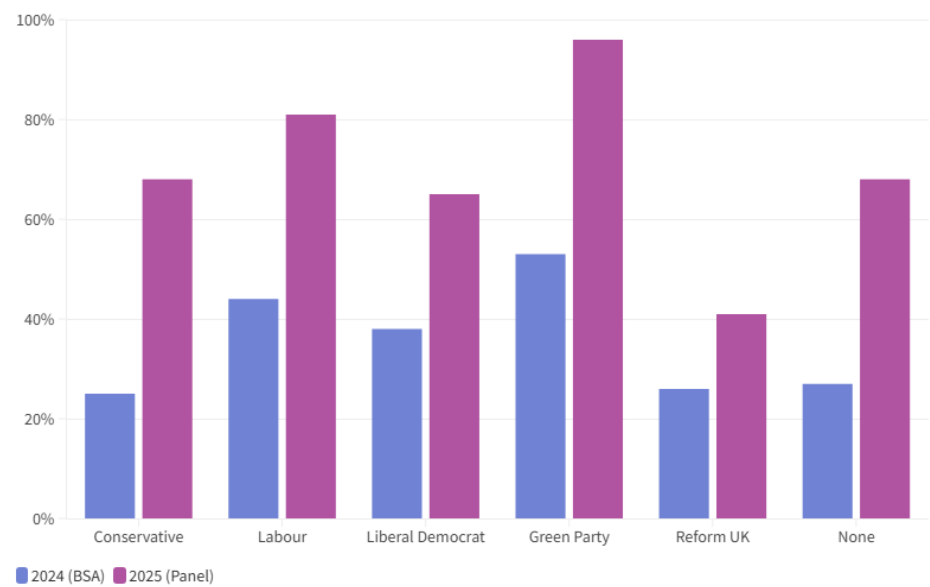
Source: 2025 NatCen Panel

The data on which Figure 10 is based can be found in Table 3.

Arguably, however, the most interesting finding to emerge from the 2025 data is a divergence in perceptions of the US as a serious threat between Conservative and Reform UK supporters. While their perceptions aligned in 2024, the Trump effect seems to have played out differently in the British right; Conservative supporters appear now much more concerned about Trump's US than those who identify with Reform UK – with 68% of the former group viewing the US as a "very" or "quite" serious threat to global peace, compared with 41% of Reform UK supporters. The less negative stance of those who identify with Reform UK regarding Trump's US is likely to originate in the personal connections between its leader, Nigel Farage, and the US President, which extends since Trump's first term. For example, in 2016 a newly elected Trump claimed that Farage would be a great British ambassador in the US (Sopel, 2016).

Security threat perceptions across political identities

As might be anticipated by the different perceptions of individual countries as security threats across the political spectrum, the distribution of the security threat perception classes also varies by political identity. As shown in Table 4, supporters of the Conservative Party are more likely to have a stronger perception of security threats, as can be seen in the lower prevalence of 'cautious optimists' among supporters of this party (9% are categorised in this way, compared with 20% of the population as a whole). Supporters of the Conservative Party, alongside those who identify politically with Reform UK, are also particularly likely to fall in the 'Western-oriented' class. The greater proportion of Reform UK supporters who can be classified as 'Western-oriented' mirrors the position taken by the party leader, Nigel Farage, who presented China as the main source of global insecurity and stressed the importance for the UK defence system to be closely aligned to the US (Keate, 2025).

Security threat perception classes

Table 4 Security threat perception classes, by political identity

Security threat perception classes	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green Party	Reform UK	None	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Cautious optimist	9	24	16	34	17	22	20
Globally alarmed	38	37	39	44	28	25	33
Scenario observer	33	29	34	12	27	34	30
Unconcerned	3	4	4	4	3	8	5
Western oriented	17	5	7	5	25	12	12
Unweighted base	*201*	*292*	*98*	*74*	*104*	*132*	*985*

The distribution of security threat perception classes can also help us to understand the potential dividing lines among Labour supporters on military spending, and why their attitudes are different from those of supporters of the Green Party. Labour and Green Party supporters share a broadly similar profile, which is distinct from that of Conservative Party supporters; they are both very unlikely to be 'Western-oriented' and very likely to be 'cautious optimists', indicating a lower-than-average level of perceived threats and a greater likelihood of considering the US and Israel as security threats. However, members of the Green Party are also highly unlikely to be "scenario observers' – a group that tend to see Russia, Israel, Iran and North Korea as very serious threats – whereas this group is more common among Labour supporters. The higher proportion of "scenario observers' among Labour supporters may explain both the difference between Green and Labour supporters, and also the cleavage within the Labour Party, with its supporters being equally likely to endorse an increase or a decrease in military spending.

Conclusions

Recent increases in global conflict are clearly reflected in the attitudes of the British public, who have never been so supportive of military spending and so concerned by security threats represented by individual countries, since the BSA survey began in 1983. The fears of an escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine seem to be the most important driver of these attitudes. Russia is perceived as a serious security threat by almost everyone in Britian, regardless of political identity. The decision of the government to justify an increase in defence spending as primarily motivated by the actions of Russia (Prime Minister's Office, 2025b) has played into this space, singling out the country associated with deeper and broader security concerns by the public. However, when implementing defence policies, the Labour government may be more likely to face challenges from its own party supporters, than a Conservative government would. Indeed, Labour supporters seem to be more divided on the issue of furthering military spending, with equal shares endorsing a decrease or an increase, and with only about four in a hundred party supporters willing to go as far as to make defence the main government priority for extra spending.

While this research has shown that attitudes to military spending and security threats can create internal frictions among supporters of the same party, it has also shown that supporters of different political parties can converge on these themes. This is the case in particular for the perception of countries as security threats, which in some cases, such as Russia, was comparable across the political landscape, from Green to Reform UK. However, the strongest convergence was observed between Conservative and Reform UK supporters in relation to perception of security threats and attitudes towards military spending.

Nevertheless, this convergence – strong in 2024 – seems weaker now, with supporters of the two parties expressing different views on whether the US under Donald Trump represents a serious security threat for global peace. The public's perception of the US as a security threat dramatically increased after the 2024 presidential elections and the first 100 days of the Trump

administration, reaching an all-time high. Reform UK supporters are the only political group to have maintained a relatively positive perception of the US.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Latent Class Analysis

Latent class analysis (LCA) is a statistical method used for identifying latent (i.e. unobserved) classes that explain the patterns of responses on a set of observed variables within a population. This technique is particularly useful when researchers believe that the population is not homogeneous but rather consists of distinct groups that share similar characteristics.

In this report, LCA was used to identify classes of people that could explain the heterogeneity in the responses to the seven different questions asking about to what extent the countries included in the study were perceived as threats to global peace. The input to the model consisted of seven variables (one for each country: China, USA, Iran, Israel, Russia, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia) with four levels each (not a threat, not a serious threat, a quite serious threat, and a very serious threat). People who did not give a substantive answer (i.e., who did not know, or refused) were removed from the analysis sample.

The LCA model shown in the report was selected from ten possible options, with the number of groups ranging from 1 to 10. A comparison of Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), as well as substantive considerations on the interpretability of the findings, indicated that the best option was a model with five classes.

Each of the classes are presented in the tables below with reference to 'posterior probabilities'. In essence, a posterior probability represents the chance of an individual belonging to a particular class providing a particular answer to a question measuring their perception as to whether a particular country represents a threat to global peace or not. Probabilities are expressed on a scale ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 means that a particular answer would never be selected, and 1 that it would always be selected. By way of an example, respondents belonging to the 'unconcerned' class have a very high probability of considering China or Iran not to a threat (0.85 for

both countries), while the 'Western-oriented' have a low probability of considering Israel as a quite serious threat (0.17).

Table A.1 Posterior probabilities of threat perception for the "Unconcerned" class

	China	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
Threat perception							
Very serious threat	0.00	0.33	0.15	0.39	0.17	0.09	0.10
Quite serious threat	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.17	0.10	0.06
Not serious threat	0.12	0.14	0.00	0.07	0.26	0.24	0.00
Not a threat	0.85	0.53	0.85	0.41	0.41	0.58	0.84

Table A.2 Posterior probabilities of threat perception for the "Cautious optimist" class

	China	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
Threat perception							
Very serious threat	0.06	0.16	0.06	0.31	0.37	0.11	0.01
Quite serious threat	0.22	0.19	0.32	0.31	0.40	0.27	0.10
Not serious threat	0.68	0.46	0.61	0.33	0.22	0.55	0.73
Not a threat	0.05	0.19	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.16

Table A.3 Posterior probabilities of threat perception for the "Globally alarmed" class

Threat perception	China	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
Very serious threat	0.16	0.04	0.16	0.21	0.70	0.34	0.02
Quite serious threat	0.61	0.33	0.78	0.65	0.29	0.58	0.55
Not serious threat	0.22	0.43	0.05	0.13	0.00	0.08	0.40
Not a threat	0.01	0.20	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03

Table A.4 Posterior probabilities of threat perception for the "Scenario observer" class

Threat perception	China	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
Very serious threat	0.59	0.22	0.89	0.78	1.00	0.80	0.38
Quite serious threat	0.35	0.3	0.11	0.18	0.00	0.13	0.36
Not serious threat	0.05	0.36	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.06	0.24
Not a threat	0.01	0.13	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03

Table A.5 Posterior probabilities of threat perception for the "Western-oriented" class

Threat perception	China	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
Very serious threat	0.60	0.00	0.62	0.00	0.76	0.54	0.10
Quite serious threat	0.34	0.00	0.37	0.17	0.22	0.35	0.24
Not serious threat	0.04	0.15	0.00	0.23	0.01	0.09	0.44
Not a threat	0.01	0.85	0.01	0.60	0.01	0.02	0.21

Table A.6 Defence should be the highest government priority for extra spending, 1983-2024

Year	Defence %	Unweighted base
1983	4	1761
1984	2	1675
1985	2	1804
1986	1	3100
1987	1	2847
1989	1	3029
1990	1	2797
1991	1	2918
1993	1	2945
1994	2	1167
1995	1	1234
1996	1	3620
1997	1	1355
1999	1	3143
2000	1	2292
2001	1	3287
2002	1	3435

2003	1	*4432*
2004	2	*3199*
2005	2	*2166*
2006	2	*3240*
2007	3	*3094*
2008	4	*2229*
2009	6	*3421*
2010	3	*3297*
2011	5	*3311*
2012	3	*3248*
2013	3	*3244*
2014	5	*2878*
2015	5	*3266*
2016	3	*974*
2017	4	*984*
2018	3	*973*
2019	4	*1075*
2020	4	*1275*
2021	2	*1008*
2024	9	*1022*

Table A.7 Proportions regarding specific countries as very or quite serious threats to world peace in the next 10 years

Country	The country is a very or quite serious threat
	%
China	69
USA	36
Iran	78
Israel	73
Russia	90
North Korea	77
Saudi Arabia	47
Unweighted base	*1022*

Table A.8 Proportions regarding specific countries as very or quite serious threats to world peace in the next 10 years, 1994-2025

Country	The country is a very or quite serious threat			
	1994	**2005**	**2024**	**2025**
	%	%	%	%
China	46	28	69	63
USA	22	47	36	72
Iran	n/a	n/a	78	67
Israel	n/a	48	73	67
Russia	41	n/a	90	90
North Korea	n/a	52	77	67
Saudi Arabia	n/a	n/a	47	35
Unweighted base	*975*	*806*	*1022*	*1049*

'n/a = not asked'

Table A.9 Classes of security threat perception

Classes	%
Cautious optimist	20
Globally alarmed	33
Scenario observer	30
Unconcerned	5
Western-oriented	12
Unweighted base	*985*

Table A.10 Attitudes to military spending and defence by classes of security threat perception

Security threat perception classes	Spend more/much more	Spend less/much less	Defence highest priority	*Unweighted base*
	%	%	%	*%*
Unconcerned	16	54	0	*30*
Cautious optimist	24	31	1	*180*
Globally alarmed	39	21	9	*341*
Scenario observer	51	11	10	*333*
Western-oriented	56	11	23	*101*

Table A.11 Attitudes to military spending and defence by political identity

	Spend more/much more	Spend less/much less	Defence highest priority	*Unweighted base*
	%	%	%	*%*
Conservative	61	8	22	206
Labour	28	27	4	302
Liberal Democrat	35	15	6	100
Green Party	22	42	3	76
Reform UK	67	10	15	106
None	28	16	1	142

Publication details

Footnotes

1. BSA and the NatCen Opinion Panel have common survey design elements (for example, they are both based on a random probability sample and have the same survey interview modes) but diverge in some respects (for example, the Panel's sample has taken part in studies before, while the BSA sample is "fresh"). The comparison of the findings of these two studies reveals public attitudes that are substantially aligned, with a strong divergence observed primarily on attitudes towards the US. The convergence of attitudes offer confidence in the comparability of the two studies and on the fact that the changing attitudes towards the US are not caused by the use of a different survey approach. ↑

2. Estimates for the 'unconcerned' class are based on a low sample size, as only a small proportion of the sample falls in this class. This limitation, leading to uncertainty around the estimates for this class, should be kept in mind when interpreting the results for this class. ↑