National Centre for Social Research

BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES

BSA: A more dangerous world

British attitudes to security, defence and international alliances

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Summary

Against a backdrop of international instability and conflict, this chapter examines perceptions of threats to world peace, Britain's relationships with its allies, support for defence spending, and the importance attached to willingness to serve in the military.

The world has come to seem a more dangerous place

- In 1994, 41% regarded Russia as a serious threat to world peace. Now 89% do so
- Twenty years ago, only 28% regarded China as a serious threat. Now 62% take that view.

Concern about vital allies has grown, alongside increased support for links with Europe

- The proportion describing the United States as a serious threat has more than doubled, from 35% in 2024 to 74% in 2026.
- Some 78% now regard Israel as a serious threat, compared with 48% in 2005.
- In recent years Britons have become more favourable towards closer ties with Europe. 42% now prioritise closer links with Europe, while 38% favour both Europe and America equally. Just 9% now prioritise links with the USA.

Over half of Britons now want more spending on defence

- For the first time, a majority (56%) want the government to spend more on defence, while only 17% favour spending less.

- Support for more defence spending has risen among Labour supporters from 28% in 2024 to 55% in 2026.
- Between 2025 and 2026, support for higher spending among women rose from 40% to 52%.
- Only 21% of Green supporters favour higher defence spending.

‘Guns vs. butter’ doesn’t tell the whole story

- Among the third most sympathetic towards welfare spending, 36% support more defence spending, compared with 60% of the least sympathetic third.
- Nevertheless, around half of those favouring more spending on benefits for retired people, carers and low-income parents also favour higher defence spending.

Age differences and defence views shape the importance attached to willingness to serve

- In 2025, 32% selected the two highest importance scores for willingness to serve in the military at a time of need, and only 15% selected the lowest two.
- Among those aged 55 and over, 45% selected the highest categories, compared with 22% of under-35s.
- Among those wanting much more defence spending, 57% also attached high importance to willingness to serve.

Introduction

Public support constitutes a critical, though often underexamined, component of defence policy in advanced democratic societies. In the United Kingdom, attitudes towards defence spending have historically reflected a tension between traditional preferences for strong national defence and competing demands for investment in domestic public services. Over the past decade, however, shifting geopolitical conditions, including Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, intensifying strategic competition with China, instability in the Middle East, and the resulting renewed debate about Europe's security needs, have considerably altered the strategic context. Successive governments have responded to these developments by committing to significant increases in defence expenditure, culminating in an increase in defence spending from little more than 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) at the turn of the decade to around 2.6% now, with an ambition to reach 3% in the next parliament and ultimately 3.5% by 2035 (Prime Minister's Office, 2023; Ministry of Defence, 2024).

This chapter assesses how public attitudes have responded to and been shaped by the dramatic changes in the geostrategic environment facing Britain over recent years. Both the most recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, and its preceding edition – which both had fieldwork conducted in the autumn – asked a range of questions that explored the extent to which the public regarded various countries as a threat to global peace, whether they considered Europe or the United States as the more important ally, and whether they wanted defence spending to fall or increase. To enable us to keep pace with the speed of recent events, some of these questions were also included on two waves of the NatCen Opinion Panel, which comprises people who have responded to previous BSA surveys, which were undertaken in spring 2025 and spring 2026. Between them, these four surveys provide the backbone of the analysis in this chapter. However, in most instances the questions on these topics have also appeared on earlier rounds of BSA dating back to the 1980s, allowing an assessment of the degree to which current attitudes reflect a departure from historical norms, and to observe the overall trend of opinion since the end of the Cold War to an era in which continental Europe is once again plagued by active conflict.

The geopolitical context

The last two years have been characterised by an unusually high degree of geopolitical volatility that has exposed the British public to sustained media coverage of international conflict, tensions with some of its allies, and debates about Britain's own security posture. The period was marked by the simultaneous deterioration of several regional security environments, and growing uncertainty about the future of the Western alliance system. This created a strategic backdrop in which questions concerning defence, deterrence, military preparedness, and Britain's international partnerships, became increasingly prominent within public debate.

The most consequential development has been the return of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in January 2025, and the resulting uncertainty about the future direction of American foreign policy. The new administration has adopted a markedly more transactional approach towards its allies. President Trump renewed longstanding disputes over defence burden-sharing within NATO, and signalled a reduced willingness to underwrite European security unless there were significantly greater contributions from European governments (Crerar, 2026). Public disagreements with several allied leaders, repeated questioning of traditional alliance commitments, and rhetoric regarding the need to defend American interests in Greenland – the sovereign territory of fellow NATO member the Kingdom of Denmark – reinforced wider debates about the sustainability and costs of America’s role in the European theatre (Conley, 2026). Meanwhile, the abduction of the Venezuelan President in early 2026, followed by robust military action alongside Israel against Iran, demonstrated the administration's willingness to pursue unilateral military action with wider international consequences (Nicholas et al., 2026).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine remained the defining security challenge in Europe. By 2026, the conflict had entered its fourth year, evolving from the intense territorial battles of the initial invasion into a prolonged war of attrition, characterised by sustained missile attacks, drone warfare and continued pressure along an extended front line. Although international media attention has fluctuated, the war continued to dominate discussions of European security and NATO deterrence, and it remains the

primary driver of the concerted push to enhance defence industrial capacity and military readiness (Budginaite-Froehly 2026).

At the same time, the Middle East also remained a major source of international instability. The continuing conflict in Gaza following the October 7th 2023 terror attacks on Israel ensured that Israel's military operations remained highly visible. During 2025 and into 2026, tensions expanded beyond Gaza to encompass direct military exchanges involving Israel and Iran, as well as the subsequent American military intervention against Iranian nuclear facilities and military capabilities. These developments, and particularly the decision by Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz shipping passage, substantially increased concern about the risk of wider regional conflict, the security of global energy markets, the disruption of supply chains, and the potential for further escalation involving major powers (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development).

In contrast, relations between Western governments and China entered a more complex phase. While strategic competition remained a central feature of the relationship, several governments, including the United Kingdom, sought to stabilise diplomatic engagement with Beijing after a prolonged period of increasingly confrontational rhetoric and a shift towards a more robust security posture. The re-election of President Donald Trump undoubtedly played a role in encouraging greater dialogue (Garton Ash et al. 2026). Discussions increasingly focused on achieving a balance between economic and trade engagement and addressing national security concerns, particularly in relation to critical infrastructure, advanced technologies, supply chains and investment screening. Meanwhile, China's continued support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, its distortive and coercive trade practices, and its pursuit of military exercises threatening Western allies in the region, including Taiwan, ensured that long-term strategic competition with China remained firmly on the international agenda, even though diplomatic rhetoric softened and dialogue resumed (Benner, 2026).

Across Europe, these external pressures accelerated discussions about defence spending, industrial capacity, and strategic autonomy. European governments announced significant increases in defence expenditure, expanded defence industrial production and introduced new initiatives aimed at strengthening military readiness (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). NATO continued to adapt to the evolving security environment through revised regional defence plans, greater emphasis on high-readiness forces and enhanced deterrence along its eastern flank. Simultaneously, cooperation between European states intensified through bilateral agreements, multinational procurement initiatives, and increased collaboration on defence technology and capability development. High-minded speeches about the growing urgency of the security environment persisted, even if practical cooperation efforts were often impeded by

competition between states over who secured contracts for defence industrial projects (van der Leyen, 2026; Tamma, 2026).

Within the United Kingdom, these international developments coincided with an increasingly prominent domestic debate about national resilience and defence policy. The publication of the Strategic Defence Review, an independent review of the UK's defence posture and needs, alongside renewed commitments to increase defence spending to 3% of GDP, signalled an institutional recognition of the need for a major defence uplift (Ministry of Defence, 2025). Continued investment in defence programmes, such as the AUKUS submarine partnership and the GCAP aircraft project, and growing attention to critical national infrastructure, cyber security, and defence innovation, reinforced the perception that Britain was entering a period that requires greater long-term strategic preparedness. However, the Starmer government subsequently struggled to identify a politically viable pathway to funding its commitments, culminating in the resignation of the Defence Secretary, John Healey, and the publication of an only partially funded Defence Investment Plan, ten months late (Crace, 2026; Ministry of Defence, 2026). Defence spending will undoubtedly continue to remain a prominent issue in Westminster under the new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, who seemingly recognised the significance of the challenge in appointing Healey as Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mason, 2026).

Collectively, these developments capture an international environment characterised by persistent uncertainty, and a British Government grappling with a political landscape that is currently unwilling to facilitate the greater resources considered necessary to respond to the shifting circumstances. The simultaneous pressures generated by continued war in Europe, instability in the Middle East, strategic competition with China, and doubts about American leadership, ensured that foreign policy and national security have come to occupy an unusually prominent place in public discourse.

But how much impact have these developments had on public opinion in Britain? In this chapter, we examine how attitudes have evolved on three core issues. First, to understand how geopolitical events are shaping perceptions of other nations, we assess the extent to which various countries are regarded as a threat to world peace. Second, given citizens' perceptions of the geostrategic context, we examine whether there has been a commensurate increase in support for more spending on defence, and the degree to which that support is tempered by a wish to see more spending on the myriad domestic issues also requiring attention. Third, we assess how much the recognition of a deteriorating security environment is shaping the importance Britons attach to willingness to undertake military service in the defence of their nation.

The dynamic evolution of perceptions of threat

On each of our four recent surveys respondents were asked:

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?

A very serious threat
Quite a serious threat
Not a very serious threat
No threat at all

In each case, they were asked to evaluate the seven countries shown in Table 1. Respondents had also been asked about some of these countries on the 1994 and 2005 BSA surveys. For each year, the table shows the proportion who regarded the country as a "very" or "quite a serious" threat.

Table 1. Proportions regarding specific countries as a very or quite serious threat to world peace in the next 10 years, 1994-2025

Country	1994	2005	2024	Spring 2025	2025	Spring 2026
	%	%	%	%	%	%
China	46	28	69	63	63	62
USA	21	47	36	71	54	74
Iran	n/a	n/a	78	67	65	75
Israel	n/a	48	73	67	68	78
Russia	41	n/a	90	90	88	89
North Korea	n/a	52	77	67	68	66
Saudi Arabia	n/a	n/a	47	35	38	34
Unweighted bases	*975*	*806*	*1022*	*1049*	*1075*	*1973*

n/a not available

Source: Spring 2025; 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel

One striking revelation is that, over the last two years, citizens have become markedly more likely than they were in decades past to believe that both Russia and China represent a serious threat to global peace. For example, in 1994, three years after the collapse of the USSR, only just over two in five (41%) Britons felt that Russia posed a serious threat. In our four more recent surveys, the figure has more than doubled to range between 88% and 90%. Indeed, Russia is now almost universally regarded as a serious threat. In the case of China, only just over one in four (28%) felt the nation posed a serious threat to global peace two decades ago, whereas in our four recent surveys, the figure has averaged just a little below two-thirds (64%). The average British citizen currently believes that approaching five (4.8) of the seven countries in our table now represent a serious threat, up from 4.4 in 2024.

Taken together, it is clear that there has indeed been a marked shift in perceptions of risk, and that Britons now feel that they are facing a more dangerous global landscape.

The next major finding is perhaps even more notable as it concerns Britain's most significant security and strategic partner, the United States. In 2024, when our BSA survey was conducted before the election at which Donald Trump won his second term as President, only a little over one in three (35%) felt that the North American superpower represented a serious threat. However, four months after President Trump had re-entered the White House – by which point, the infamous White House spat with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine had provoked much alarm across the pond – the proportion of Britons regarding the United States as a threat to global peace had doubled to 72%. Some of that concern had dissipated by the autumn, as the President undertook his historic second State Visit to Britain, and just over half (54%) of citizens saw the US as a serious threat. However, following the bitter public disputes with NATO allies over Greenland, and the decision in February 2026 to, alongside Israel, embark on a bombing campaign in Iran, the proportion of Britons who saw the United States as a threat to global peace rose again, to 74%.

Attitudes towards the United States have experienced volatility before, with just 22% of citizens holding negative views under Bill Clinton's leadership in 1994, leaping to almost half (47%) in 2005, as the costs of George W. Bush's War on Terror became evident. However, that a clear majority of the population have come to regard Britain's most important ally in the post-war international order as a threat to global peace is undoubtedly novel.

Israel's reputation, too, has seemingly suffered from its involvement in recent Middle East conflict. Two decades ago, a little under half (48%) regarded Israel as a serious threat to peace. By the autumn of 2024, by which point Gaza had suffered heavy damage in the wake of Israel's response to the Hamas incursion on 7 October 2023, nearly three-quarters (73%) felt that way. And although that figure subsequently dropped a little in the autumn, to around two-thirds, in the subsequent survey this spring following the Iran bombing campaign, 78% now saw Israel as a serious threat to global peace. It is, of course, plausible that rather than simply judging Israel solely on the basis of its own actions, some people in Britain may fear the risk that developments involving Israel could trigger a much broader regional confrontation, as a catalyst for wider geopolitical instability in the Middle East.

Indeed, Iran itself is by no means regarded favourably by the British people. During the last two years, consistently between approximately two-thirds and three-quarters of Britons have believed it has posed a serious threat to global peace – a figure that may continue to grow in light of the increasing visibility of Iran-backed terror plots on British soil. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, which has been targeted by Iran and its proxies the Houthis, is now considered to be a

serious threat by only just over a third of Britons (34%), well down on the nearly half who expressed that view in the autumn of 2024. Consequently, Saudi Arabia is now the only one of the seven nations studied which is regarded as a serious threat by fewer than three in five Britons.

The British people appear palpably aware of the volatile contemporary geopolitical environment and are becoming attuned to the full diversity of the risks facing the nation, our allies, and our interests. This may have occasioned a differentiation between the perceived immediacy of threats. China provides a useful example. While around two-thirds of Britons regard China as a threat to global peace, and there has been no fundamental softening of views since the re-election of US President Trump, the proportion who describe China as a very serious threat declined between 2025 and 2026 from 23% to 18%. This small moderation may reflect the current British Government's deliberate efforts to stabilise relations with Beijing, but it could also capture the relative salience of other forms of seemingly more immediate risk, and the impact these have had on reframing China as a less urgent, longer-term source of instability and risk.

The current geopolitical environment has also required Britons to confront a more complex picture of alliances. While traditionally, the public has observed an international landscape in which a small number of adversaries challenged a much more expansive group of allies, one of the defining characteristics of the current geopolitical arena is that several of Britain's most established allies have pursued unilateral actions that have diverged from British strategic assessments and complicated in people's minds the assumed alignment of partners. This has seemingly rendered perceptions of the degree to which a collection of allies, adversaries, and other nations pose a serious threat to global peace more complex than they would have been in the past.

However, this does not necessarily mean that the distinction made between allies and rivals has simply been entirely erased. To assess whether or not this is the case, Table 2 reports for our most recent survey in spring 2026 the correlations between the threat scores for each pair of our seven countries. These correlations can range between -1 and +1; a high negative score indicates that those who believe one of the pair represents a threat is more likely to take the opposite view of the other, while a high positive score indicates that those who think one of the two countries is a threat is also more likely to take a similar view of the other. In contrast a score close to zero means that there is little or no relationship between the extent to which the two countries are regarded as a threat.

The results indicate that, in practice, there are clear distinctions made between different nations. In the case of the USA, there is little or no association between perceptions of America as a threat and perceptions of the other countries in the table – with the singular and expected exception of

Israel. The correlation between the threat scores of those two countries is 0.51, the highest for any of our pairs of countries. Conversely, there are relatively high positive correlations between Russia, China, and North Korea, and indeed between each of them and Iran. That said, we might note that at +0.14, the correlation between the USA and Russia is both slightly positive and just as high as that between the USA and Saudi Arabia, a country which is relatively closely aligned with the USA. Moreover, back in 2024 before Donald Trump secured his second term, the correlation between the USA and Russia was 0.00. Old fault lines in citizens' perceptions of other countries may not have disappeared, but they have become more blurred.

Table 2. Correlations between assessments of countries as a threat

	USA	Iran	Israel	Russia	North Korea	Saudi Arabia
China	-0.02	0.42	-0.03	0.41	0.41	0.26
USA		-0.06	0.51	0.14	0.02	0.13
Iran			0.13	0.43	0.5	0.3
Israel				0.2	0.14	0.24
Russia					0.45	0.19
North Korea						0.36

Source: NatCen Opinion Panel Spring 2026.
Unweighted bases: 1970-1977.

Much the same can be said about the political differences that have traditionally been evident in the public's perceptions of the threat posed by different countries (Addario, 2025). Hitherto, those who support the Labour Party and those on the left of politics have typically been less enamoured of the United States, a capitalist economic as well as a defence superpower, while those on the right of politics and those who support the Conservatives have typically been more suspicious towards authoritarian communist regimes such as that of China and North Korea. Meanwhile, the Middle East has long been a source of domestic argument, with citizens taking sharply different views about both Israel, of whom the United States is a close ally, and Israel's regional neighbours – some of whom, such as Saudi Arabia, are relatively close to the US, while others, such as Iran, are considered a primary enemy.

Table 3 suggests these dividing lines are still in evidence. It shows for all the readings for our seven countries taken since 1994, the proportion of each political party's supporters who have believed that nation poses a serious threat. An examination of the final row of the table for each country reveals that Conservative and Reform supporters are less likely than those who back

Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Greens to regard the USA or Israel as a serious threat. Conversely, those who say they identify with the Conservatives or Reform are somewhat more likely to regard the threat from China, North Korea or Iran as serious. The difference is especially pronounced when compared with Green Party supporters. On the other hand, there is little disagreement about Russia, which is deeply embedded across the population as a whole as an enduring, primary threat to the United Kingdom. There is also relatively little difference to be observed between the parties' supporters in their perception of Saudi Arabia.

Far from disappearing, the link between party support and perceptions of threat is stronger now than 20 or more years ago. This is the result of two developments. First, Labour and Conservative supporters are further apart in their perceptions of the USA and Israel than they were in the past. In 2005, there was only a six-point difference between Labour and Conservative supporters in the proportion who regarded the USA as a serious threat, although Liberal Democrat supporters were more concerned. Now, there is a 16-point difference. In the case of Israel, where once there was little difference between Conservative and Labour identifiers, now those who back Labour are 14 points more likely to regard the country as a threat. However, these widened gaps were largely already in place by 2024. Even in the case of the United States, the gap between the supporters of the two traditional parties was already as much as 19 points in 2024 and had grown to 27 points by the autumn of 2025 – though the gap between Conservative and Labour voters' perceptions of both the United States and Israel then narrowed between autumn 2025 and spring 2026.

The second reason for the strengthened link is the very divergent perceptions of most of the surveyed nations held by Reform and Green supporters, two parties that were not a significant political force two decades ago. Those who support the Greens are now 46 points more likely than those who back Reform to regard the USA as a serious threat. For no other country are perceptions so politically polarised. Indeed, this polarisation is now even more marked than two years ago, thanks to a notably lower increase since then in the proportion of Reform supporters who regard the USA as a threat under the Presidency of Donald Trump. Green supporters are also more likely than their counterparts in the Reform camp to consider Israel a serious threat, although, at 26 points, the difference is somewhat more muted. Meanwhile, in the case of China, North Korea and Iran, it is Reform supporters who are most likely of all citizens to consider them a serious threat, while those who back the Greens are least likely to do so. At 29, 30, and 35 points respectively, the difference between the two sets of supporters is far greater than that between Conservatives and Labour supporters, either now or in the past. In short, the fragmentation of British politics has made Britain's foreign policy posture potentially more, rather than less, likely to be a source of political contestation.

Table 3 Proportions regarding countries as a "very" or "quite serious" threat to global peace, by party support, 1994-2026

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	Reform UK
China	%	%	**%**	%	%
1994	52	41	47	*	*
2005	35	27	25	*	*
2024	83	65	65	54	79
Spring 2025	75	68	66	52	74
Autumn 2025	74	62	75	48	70
2026	70	65	61	44	73
Change 2024-26	-13	0	-4	-10	-6
USA	%	%	%	%	%
1994	14	26	17	*	*
2005	42	48	58	*	*
2024	25	44	38	53	26
Spring 2025	68	81	65	96	41
Autumn 2025	39	66	64	67	33
2026	66	83	72	94	48
Change 2024-6	+41	+39	+34	+41	+22
Iran	%	%	%	%	%
2024	88	76	78	68	87
Spring 2025	81	61	76	45	91
Autumn 2025	68	70	61	41	79
2026	87	70	76	54	89
Change 2024-6	-1	-6	-2	-14	+2
Israel	%	%	**%**	%	%
2005	51	48	54	*	*
2024	71	80	80	75	59
Spring 2025	58	77	71	74	51
Autumn 2025	59	78	69	79	63

2026	70	84	79	88	62
Change 2024-6	-1	+4	-1	+13	+3
Russia	%	%	**%**	%	%
1994	45	38	40	*	*
2024	96	92	93	93	88
Spring 2025	95	97	99	90	82
Autumn 2025	86	88	98	76	91
2026	92	90	95	83	92
Change 2024-6	-4	-2	+2	-10	+4
North Korea	%	%	**%**	%	%
2005	61	50	54	*	*
2024	87	74	79	70	79
Spring 2025	76	66	81	47	65
Autumn 2025	71	70	65	52	78
2026	72	64	56	50	80
Change 2024-6	-15	-10	-23	-20	+1
Saudi Arabia	%	%	**%**	%	%
2024	44	49	52	39	52
Spring 2025	36	34	42	34	32
Autumn 2025	29	39	32	34	43
2026	27	29	27	33	32
Change 2024-6	-17	-20	-25	-6	-20
Unweighted base					
1994	*294*	*362*	*163*	*<25*	*<25*
2005	*210*	*353*	*113*	*<25*	*<25*
2024	*206*	*302*	*100*	*76*	*106*
Spring 2025	*182*	*210*	*53*	*50*	*57*
Autumn 2025	*167*	*282*	*96*	*100*	*167*
2026	*363*	*397*	*191*	*244*	*314*

Source: British Social Attitudes, except Spring 2025; 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel.

But what underpins these political differences? As the chapter in this report by Curtice (2026) shows, there are two key value dimensions which play a decisive role in determining party identification. First, those on the left are distinctly concerned about inequality and favour government intervention to address it, while those on the right are more inclined to prioritise growing the size of the economy overall. The other dimension divides libertarians, who emphasise individual liberty, and authoritarians, more concerned about potential threats to social order and cohesion. Previous research suggests that authoritarians tend to be more likely to perceive and be concerned by threats from abroad (Hetherington and Suhay, 2006), which may suggest that the libertarian/authoritarian divide should be the more strongly associated with citizens' threat perceptions. However, it is also true that the United States and authoritarian states with a communist heritage have traditionally taken very different views of the extent to which the economy should be under state control rather than governed by market forces, a divergence that echoes the domestic division between those on the left and those on the right.

In Table 4, we use people's answers to a set of scale items that are regularly included on BSA to identify the one-third most libertarian and the one-third most authoritarian citizens on this dimension (see Carabat et al., 2026). At the same time, we also divide respondents into the one-third most left-wing and the one-third most right-wing groups, again using questions regularly asked on BSA. The table shows the proportion of each group that regards each country as a serious threat, together with the difference between libertarians and authoritarians and that between those on the left and those on the right in the proportion who express that view.

Table 4 Proportions regarding countries as a "very" or "quite serious" threat, by position on libertarian/authoritarian and left/right scales.

% regard as serious threat	Libertarian/Authoritarian			Left/Right		
	Libertarian	Authoritarian	Libertarian-Authoritarian	Left	Right	Left-Right
China	56	69	-13	57	65	-8
USA	84	67	+17	82	63	+19
Iran	61	86	-25	64	79	-15
Israel	83	75	+8	83	69	+14
Russia	88	91	-3	88	86	2

North Korea	53	77	-24	55	68	-13
Saudi Arabia	30	38	-8	34	28	+6
Unweighted base	*536*	*630*		*524*	*635*	

Source: NatCen Opinion Panel Spring 2026

The results confirm our expectation that, for the most part, the difference between libertarians and authoritarians is bigger than that between those on the left and those on the right. On average, across all seven countries, there is a 14-point difference between libertarians and authoritarians in the proportion who regard a country as a threat, compared with an 11-point gap between those on the left and those on the right. Moreover, in most instances, authoritarians are more likely than libertarians to regard a country as a threat per se, indicating a higher sensitivity to geopolitical threat perception. Nevertheless, there are two countries to which neither of these generalisations applies – the USA and Israel. Authoritarians are less likely than libertarians to regard those two countries as a serious threat, while in both instances too, the gap between left and right – with those on the left the more likely to regard them as a threat – is somewhat bigger than that between libertarians and authoritarians.

These patterns, which have changed little since 2024, suggest the United States' position as Britain's traditional ally continues to be a positive influence on perceptions of its international behaviour amongst Britons with authoritarian instincts. Those who voted for Brexit in 2016, an option widely presented by its advocates as consistent with and indicative of the relative importance of the UK's relationship to Washington as compared with Europe, are 18 points less likely than those who backed Remain to perceive America as a serious threat to global peace. Conversely, the fact that the United States is less favourably regarded by those on the left, suggests that, in part, many citizens evaluate the United States not solely as a military or diplomatic actor, but also as the world's leading capitalist economy, and that their attitudes towards American foreign policy are closely intertwined with their views of global markets and other foundational concepts of their politics.

Age is nowadays the most prominent demographic division in our politics, with younger Britons broadly more likely to support Labour and the Greens, while older Britons tend to be more inclined to favour Reform and the Conservatives (Curtice et al., 2025; 2026). Younger Britons are less likely than older people to possess an authoritarian outlook (Curtice et al., 2023), and also have not had the personal experience of life during the fraught geopolitical environment of the Cold War, in which the West sought to ensure that liberal democracies triumphed over communist authoritarian regimes. As Table 5 shows, older Britons are more likely than younger citizens to regard

China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran as serious threats to global peace.[1] In the case of China, 71% of those aged 55 and over believe the country is a serious threat, compared with only 47% of those aged under 35. By contrast, younger Britons are more likely to consider the United States and Israel, two democratic allies of Britain, as threats to global peace. Older Britons are evidently more likely than their younger counterparts to see the world through the prism of Britain's traditional allies and competitors, while younger Britons may not afford any special significance to these conceptions.

Table 5 Proportions regarding countries as a "very" or "quite serious" threat, by age group

	18-34	35-54	55+	55+ vs 18-34
	%	%	%	
China	47	63	71	+24
USA	79	75	69	-10
Iran	63	74	84	+21
Israel	82	77	76	-6
Russia	81	90	93	+12
North Korea	53	64	76	+23
Saudi Arabia	32	39	30	-2
Unweighted Bases	*295*	*633*	*1057*	

Source: NatCen Opinion Panel Spring 2026

Finally, it is worth reflecting on what respondents mean when they identify that a nation poses a risk to global peace. In the case of the United States, for example, while the survey does capture growing concern regarding the current US Government's foreign policy choices for the stability of the wider international order, this does not necessarily demonstrate a fundamental recalculation of the United States' utility as Britain's foremost strategic and security ally. At the same time, public understandings of security have become increasingly multidimensional. It is entirely possible, for example, that concern about the global tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on allies and adversaries alike is seen to be just as destabilising for global peace as the choices the administration has made around Iran, Greenland, and other geopolitical hotspots. The breadth and complexity of American power have been defining factors in shaping the significance of the United States to Britain over many decades. These same attributes may now also

[1] In the case of Russia the age difference is more apparent if we focus on those who regard the country as a 'very serious' threat. As many as 71% of those aged 55 and over express that view compared with 61% of those aged between 35 and 54 and only 50% of those aged under 35.

be playing a role in widening the aperture of concern amongst the British people.

The transatlantic dilemma – Britain's most vital alliances

As the world appears to be an increasingly dangerous place, the question of where and with whom Britain seeks its alliances becomes even more significant. At the heart of this dilemma is one of the central debates which has defined Britain's strategic posture since the end of the Second World War – namely, the extent to which Britain should prioritise its 'special relationship' with the United States, or whether it should rather focus on Europe, its geographic neighbour.

Since 1984, BSA has periodically assessed where people stand on this debate by asking:

On the whole, do you think that Britain's interests are better served by closer links with…

Western Europe
United States of America (USA)
Both equally, or
Neither

Note: The reference to "Western Europe" reflects the geostrategic situation on the continent when the question was first asked, in 1984, before the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the decade.

Examining the full suite of data over the years enables us to observe a fairly significant degree of volatility in perceptions of both the United States and Europe, and reminds us that the notion of a population divided between two pathways is not entirely accurate. As Table 6 shows, the high point for American cooperation was found in 1993, although even at this time, only a quarter (25%) of Britons supported the prioritisation of this relationship. And despite a recent rise in enthusiasm for cooperation with Western Europe, the proportion of Britons favouring this relationship over the United States was in fact higher during the 1980s and 1990s, peaking at 57% in 1987 when the Single European Act of economic integration came into force. A shift towards Britons seeking a more equal balance between the United States and Western Europe emerged over a 30-year period, with the proportion of Britons favouring this approach increasing from 21% in 1995 to 55% in 2022, following the UK's departure from the European Union and in the wake of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As we might anticipate from our earlier analysis, however, the return of Donald Trump to the White House has helped ensure that Western Europe (42%) has become the single most popular option once more, while a record low of 9% choose the USA. That said, still nearly two in five (38%) say "both

equally", well above anything recorded in the 1980s and 1990s. It seems that practical geography has always played a prominent role in Britons' interpretation of the nation's relationships, and that for many the choice has come to be regarded as not so much about whether Britain should favour the United States or Europe, as about the extent to which it prioritises Europe or seeks a balanced relationship with the two. Meanwhile still relatively few (11%) believe that Britain should not seek to be close to either the United States or Western Europe.

Table 6 Perceptions of whether Britain's interests better served by closer links with Western Europe or the USA, 1984-2026

	Western Europe	United States of America	Both equally	Neither	*Unweighted bases*
1984	53	21	16	3	*1675*
1985	48	18	20	4	*1804*
1986	55	18	17	3	*3100*
1987	57	18	14	3	*2847*
1989	50	17	20	3	*3029*
1990	52	18	18	3	*2797*
1993	42	25	17	5	*1461*
1994	45	21	17	9	*1165*
1995	46	20	21	6	*1227*
2022	20	11	55	10	*1052*
2025	30	12	43	11	*1075*
2026	42	9	38	11	*981*

Source: 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel

When considering the degree to which Britain's interests are served by closer cooperation with the United States or Europe, one must distinguish between economic and defence relationships – not least of all because Washington is deeply embedded as Britain's most integrated security ally, but the European Union, even after Brexit, remains Britain's largest trading partner. To ascertain the impact of these distinctions, our two most recent surveys also asked respondents:

And thinking now specifically about the military and defence, do you think that Britain's interests are better served by closer links with…

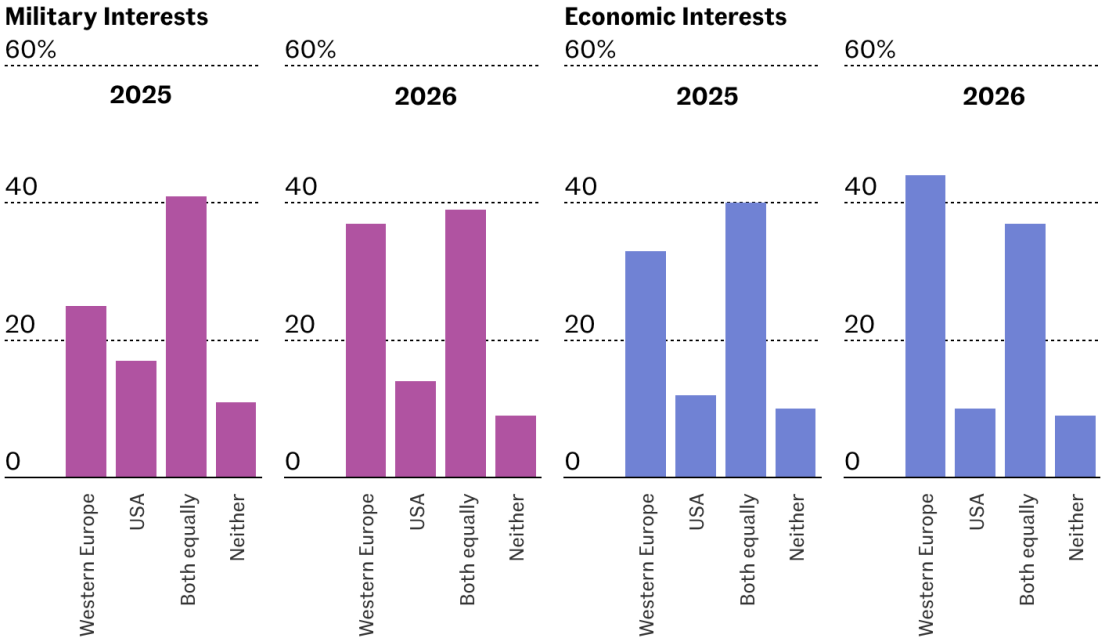
And thinking now specifically about the economy, do you think that Britain's interests are better served by closer links with…

The response options were the same as those for the general question we have already analysed.

Figure 1 reveals that when citizens are asked specifically about Britain's military and defence interests, the balance of preference between Western Europe and the USA is somewhat more inclined towards the latter than was the case when people were asked about Britain's interests in general terms. In 2025, for example, 25% picked Western Europe, five points below the equivalent entry in the previous table, while 17% selected the USA, five points above. These differences are replicated in our Spring 2026 survey. That said, at 41% the proportion saying "both equally" in 2025 is little different from that in Table 6, and the same is true of the results in 2026. It seems that even in a period in which scepticism regarding aspects of contemporary American foreign policy has reached a fever pitch, the United States continues to be regarded by many as an indispensable security partner, albeit alongside Western Europe.

Meanwhile – and in contrast – Western Europe is a little more likely to be selected than in Table 6 when reference is made to Britain's economic interests, indicating that, for some, geographic proximity plays a larger role in questions of trade. That said, in both instances the proportion selecting Western Europe was much higher in 2026 than 2025, just as was also the case in Table 6.

Figure 1: Perceptions of whether Britain's military and economic interests are better served by closer links with Western Europe or the USA, 2025 and 2026



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter.
Source: 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel

Overall, British public opinion has evidently moved towards a more European conception of Britain's international interests. However, this does not necessarily indicate a widespread desire to abandon the transatlantic relationship. Britons are not necessarily seeking to replace one alliance with another, nor do they appear to favour a wholesale strategic realignment. Instead, they support diversification, strengthening Britain's European partnerships while preserving the transatlantic alliance with the United States. This perhaps reflects an emerging public preference for strategic balance, resilience, and flexibility, in an increasingly unpredictable international environment.

Interestingly, the preference for Europe as an ally was even more evident if, instead of asking people to choose between "Western Europe" and the United States, Britons were invited to choose between the "European Union" and the United States. In our spring 2026 survey, half of the respondents were presented with this option, while half were given the traditional "Western Europe" option. When the European Union is presented as the alternative to the USA, it attracts greater support than "Western Europe" across almost every demographic group. Overall, the proportion favouring the EU stands at 53%, compared with 42% for Western Europe, while the proportion favouring ties with the United States is now 6% rather than 9%, and the proportion wanting to balance both relationships 33% rather than 38%.

The higher level of preference for the European Union also extends to the more specific questions about Britain's military and economic interests, with the proportion choosing EU cooperation on defence now standing at 46%, nine points above the Western Europe option, and the proportion selecting the USA four points lower. Rather than deterring respondents, making reference to the EU now appears to provide a clearer and more concrete frame of reference in people's minds. This may in part reflect the fact that the EU has become a more consequential geopolitical actor in the decade since Britain's decision to leave, particularly in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Britain's European orientation is therefore seemingly more readily expressed when citizens are invited to think in institutional rather than purely geographical terms.

Nonetheless, the overall preference for Europe does mask a considerable degree of divergence between the instincts of different social and political groups, and between those who support different parties. As Table 8 shows, Green supporters are the most likely to choose Western Europe and the least likely to choose the United States, while the opposite is true of Reform supporters. Conservative supporters are closer to Reform supporters, while the outlook of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters is closer to that of those who back the Greens. Indeed, even when we take into account those choosing "both equally", only around one in four Green supporters (24%) now believe that Britain's interests are better served by closer links with the US, either alone or in tandem with Western Europe. Even in the case of Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the equivalent figure is a little below half. Moreover, although the balance of opinion tipped somewhat between 2025 and 2026 towards Western Europe among the supporters of all parties, the movement was particularly sharp among Labour and Green supporters. With opponents of Brexit also less inclined to nominate the USA or "both equally", there is evidently still a considerable political fault line in public attitudes towards where the UK should be seeking political allies.

Table 8 Perceptions of whether Britain's military and defence interests are better served by closer links with the USA or Western Europe, by party support

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	Reform
	%	%	%	%	%
Western Europe	25	49	47	67	11
United States	15	9	12	5	28
Both equally	55	38	32	19	54
Neither	5	4	10	9	5
Unweighted bases	*172*	*207*	*100*	*99*	*167*

Source: NatCen Opinion Panel Spring 2026

The march to a wartime footing

The United Kingdom now faces a strategic environment characterised not by discrete military crises, but by what the 2025 National Security Strategy describes as an era of “continuous competition”, in which hostile states employ military pressure alongside cyber operations, economic coercion, political interference and technological competition (HM Government, 2025). Such conditions require sustained rather than episodic investment in defence capabilities. Yet maintaining elevated defence spending over many years demands durable political consent, particularly during periods of fiscal constraint. Public opinion therefore constitutes more than a constraint upon defence policy; it forms part of the strategic environment within which defence policy is made.

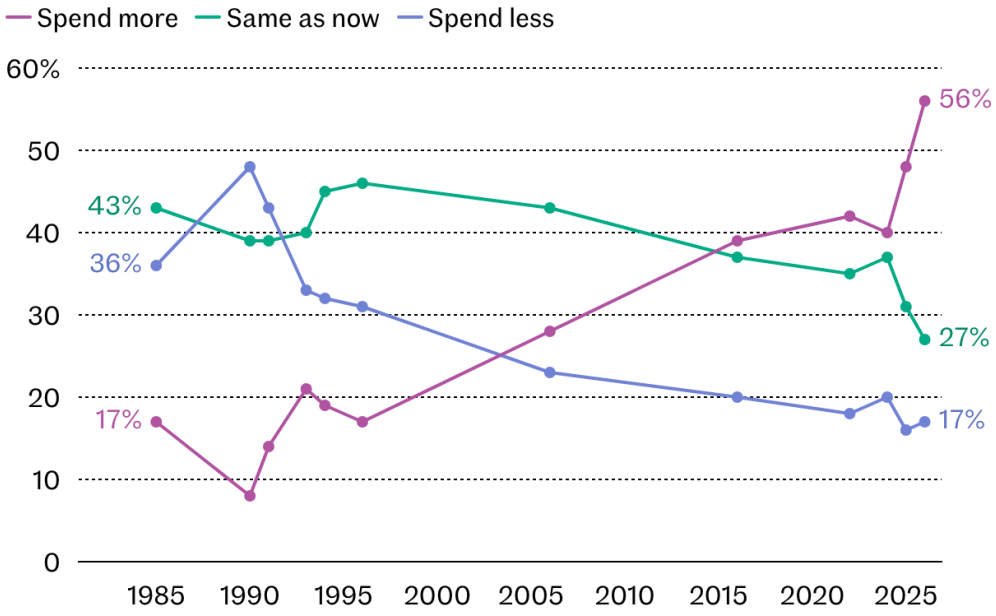
Yet despite their increasing importance, British public attitudes towards defence spending remain comparatively understudied. This has impeded understanding of the complex nature of individual beliefs, as defence spending occupies a unique position at the intersection of several competing policy objectives. Citizens may, for example, support maintaining a strong military while opposing particular military interventions; equally, they may endorse increases in defence spending without favouring an interventionist and forthright foreign policy doctrine. Similarly, while voters evaluate defence spending alongside perceived external threats, they also consider defence expenditure in the context of their perceptions of state performance in healthcare, education, pensions, taxation, economic growth, and wider conceptions of the state's responsibilities.

During much of the post-Cold War period, defence expenditure could often be treated as a residual category within public spending, adjusting gradually to changing fiscal circumstances. However, contemporary strategic competition presents a different challenge, and Western governments must now seek to increase defence spending structurally rather than temporarily, requiring public consent that can endure beyond individual crises or electoral cycles. The United Kingdom offers an especially valuable case study for examining these dynamics, combining one of NATO's largest defence budgets with a strong Parliamentary tradition, comparatively high levels of public trust in the armed forces, and persistent fiscal pressures arising from an ageing population, growing demands on state welfare and public services, and slow economic growth. These characteristics create an environment in which defence spending must compete directly with other highly valued public goods.

Over much of the past half century, defence has indeed occupied a relatively modest place in the hierarchy of the British public’s priorities, in part because citizens assessed that the government was sufficiently investing in the country’s defensive architecture to meet the threats of the day. In 1985, as the Cold War continued, Britain was spending 5.3% of GDP on its defence.

At this time, as Figure 2 shows, only 17% felt it was necessary to spend more on defence, in part perhaps because the Cold War had matured to a point of relative stability, but also perhaps because people recognised the considerable degree of expenditure being directed towards defence. As Britain began to take advantage of the post-Cold War peace dividend of the 1990s, the proportion advocating higher spending remained much the same, as the decline in spending on defence that took place at this time seemingly matched, in citizens' eyes, the reduced perception of risk in the now more benign geostrategic environment. In any event, the 'peace dividend' encouraged successive governments to reduce military expenditure while prioritising health, education, and welfare.

Figure 2: Attitudes to spending on military and defence 1985–2026



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter.
Source: 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel

By 2006, when we revisited the issue of defence spending for the first time for ten years, Britain was only spending 2.4% of GDP on its military. With the world now in the midst of the 'War on Terror' following the September 11th attacks five years before, the proportion seeking higher defence spending had risen to 28% and was now slightly higher than the proportion in favour of less spending (23%). By 2022, in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its increasingly aggressive posture towards Europe as a whole, over two in five (42%) were in favour of more spending, yet defence spending as a proportion of GDP remained relatively low.

This gulf between risk perceptions and government response is the driving alchemy that underpins the historically high levels of support for increased defence expenditure observed today. In our latest survey this spring, the

proportion supporting higher defence spending has risen above half (56%) for the first time, while only one in six (17%) want less spending. Two data points underscore the relationship between threat perceptions and spending preferences. Among the minority – 22% of those who responded to our latest survey – who believe that no more than three of our seven countries represent a threat to world peace, only 38% favour more spending on defence. But among those who believe that five or more of the seven nations pose a threat – 58% of those in our most recent survey – as many as 64% are in favour of higher defence spending.

The demand for more expenditure is now evident among the supporters of almost all parties, albeit to somewhat varying degrees, and with one notable exception (see Table 10). Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters have always been rather less supportive of spending on defence than their Conservative counterparts, although in the 1980s and 1990s, this mainly reflected their more forthright preference for lower spending rather than a major divergence from Conservatives in their desire for spending to be increased.(Curtice and Scholes, 2023). However, after the September 11th attacks, this began to change. In 2006, Conservative supporters were nine points more likely than those who backed Labour to say that defence spending should be increased, and by 2022 the gap had widened to 35 points, with the gap between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also standing at 24 points.

Nevertheless, we are now observing another shift in the pattern. Between 2024 and 2025, support for higher defence spending rose markedly in the ranks of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters, and although those who back Labour are still 21 points less likely than Conservatives, and 28 points less likely than those backing Reform, to favour more defence spending, still over half (55%) now want spending to rise. This suggests that the growing concern about Britain's security has broadened support for more spending on defence across much of the political spectrum, albeit without erasing long-standing ideological differences. The one exception comes from those who support the Greens, nearly half of whom (47%) favour less spending on defence, an even slightly higher figure than in 2024. In this respect, when it comes to defence spending, it is the Green Party which is out of step with wider British opinion.

Table 10 Attitudes towards defence spending, by party support, 1996-2026

% more/ % less	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	UKIP/Reform UK
1996	16/23	18/37	19/35	*	*
2006	32/18	23/25	18/34	*	*
2016	48/10	31/27	31/26	*	62/11

2022	67/5	32/26	43/9	18/39	*
2024	61/8	28/27	35/15	22/42	67/10
2025	67/8	41/18	59/10	15/38	74/5
2026	76/5	55/18	62/9	21/47	83/3

Source: 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel
Details of the unweighted bases for this table can be found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter.

As we might anticipate, given the differences by party support, Britons with authoritarian instincts (70%) are more likely than libertarians (42%) to be in favour of more spending, as are those on the right of politics (67%) as compared with those on the left (49%). Equally, those who voted Leave in the Brexit referendum in 2016 (80%) are much more likely than those who supported Remain (54%) to want more money for defence, although it is now a majority wish amongst those on both sides in a previously contentious debate. Alongside these differences, there is a marked divergence by age. Over three in five (62%) of those aged 55 and over support more defence spending compared with a little under half (47%) of those aged between 35 and 54, and only three in ten (30%) of those aged under 35 years.

Moreover, the rise in support for more spending over the last decade has been heavily concentrated among older people. Amongst the over-55s, the proportion in favour of more spending is 16 points up on the equivalent figure in 2016, while among the middle-aged, the rise is 11 points. Among the under 35s, in contrast, the level of support in our latest survey is three points down on ten years ago. Attitudes towards defence spending have therefore become something of a generational divide. The widening age gradient suggests that older generations may be responding particularly strongly to the deteriorating international security environment.

By contrast, whereas a gender gap had formed over the past three decades, it is now beginning to narrow. In 2025, men were substantially more likely than women to support higher defence spending (55% to 40%), with women more inclined to favour maintaining existing spending levels. In 2026, while 60% of men favour spending increases, the proportion of women believing defence spending should be increased has risen 12 percentage points to 52%. Again, while important differences remain between social groups, the overall trend in favour of higher defence spending is robust, even if we cannot yet anticipate whether it will be sustained.

Guns versus Butter

As the geopolitical climate has become more dynamic, unpredictable, and infused with proliferating threats, the British people have turned to their government to strengthen the nation's defensive apparatus. There appears to be a considerable awareness that these investments involve significant costs, and therefore defence spending itself has become the central

battleground of public debate, more so than the substantive details of how any additional funds will be spent. How much is spent on defence has come to assume a prominent place in citizens' minds as a test of state legitimacy and competence. However, defence spending differs from most other areas of public expenditure, as its benefits are largely preventative. Citizens can readily observe improvements to hospitals, schools, or transport infrastructure, whereas successful defence policy is often measured by the absence of conflict or coercion.

For governments, the task of defence investment is, over time, to build incrementally sufficient capability that can be mobilised effectively when needed. The economic and social costs of undertaking this process in a period of relative peace are significantly lower than during a time of active conflict, when nations may find themselves scrambling to access scarce resources and struggling to repurpose existing infrastructure. However, without a persuasive argument about the urgency of the geopolitical stakes and the foundational role that defence plays in enabling a secure and prosperous national foundation on which to build strong public services and the quality of life, the short term political costs may appear to be greater than in a time of visible conflict.

This political sensitivity is reinforced by surveys, such as those conducted by Ipsos and YouGov, which demonstrate that support for increased defence expenditure often diminishes when citizens are asked whether they would accept higher taxation, increased government borrowing, or reductions in domestic public services to finance it (Paskell and Desroches, 2026; Smith, 2026). These findings suggest that public opinion towards defence is conditional, with citizens willing to endorse increased defence spending under particular political, economic, and strategic conditions, while withholding support under others. The public debate about defence spending is therefore often framed as a zero-sum choice between domestic and international expenditure, with spending on 'defence or welfare' the modern battleground of the traditional 'guns or butter' framing which characterised early 20th century discourse. However, while attitudes towards defence are closely associated with broader beliefs about the role of the state, public spending, and welfare, the relationships are more nuanced than a simple left-right ideological divide would suggest.

It is certainly true that across almost every question in our survey, citizens who favour increasing defence spending display a greater willingness to reduce or restrain welfare expenditure. Conversely, those who wish to reduce defence spending are consistently more supportive of maintaining or increasing spending on welfare and public services. The clearest relationship emerges when we consider Britons' broader preferences on taxation and public spending. Among those who favour lower taxes and reduced spending on health, education and social benefits, 53% support increasing defence expenditure, compared with only 12% who favour reductions. By contrast,

among those supporting higher taxes and greater social spending, 43% favour increased defence expenditure and 21% favour reductions. This suggests that preferences for defence spending are linked to broader fiscal philosophy, with advocates of a smaller state more willing to prioritise defence over other areas of public expenditure.

That there is a relationship between citizens' instincts towards spending on welfare and on defence is even more apparent if we compare the attitudes of those who, according to a series of items that measure how sympathetic or unsympathetic people are towards welfare, are among the one-third least sympathetic and those who comprise the one-third most sympathetic (for further details see Carabat et al. 2026). As many as 60% of those who are least sympathetic to welfare spending support greater spending on defence, while only 12% want less spending. In contrast, only 36% of those most sympathetic to welfare spending back more defence spending, while as many as 27% would prefer that defence spending is reduced.

That said, perhaps the most important finding for a Chancellor grappling with these hard choices is that the degree to which Britons are willing to sacrifice public spending depends on the welfare benefits in question. Certain categories of welfare spending, particularly support for disabled people, carers, and pensioners, continue to command broad support, even among citizens who favour substantially higher defence spending. Equally, there are areas of welfare provision, namely those for single-parent families or the unemployed, which command much weaker levels of support among those who want more spent on defence. This suggests, as de Vries and Baumberg Geiger (2026) show, that people distinguish between different forms of welfare rather than treat social spending as a single category.

Table 11 presents the proportion of Britons in our 2025 survey who favour higher defence spending, among those who would prefer the government to spend more on benefits for each of six welfare groups, and those who would like it to spend less. At the same time, in the far, right-hand column we show the difference in the level of support for more spending between those who want more spending on benefits for that group, and those who prefer spending reductions.

In some instances, there are large differences between those two groups. Support for more defence spending is 26 points higher among those who favour less spending on benefits for single parents than it is among those who want more spending on this group. There is also an equivalent gap of 22 points between those who want more spending on benefits for the unemployed and those who want less. However, the gap is notably smaller, just 10 points, in the case of benefits for disabled people who cannot work, and carers, while it is negligible in the case of parents on low incomes. Meanwhile, the level of support for more spending on defence does not differ at all between those who want more benefits for retired people. Although the

BSA survey does not directly test willingness to fund defence through reductions in welfare spending, the relatively weaker support for some forms of welfare provision suggests where a government that is seeking savings to fund defence might encounter less public resistance. The association between preferences for reductions in these benefits and support for higher defence spending reinforces that interpretation.

Table 11 Support for more defence spending by attitudes towards welfare for specific groups

% support more spending on defence	Attitude towards Benefits for Group		
	More	Less	More-Less
Retired people	50	50	0
Parents on low incomes	47	51	-4
Disabled people who cannot work	44	54	-10
Carers of sick or disabled	48	58	-10
Unemployed people	32	54	-22
Single parents	38	64	-26

Details of the unweighted bases for this table can be found in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter.

Taken together, this analysis reveals that support for defence spending is closely intertwined with wider attitudes towards public expenditure, though not in a simplistic zero-sum fashion. The results point towards two competing conceptions of the state's priorities. One places greater emphasis on national security, lower taxation, and more selective welfare provision, and is associated with substantially stronger support for defence investment. The other prioritises a more expansive social safety net and is correspondingly less inclined to support increasing military expenditure. Yet these two positions are not simply mutually exclusive. When two seemingly essential national needs collide, British public opinion distinguishes between different forms of welfare, rather than viewing social spending as a single undifferentiated category.

These findings have important implications for policy-makers. The data indicate that public support for increased defence investment may be broader than is often assumed, provided it is framed not as coming at the expense of the social contract, but as part of a broader reprioritisation of state responsibilities in an era of heightened international insecurity. Indeed, examining citizens' evolving preferences for the prioritisation of state resources, we can observe that in 2025, defence became the first priority for government spending for 10% of Britons – the first time the figure has reached double digits in the past 40 years. Those prioritising health (41%) and education (17%) are still much more numerous, but they are now somewhat fewer in number than they were in 2020 (48% and 23%

respectively) ahead of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The political challenge, therefore, may be less about convincing the public of the need for stronger defence spending, than about identifying which areas of public expenditure they consider most legitimate to protect, and which they regard as more open to reallocation.

The defence of the realm

Debates about geopolitical threats or levels of military expenditure can feel rather abstract and conceptual. Much of foreign, defence and security policy involves citizens looking to the state to take the difficult decisions on their behalf. To assess the strength of feeling underpinning the heightened perceptions of threat that people are experiencing, we also addressed the personal, civic investment that Britons now have in the defence of their country, and whether the deteriorating security environment is fostering a sense that it is important for people to be willing to serve in Britain's defence. Respondents were asked on both our 2023 and 2025 surveys to indicate how important it is "to be willing to serve in the military at a time of need" by positioning themselves on a scale from 1-7, with 1 meaning "not at all important" and 7 "very important".

Table 12 reveals that, in answering this question, in 2025 nearly one in three (32%) responded with a "6" or a "7", indicating that they regarded willingness to serve as highly important. Almost half (49%) gave a score of 5, 6 or 7. Conversely, just 15% offered a score of "1" or "2", indicating they thought willingness to serve was of little or no importance. Moreover, this last figure was eight points down on that recorded in 2023, indicating that the proportion attaching little or no importance to willingness to serve has somewhat diminished. Overall, these findings suggest that public opinion is trending towards becoming more settled around the principle that deteriorating international conditions require individual, as well as governmental, preparedness.

True, respondents appear to have found it more difficult to answer this question in 2025 than in 2023. One explanation could be that these questions now feel less hypothetical as the world becomes more dangerous. In any event, if we put those responses to one side, as many as 39% now believe that a willingness to serve at a time of need is of high importance, a statistically significant increase on the equivalent figure of 32% in 2023.

Table 12 Perceived importance of willingness to serve in the military at a time of need, 2023 and 2025.

	2023	2025	2025-2023
	%	%	
1-2 (not important)	23	15	-8

3-5	39	35	-4
6-7 (important)	29	32	+3
Can't choose	9	16	+7
Unweighted bases	*1611*	*1075*	

There are, however, notable differences by party support. Table 13 shows that whereas nearly half of Reform and Conservative supporters believe that willingness to serve in the military is highly important – that is, they give a score of 6 or 7 – only around a quarter of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green supporters take that view. Meanwhile, in the case of the Greens, as many as one in three (34%) believe that the willingness to serve in a time of need is decidedly unimportant, and choose a score of only 1 or 2. That figure is almost twice or more than that among the supporters of any of the other parties, once again highlighting that it is the Green Party's voters which diverge most strongly from public opinion in general. Meanwhile, perhaps unsurprisingly, citizens with personal connections to the Armed Forces are more likely than those without such connections to regard willingness to serve as important.

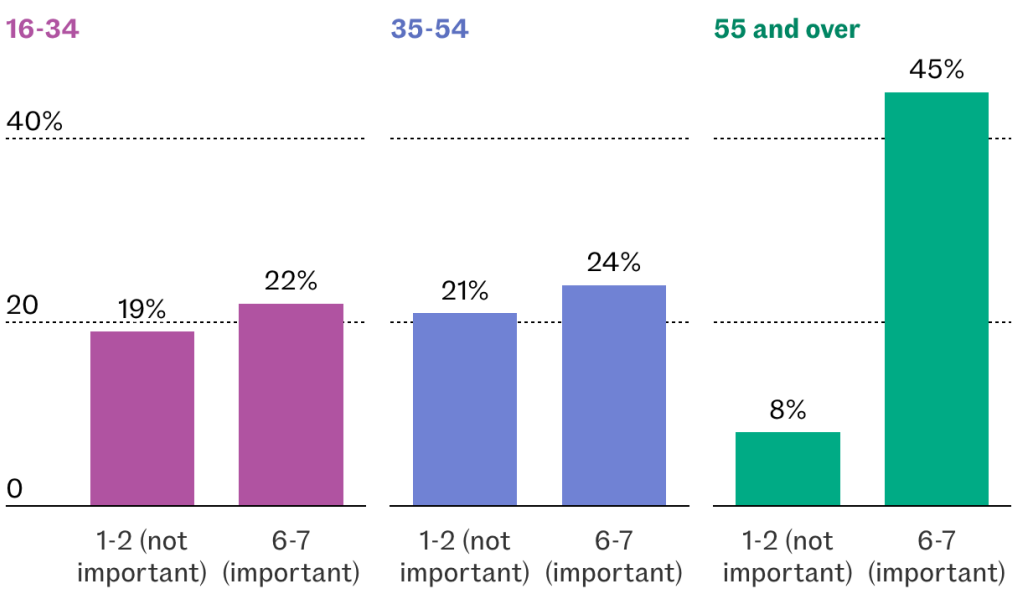
Table 13. Perceived importance of willingness to serve in the military, by party support

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	Reform
	%	%	%	%	%
1-2 (not important)	7	18	10	34	7
3-5	30	42	49	30	34
6-7 (important)	48	23	26	21	49
Unweighted bases	*167*	*282*	*96*	*100*	*167*

There are also striking distinctions by age. Figure 3 shows that those aged 55-and over are much more likely than those aged less than 55 years to say that willingness to serve is highly important. No fewer than 45% of older people express that view, while fewer than one in ten (8%) indicate that it is of little or no importance. In contrast, among younger and middle-aged Britons, the proportion who believe that willingness to serve is particularly important is almost matched by the proportion who believe it is of little or no importance. It seems that not only is there greater support for the armed forces among older generations, but also that there might be a fundamentally different conception of the relationship between the individual and the nation.

The obvious policy challenge lies in the fact that of course it is younger Britons, not their elders, who would be required to serve in the military, should Britain become involved in an active conflict.

Figure 3: Perceived importance of willingness to serve in the military, by age group



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter.

Citizens with a more authoritarian outlook are substantially (47%) more likely than libertarians (22%) to say willingness to serve is important. Meanwhile, the more politically engaged, who may be more aware of contemporary geopolitical risks and therefore perceive a greater urgency to the question, are also more likely to regard willingness to serve as highly important. As many as 36% of those with a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of interest in politics take that view, compared with just 15% of those with "not very much" interest or "none at all". There is also a robust relationship between citizens' willingness to serve and their attitudes towards defence spending. Among citizens wishing to spend "much more" on defence, as many as 57% say that willingness to serve is particularly important. By contrast, 53% of those who wish to spend much less on defence regard it as of little or no importance. This relationship demonstrates that support for defence spending is not simply an abstract fiscal preference, but may also reflect a broader conception of national defence as a shared civic enterprise in which individuals themselves assume responsibilities alongside government.

Conclusion

Britain's strategic culture is changing. The country has moved psychologically from a post-Cold War society at peace, to one that has come to accept permanent geopolitical competition as the new strategic reality. Rather than simply reacting to individual international crises, the British people appear to have internalised a broader understanding that the world has become structurally more dangerous, and that accordingly the country must adapt. This shift helps to explain why support for more defence spending has continued to rise, why willingness to serve in defence of the nation has come to be regarded as more important, and why public opinion now favours a diversified alliance structure spanning both Europe and the United States. At the same time, these findings reveal a level of nuance that is often absent from public debate, which frequently reduces the funding of security to a binary ‘guns versus butter’ choice, or Britain's strategic orientation to simply a ‘Europe versus America’ dilemma.

From a policy perspective, our findings illuminate potential pathways through which the hard choices underpinning the current defence spending debate can be navigated. The public licence for government to prioritise funding a defence uplift has undoubtedly strengthened, but it is clear that the choices that are made about which areas of the welfare state are cut back to do so must be taken with care and nuance. The findings also suggest an important communication challenge for government, which is central to its legitimacy to pursue the national interest. Public consensus appears strongest where threats are immediate, visible, and easily understood, as in the case of Russia. By contrast, where security challenges are gradual, technologically complex, or strategically indirect, as with China, perceptions differ somewhat by age and political outlook. The patterns are even more complex when they pertain to established allies currently pursuing more high-risk foreign policies, such as the United States and Israel.

If the government wishes to sustain long-term public support for more multifaceted alliance relationships, or policies addressing the structural and less visible factors underpinning competitiveness and resilience, it will need to invest more heavily in sophisticated strategic communications. It must also take seriously the relationship between attitudes towards defence and the instinct of civic responsibility that is still relatively weak among the younger people upon whom Britain would need to rely in a time of need. In an era in which national security increasingly demands a truly whole-of-society

approach to resilience, alongside traditional military power, building public understanding is itself an increasingly important element and capacity of strategic statecraft.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Underlying data for Figure 1. Perceptions of whether Britain's military and economic interests are better served by closer links with Western Europe or the USA, 2025 and 2026

	Military Interests		Economic Interests	
	2025	2026	2025	2026
	%	%	%	%
Western Europe	25	37	33	44
United States of America	17	14	12	10
Both equally	41	39	40	37
Neither	11	9	10	9
Unweighted bases	*1075*	*981*	*1075*	*981*

Table A.2 Underlying data for Figure 2. Attitudes to spending on military and defence 1985-2026

	1985	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	2006	2016	2022	2024	2025	2026
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Spend more	17	8	14	21	19	17	28	39	42	40	48	56
Same as now	43	39	39	40	45	46	43	37	35	37	31	27
Spend less	36	48	43	33	32	31	23	20	18	20	16	17
Unweighted base	*1502*	*2430*	*1224*	*1268*	*975*	*989*	*930*	*1563*	*1052*	*1022*	*1075*	*1985*

Source: 2026: NatCen Opinion Panel

Table A.3 Unweighted Bases for Table 10. Attitudes towards defence spending by party support, 1996-2026

% more/% less	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Green	UKIP/Reform UK
1996	289	423	113	<50	<50
2006	245	300	110	<50	<50
2016	557	469	90	<50	78
2022	290	359	131	63	<50
2024	206	302	100	76	106
2025	167	282	96	100	167
2026	363	397	191	244	314

Table A.4 Unweighted Bases for Table 11. Support for More Defence Spending by Attitudes towards Welfare for Specific Groups

% support more spending on defence	Attitude towards Benefits for Group	
	More	Less
Retired people	471	117
Parents on low incomes	542	118
Disabled people who cannot work	515	85
Carers of sick or disabled	634	60
Unemployed people	151	460
Single parents	336	188

Table A.5 Underlying data for Figure 3. Perceived importance of willingness to serve in the military, by age group

	16-34	35-54	55 and over
	%	%	%
1-2 (not important)	19	21	8
3-5	39	39	30
6-7 (important)	22	24	45
Unweighted bases	*256*	*337*	*479*

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