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Foreign Policy Attitudes and National Alignments in Times of Chinese and Russian Threats

Public Opinion Across Three NATO Members

Catarina P Thomson

The increased support for NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine is hardly surprising and matches theories of public opinion in times of war. This article unpacks this headline, considering not just Russian and Chinese pre-war behaviour but the underlying foreign policy attitudes of citizens across three different NATO member states. When grey-zone tactics were the preferred mode of action for both Russia and China, were citizens in NATO countries such as the US, the UK and a former Soviet state such as Lithuania in agreement on how to respond to threats? Using survey data from March 2021, Catarina P Thomson finds that although NATO is generally perceived as the first port of call, the dynamics underlying such support vary between these three countries.

Regardless of the outcome, the ongoing war in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the international system. A shared Russian threat has translated into NATO and other Western allies being more united than they have been in decades – including the prospect of an armed Germany and the UK collaborating closely with the EU.¹ China, a state best known for prioritising the economy over political stances, has thus far pursued 'sympathetic neutrality' but nonetheless faces critical geopolitical choices.² Options include playing what would likely be a pivotal role in peace talks between Ukraine and Russia,³ which the Ukrainian foreign minister has called for.⁴ The imposition of unprecedented economic sanctions (or, more precisely, economic warfare) against Russia is as unwelcomed by Beijing as being militarily encircled by the US, NATO, AUKUS or the Quad,⁵ and will certainly factor in any action on Taiwan.

1. Michael Clarke, 'A New World Since Thursday', blog post, *Tipping Point 2020s*, 27 February 2022, <<https://tippingpoint2020s.com/2022/02/27/a-new-world-since-thursday/>>, accessed 14 March 2022.
2. Michael Clarke, 'Putin and Xi Jinping Flirt with the Attractions of a Wider European War', blog post, *Tipping Point 2020s*, 14 March 2022, <<https://tippingpoint2020s.com/2022/03/14/putin-and-xi-jinping-flirt-with-the-attractions-of-a-wider-european-war>>, accessed 2 April 2022.
3. Namita Singh, 'Chinese Premier Li Says Ukraine Situation "Disconcerting" as He Offers China's Help in Ceasefire Talks', *The Independent*, 11 March 2022.
4. Liyan Qi, 'China Says Ukraine Foreign Minister Sought Help to Negotiate Cease-Fire With Russia', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2022.
5. AUKUS is a 2021 security pact between Australia, the UK and the US. Its principal objective is to defend shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region and includes helping the Royal Australian Navy acquire nuclear-powered submarines. For more information, see Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 'UK, US and Australia Launch New Security Partnership', 15 September 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-us-and-australia-launch-new-security-partnership?msclkid=9035bdfbce9111ec9b742b771c3173e4>>, accessed 23 May 2022. The Quad refers to the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue'



A cardboard sign at a protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Courtesy of Jani-Markus Häsä / Alamy Stock Photo

However, it must not be forgotten that just months before this show of Western unity, fractured institutional bonds among NATO members culminated in the disorderly withdrawal of allied troops from Afghanistan. At the time, this seemed like a natural endpoint of a post-Cold War evolution where NATO allies no longer shared a congruent understanding of the threats they face both individually and collectively. A US president had publicly wavered on American commitment to NATO and allied European defence,⁶ and the UK had left the EU. After all, member states with different geopolitical considerations may very well have diverging preferences over which organisations to rely on or which states to side with in times of crises.

Foreign policy experts often debate what kind of public opinion matters most during times of conflict. Some claim that what matters most is not actually public opinion per se, but rather how underlying public attitudes interact with predictable responses

to world events.⁷ Some of these predicted patterns can be observed in the war in Ukraine, and include citizens rallying 'around the flag' and tending to support those already in power, or countries coming together in the face of shared threats. Of course, public opinion does not translate directly into policy, but it can foment or constrain coercive foreign policies in democracies, including the initiation of warfare.⁸

It is tempting to treat states as unitary actors, pursuing what one assumes is their national interest. However, this assumption does not always hold and, despite polling data being more ubiquitous than ever before, decision-makers often interpret public opinion incorrectly. Brexit, for instance, is often seen as evidence of an isolationist UK. Closer inspection of the foreign policy attitudes of those who voted to leave versus those who voted to remain in the EU, however, paints a very different picture. Isolationist attitudes are low across the board. The key difference between both groups is that those who

between Australia, India, Japan and the US. For more information, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-61547082?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA>.

6. Graig Graziosi, 'Trump Boasts He Told Nato Members He Wouldn't Protect Them from Russia', *The Independent*, 22 April 2022.
7. John Zaller, 'Coming to Grips with V.O. Key's Concept of Latent Opinion', in Michael B MacKuen and George Rabinowitz (eds), *Electoral Democracy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
8. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., 'An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace', *American Political Science Review* (Vol. 93, No. 4, 1999), pp. 791–807.

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voted 'remain' privilege multilateralism, while those who voted 'leave' prefer taking unilateral action.⁹

The fact that support for NATO has increased since Russia's invasion of a neighbouring country is hardly surprising and has been thoroughly predicted by theories of public opinion in times of war. This article unpacks this headline and considers the underlying foreign policy attitudes of citizens across three different NATO member states. Attitudes – such as favouring multilateral or unilateral action, isolationist or active international stances, and the use of diplomacy versus militaristic tendencies – are relatively stable and influence security preferences. Are NATO member states – as diverse as the US, the UK and a former Soviet state such as Lithuania – equally threatened by these rising global challengers in the grey-zone realm? When it comes to preferred responses to such threats, are citizens across these states equally prone to prefer multilateral responses? Or are some inclined to favour their country to take unilateral action or indeed an isolationist stance?

When the Gray Zone Security Survey on threat perceptions was fielded in March 2021,¹⁰ the world was arguably a different place. Threats such as Russian regional territorial incursions, or China's increasing assertiveness on the global stage,¹¹ were categorised as grey-zone crises. Russia's decision for direct military engagement follows decades of grey-zone action in post-Soviet states.¹² Currently understudied, public opinion in the face of grey-zone tactics is essential as these are deliberately chosen to

remain below the threshold at which targeted states would initiate action against a challenger.¹³

The Gray Zone Security Survey on threat perceptions is based on the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) database, which includes information on over 150 variables for 485 international crises between 1918 and 2016 and over a thousand state actors that became involved in these.¹⁴ Among the most extensively studied ICB variables are those with information on crisis triggers, threat perception and crisis response. These were the basis for the development of threat perception and response items included in the Gray Zone Security Survey.

The survey was launched in March 2021 in the US, the UK and Lithuania, with nationally representative samples of 4,000, 1,300 and 1,000 respectively.¹⁵ The countries were selected to represent, to the best possible extent, a broad typological spectrum of NATO member states: two powerful founding members, as well as an Eastern European member from states that joined in 2004. The Baltic states have been one of the most geopolitically critical fronts in the relationship between Russia and the US, and Lithuania was selected for being particularly active in US-led military campaigns (including, for example, Iraq and Afghanistan),¹⁶ as well as the most prominent advocate for NATO's greater military presence at its eastern border¹⁷ and a vocal watchdog on evolving Russian grey-zone tactics.¹⁸ Lithuania has also taken harsh steps against Chinese strategic plans for the region.¹⁹ In the months since the survey was fielded, Lithuania withdrew from the 17+1 summit

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9. Catarina P Thomson, 'Mind the Gap: Comparing Foreign Policy Attitudes of Security Elites and the General Public', *RUSI Whitehall Reports*, 2-18 (February 2018).
 10. Supported by the Minerva Research Initiative of the US Department of Defense and an ESRC Impact Acceleration Account grant. Interpretations and opinions reflect those of the author and not the funding agencies.
 11. Henrik Larsen, 'NATO in an Illiberal World: The Case for Differentiated Partnerships', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 166, No. 3, 2021), pp. 84–92.
 12. Notable examples include cyber attacks of an unprecedented scale in Estonia in 2007 and arguably playing a key role in Belarus weaponising the movement of migrants to EU borders in 2021. Parag Khanna, 'How Small States Prepare for Cyber-War', *CNN*, 2 September 2015; *BBC News*, 'Belarus Migrants: Poland PM Blames Russia's Putin for Migrant Crisis', 9 November 2021.
 13. Egle Murauskaite et al., 'Extended Deterrence Dilemmas in the Grey Zone: Trans-Atlantic Insights on Baltic Security Challenges', *Journal on Baltic Security* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 2019), pp. 5–16.
 14. Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Michael Brecher et al., 'International Crisis Behavior Data Codebook, Version 14', <<http://sites.duke.edu/icbdata/data-collections/>>, accessed 5 November 2021.
 15. YouGov fielded in the US and the UK; Spinter in Lithuania.
 16. *Lithuania Tribune*, 'MP Kasčiūnas: "We Must Strive for the Status of the Main US Ally in the Region"', 10 July 2020, <<https://lithuaniatribune.com/us-military-in-lithuania/?msclkid=e3c3e9f6ce8611ec9073752e7ce86327>>, accessed 23 May 2022.
 17. *Radio Free Europe*, 'Lithuania Wants NATO Command to Move Closer to Eastern Borders', 17 March 2017.
 18. Andrius Sytas, 'Lithuania Fears Russia Will Attempt to Sway Its Elections', *Reuters*, 5 February 2019.
 19. Liudas Dapkus, 'Lithuanian Agency Warns Against Use of Chinese-Made Phones', *Associated Press*, 22 September 2021.

Table 1: Russia’s Territorial Ambitions as Threat

	US	UK	Lithuania
1 - Not a threat at all	4%	4%	6%
2	5%	7%	5%
3	9%	13%	6%
4 (Midpoint)	19%	25%	13%
5	25%	25%	19%
6	17%	15%	19%
7 - Critical threat	21%	12%	33%

Source: Author generated.

Table 2: The Development of China as World Power as Threat

	US	UK	Lithuania
1 - Not a threat at all	3%	2%	5%
2	4%	4%	6%
3	7%	11%	11%
4 (Midpoint)	16%	22%	21%
5	20%	24%	25%
6	17%	17%	20%
7 - Critical threat	34%	20%	12%

Source: Author generated.

between Eastern European countries and China²⁰ and had officially welcomed a trade representation from Taiwan (which it named as such, instead of following the tradition of naming such delegations as coming from ‘Taipei’ to avoid Chinese ire²¹).²²

Where are China and Russia Considered Critical Threats?

We asked citizens across the three NATO member states how critical a threat to the security of their country Russia’s territorial ambitions and the development of China as a world power were. Items were measured using a seven-point scale, varying from 1 (not a threat at all) to 7 (critical threat). Table 1 depicts the percentages of individuals across each country who classified Russia’s territorial ambitions

as corresponding to options on this scale. These are considered as more of a critical threat for people in Lithuania than in the other two countries, with a third labelling Russian territorial ambitions as belonging to the highest threat category (compared with just 2 in 10 US respondents, and 12% in the UK). More than half of the Lithuanian sample consider Russian territorial ambitions as belonging to the two highest threat categories (52%, relative to 38% in the US and just 27% in the UK). About half of US respondents classify the Russian threat as belonging to one of the three mid-point options (53% assign it a value of between 3 and 5), as do 6 in 10 of UK respondents (63% chose between 3 and 5). The proportion of Lithuanian respondents who selected mid-point categories is lower (38%). Respondents who consider Russian territorial ambitions as not posing much of a threat at all remain low across the board.

20. Stuart Lau, ‘Baltic vs. Beijing: Lithuania, Estonia Snub Xi’s Eastern Summit’, *Politico*, 5 February 2021.
 21. Andrew Galbraith, ‘China Warns Lithuania, European Officials Over Taiwan Row’, *Reuters*, 30 October 2021.
 22. The objective is to compare the effects of individual-level foreign policy attitudes in security preferences across global and regional powers, as well as from a small state. There are limitations as to what can be extrapolated from this sample to other NATO member states. Notably, this sample does not include members that are not strong transatlanticists.

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Table 3: Foreign Policy Attitudes Across Three NATO States

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Multilateralism	In deciding on its foreign policies, [country] should take into account the views of its major allies	US: 16%	49%	20%	8%	3%	3%
		UK: 7%	54%	24%	9%	2%	5%
		LT: 12%	42%	34%	9%	3%	0%
	[Country] should work more through international organisations, like the UN	US: 18%	32%	21%	11%	13%	4%
		UK: 15%	40%	28%	9%	3%	5%
		LT: 17%	42%	30%	6%	3%	2%
	The best way for [country] to proceed in foreign affairs is to build international consensus	US: 20%	39%	24%	8%	3%	6%
		UK: 15%	55%	19%	3%	1%	7%
		LT: 18%	41%	33%	4%	2%	3%
Unilateralism	Sometimes it is necessary for [country] to go at it alone in international relations	US: 14%	36%	23%	16%	5%	6%
		UK: 10%	49%	22%	12%	3%	5%
		LT: 11%	34%	34%	14%	5%	2%
Isolationism	[Country's] interests are best protected by avoiding involvement with other nations	US: 8%	19%	26%	28%	15%	4%
		UK: 4%	17%	27%	34%	13%	5%
		LT: 12%	19%	36%	24%	7%	2%
	[Country] needs to simply mind its own business when it comes to international affairs	US: 9%	16%	27%	27%	18%	3%
		UK: 5%	14%	27%	38%	12%	4%
		LT: 14%	23%	27%	25%	10%	1%

Source: Author generated.

As seen in Table 2, Americans feel as threatened by the development of China as a world power as Lithuanians are regarding Russia's territorial ambitions. Half (51%) classify China's rise as a world power as being in the top two highest threat categories, with just over a third regarding it as the most critical threat level. Only 37% of respondents in the UK and 32% in Lithuania consider China's ascent

to world power as being at such high threat levels. Instead, a majority of respondents in both countries (57%) classify the development of China as a world power as belonging to threat categories closer to the mid-point of the scale.

Geopolitical considerations matter. China's development as a world power and Russia's territorial ambitions were considered critical

threats, but not equally for citizens in the three sample countries. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, compared with publics in the UK and the US, it is hardly surprising to learn that citizens of a former Soviet state considered Russian expansionism as a more critical threat. Interestingly, citizens in the UK did not feel terribly threatened despite the UK military leadership's years-long messaging on the dangers of an assertive Russia.²³ The higher degree of concern among US citizens might relate to their country's position as a global – instead of regional – power. US citizens are also quite threatened by China's rise as a global power (after all, it is their own international position that might be challenged). Individuals in the UK and Lithuania, on the other hand, do not tend to consider China's development as a global power a critical threat. This discrepancy between threat perceptions in the US and the UK might be especially poignant in light of the new AUKUS alliance, which also includes Australia and has been lauded as an effort to counter China. In the past, British security experts and members of the public have converged in *not* considering China's development as a world power a critical threat to the UK,²⁴ but perhaps a gap is beginning to emerge.

Foreign Policy Attitudes

Foreign policy attitudes or predispositions play a key role in how individuals interpret foreign policy.²⁵ Attitudes such as multilateralism, isolationism and unilateralism vary among different national groups and affect whether individuals generally support military interventions,²⁶ or more specific policies such as supporting nuclear weapons.²⁷ Table 3 presents survey results on foreign policy attitudes for the three NATO member states in this study. Members of the public across the three surveyed locations tend to score quite highly on

multilateralism. There are also relatively high levels of support for taking unilateral action, as Americans and Britons in particular acknowledge their country may have to act alone at times. The survey found low levels of support for avoiding involvement with other states, as isolationism is low across the board.

A majority consider that the best way for their country to proceed in foreign affairs is to build international consensus, with 70% of the public in the UK agreeing or strongly agreeing with this sentiment, along with 59% of citizens in the US and Lithuania. Consideration for allies' views is also important, as 65% of Americans, 61% of Britons and 54% of Lithuanians agree or strongly agree that national foreign policies should take into account the views of their major allies. Support for multilateral institutions such as the UN remains high at between 50% and 59% across the three national samples.

Support for taking unilateral action is also high, but somewhat lower than multilateralist tendencies (especially in Lithuania). While about 6 in 10 Britons, and half of Americans, consider that it is sometimes necessary for their countries to 'go at it' alone in international relations, this is the case for just 45% of Lithuanian respondents. Isolationism is low in the three samples. Less than a third of respondents in each country (27% in the US, 21% in the UK and 31% in Lithuania) consider their country's interests to be best protected by avoiding involvement with other states. Those who either agree or strongly agree with the assertion that their country needs to simply mind its own business when it comes to international affairs reaches 37% in Lithuania, but only 25% in the US and 19% in the UK.

The strong commitment to multilateralism across all three samples suggests that joint action is likely to be supported across the board. This goes beyond recent shows of Western unity such as the current response to the war in Ukraine: it is the natural tendency of the majority of domestic

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23. For instance, a former Chief of the Defence Staff spoke publicly about the issue in 2018. See Sir Nicholas Carter, 'Dynamic Security Threats and the British Army', speech given at RUSI, 22 January 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/dynamic-security-threats-and-the-british-army-chief-of-the-general-staff-general-sir-nicholas-carter-kcb-cbe-dso-adc-gen?msclid=c2567e54ce8c11ecb1ed654b02a712a4>>, accessed 23 May 2022. Warnings have also emerged from Parliament, most notably through the 'Russia report' published by the Intelligence and Security Committee. *BBC News*, 'Russia Report: UK "Badly Underestimated" Threat, Says Committee', 21 July 2020.
 24. Thomson, 'Mind the Gap'.
 25. Brian C Rathbun et al., 'Taking Foreign Policy Personally: Personal Values and Foreign Policy Attitudes', *International Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 60, No. 1, 2016), pp. 124–37.
 26. Thomson, 'Mind the Gap'; Richard K Hermann, Philip E Tetlock and Penny S Visser, 'Mass Public Decisions to Go to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework', *American Political Science Review* (Vol. 93, No. 3, 1999), pp. 553–73.
 27. Ben Clements and Catarina Thomson, 'The "Ultimate Insurance" or an "Irrelevance" for National Security Needs? Partisanship, Foreign Policy Attitudes, and the Gender Gap in British Public Opinion Towards Nuclear Weapons', *European Journal of International Security* (July 2021).

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Table 4: Support for Diplomacy Across Three NATO States

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Diplomacy	[Country] should be more committed to diplomacy and not so fast to use the military in international crises	US: 25%	36%	23%	9%	3%	4%
		UK: 18%	43%	25%	10%	1%	4%
		LT: 24%	39%	28%	6%	2%	1%

Source: Author generated.

Table 5: Militarism Across Three NATO States

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Militarism	[Country] needs a strong military to be effective in international relations	US: 37%	32%	17%	8%	3%	3%
		UK: 22%	41%	20%	11%	3%	4%
		LT: 16%	31%	33%	12%	7%	1%

Source: Author generated.

audiences in the UK, US and Lithuania. This should prove encouraging news for NATO and international alliances more generally. Isolationist tendencies are low. This is particularly the case in the UK, which should reassure those who might have feared a post-Brexit UK taking a back seat from the world stage. Although one might contest the view that a referendum was the best way to decide whether the UK should remain in the EU, at one level voters were asked a rather straightforward question: would you prefer the UK to act on the world stage as part of a multilateral institution, or should it act unilaterally? The countries in this survey sample reserve the right to take unilateral action when needed – especially the more powerful ones. It is perhaps unsurprising that unilateralism is lower in Lithuania, as it is arguably less capable of taking such action.²⁸ Policymakers often conflate unilateralism and isolationism. However, as discussed in the next section, these

foreign policy attitudes can translate into very different security preferences.

Table 4 reports that 6 in 10 respondents in the three countries surveyed agree or strongly agree with the statement that their country should be committed to diplomacy and not use the military in international crises so quickly (61% in the US and the UK, 63% in Lithuania).

However, Table 5 shows that support for the military remains high, indeed at comparable levels to support for diplomacy, in the US and the UK. Practically 7 out of 10 Americans consider their country to be in need of a strong military to be effective in international relations, as do 63% of Britons. Unsurprisingly, given their small size and population, militarism among Lithuanians is significantly lower, as only 47% agree or strongly agree with the necessity of having a strong *national* military. Their heightened concerns about Russia and strong support for multilateral alliances instead

28. Lithuania ranks 85th (out of 142) in a ranking of total available active military manpower. The US is first on the list, the UK eighth. See Global Firepower, '2022 Military Strength Ranking', <<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>>, accessed 8 May 2022.

Table 6: Siding with the EU Versus China (US Respondents)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
If the EU's and China's interests are at odds, the U.S. should side with the EU	US: 21%	32%	32%	4%	2%	9%

Source: Author generated.

lead to a consistent stance of promoting a greater NATO presence in the former Soviet regions, and support for US military interventions abroad.

Alignment Preferences and the Impact of Foreign Policy Attitudes

Despite the current united Western front in Ukraine,²⁹ in 2019 French President Emmanuel Macron described NATO as ‘brain-dead’, lamenting Europe could no longer rely on the US.³⁰ Some policy experts were linking widespread nationalist sentiments to the possibility of European states projecting their sovereign power by openly disagreeing with traditional partners.³¹ Just months prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, public opinion across EU member states was converging around not viewing the US as an unquestionable ally, even against Russia or China.³² Some underscored Europeans as increasingly viewing the world as one in which ad hoc ‘necessary partners’ replaced the fixed alliances of the past.³³ In this pre-war context, who were citizens of the US, the UK and Lithuania inclined to side with when choices included the

EU, China and the US? And what factors influenced these individual alignment preferences?

Rather surprisingly, across several items asking respondents to side with one key player or another, it was found that when asked what actor their state should align with (when facing a binary choice), between a third to almost 40% of respondents across the samples have no clear preference. As evidenced in Table 6, 32% of Americans neither agreed nor disagreed with the assertion that the US should side with the EU in a situation in which the EU's and China's interests were at odds. A majority of American respondents, however, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (53%), whereas only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. To better understand what foreign policy attitudes affect the likelihood of Americans siding with the EU over China, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model is estimated.³⁴ Figure 1 summarises the results from this model.³⁵ The left of Figure 1 shows estimates for foreign policy attitudes that increase the likelihood of siding with the EU, and the right shows estimates for foreign policy attitudes that increase the likelihood of *not* siding with the EU over China.³⁶

29. Helen Thompson, ‘United on Ukraine NATO Powers Now See the World from Warsaw’s Point of View’, *New Statesman*, 23 March 2022.

30. *The Economist*, ‘Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO is Becoming Brain-Dead’, 7 November 2019.

31. Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, ‘What Europeans Think About the US-China Cold War’, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2021.

32. Susi Dennison, ‘Give the People What They Want: Popular Demand for a Strong European Foreign Policy’, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2019.

33. Susi Dennison and Jana Puglierin, ‘Crisis of Confidence: How Europeans See Their Place in the World’, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2021.

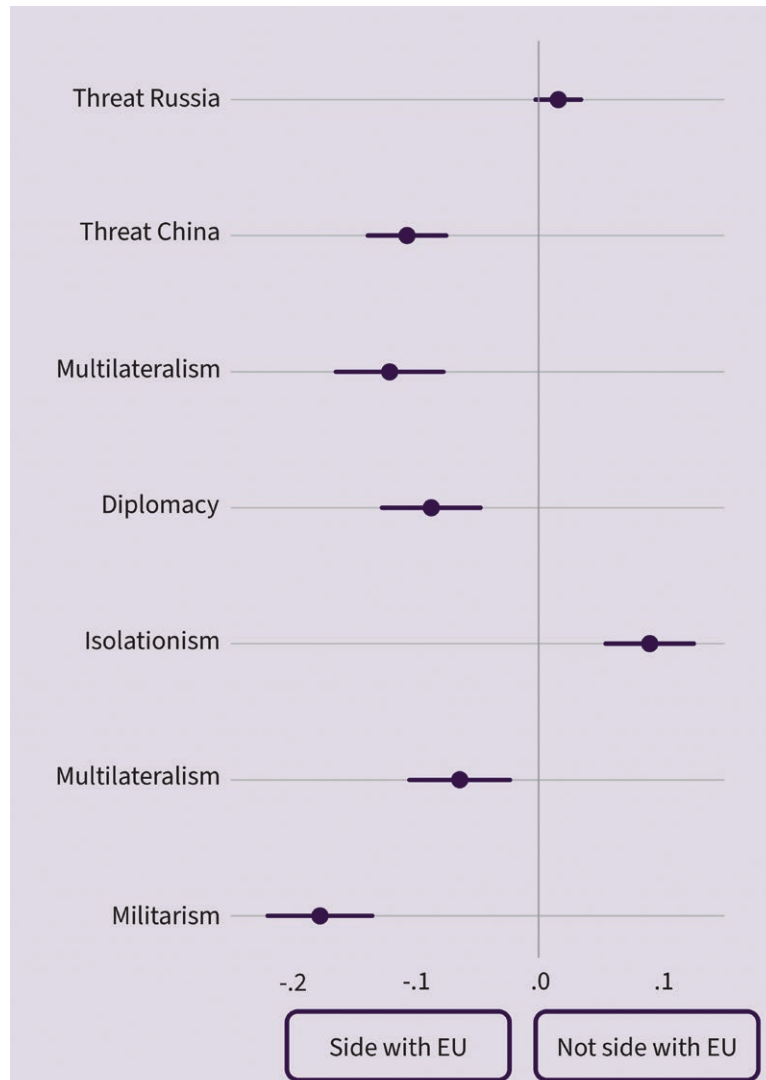
34. Regression models are statistical tools to examine the relationship between variables. The type of model (as in this case an OLS) depends on the type of data used. The objective is to assess if one variable (or multiple variables) have causal effect(s) on an outcome of interest, while controlling for the effects of other factors. Assessing whether such an effect is statistically significant or not provides us with a degree of confidence that the true relationship is close to the estimated relationship. Alan O Sykes, ‘An Introduction to Regression Analyses’, Coase-Sandor Institute for Law & Economics Working Paper No. 20, 1993.

35. Responses from Table 6 are included, except for the 9% who responded ‘don’t know’.

36. Circles represent the estimates of the effects of each factor listed to the left of the figure on respondents’ views. Whiskers on either end of these circles represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. When these intervals (or the coefficient circle) include 0 (represented by the vertical line), it can be concluded that factor does not significantly affect

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Figure 1: Effects of Foreign Policy Attitudes on the US Siding with the EU Versus China



Source: Author generated.

The first estimate on the left of Figure 1 highlights that feeling threatened by the development of China as a world power increases the likelihood of wanting to side with the EU if it is at odds with China. Other estimates here are interpreted in the same way – namely, that siding with the EU is also more likely among those who score high on multilateralism, among those who think the US should be more committed to diplomacy, and among those with higher unilateralist stances. The same is

true for those with higher militarism attitudes: those who believe the US needs a strong military in order to be effective in international relations are more likely to side with the EU than with China. The right of Figure 1 highlights that the only foreign policy attitude that increases the likelihood of Americans not choosing to side with the EU is having higher isolationist tendencies.³⁷ This is an example of the dangers of conflating unilateralism and isolationism. Americans who consider that their country's

the likelihood of an individual preferring to side (or not side) with the EU.

37. Considering Russia a critical threat is also on the right-hand side of Figure 1. However, the 95% confidence interval includes 0. It therefore cannot be confirmed whether this factor has a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of an individual preferring to not side with the EU.

Table 7: Siding with the US Versus China (UK and Lithuania)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
If the US's and China's interests are at odds, [country] should side with the US	UK: 14%	28%	37%	9%	3%	8%
	LT: 21%	27%	35%	10%	5%	2%

Source: Author generated.

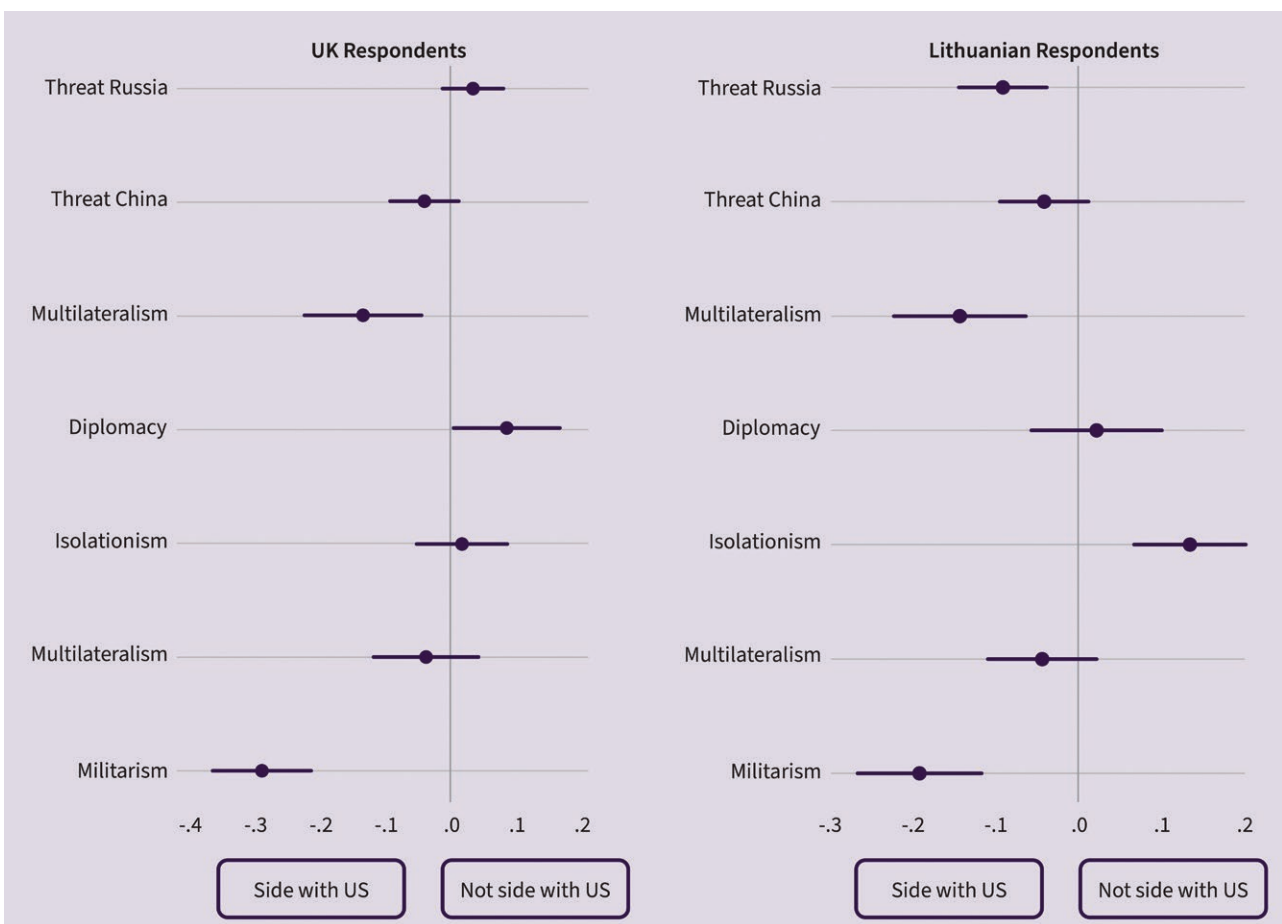
interests are best protected by avoiding involvement with other states will be less keen to side with an international institution such as the EU. Those who consider their country should at times intervene on its own in the international sphere, on the other hand, are more likely to want to side with the EU in this scenario.

The alignment preferences of British and Lithuanian respondents when faced with similar binary options are displayed in Table 7. Respondents

in both countries were asked if they would prefer to side with the US or China if their interests were at odds. Over a third of respondents did not align with either. Table 7 shows that 42% of Britons would prefer to side with the US, along with 48% of Lithuanians. Only 12% of British and 15% of Lithuanian respondents disagree or strongly disagree that their country should side with the US.

Two OLS regression models were estimated to help unpack these differences in individual

Figure 2: Effects of Foreign Policy Attitudes on Siding with the US Versus China



Source: Author generated.

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alignment preferences. Figure 2 can be read similarly to Figure 1: estimates for foreign policy attitudes that increase the likelihood of siding with the US are on the left-hand side of each quadrant.³⁸ Conversely, estimates on the right-hand side of each quadrant represent foreign policy attitudes that increase the likelihood of *not* siding with the US over China. The left quadrant illustrates British citizens, while the right quadrant depicts Lithuanian ones.

Similar to the Americans, multilateralism and militarism play an important role for Britons and Lithuanians – those who score higher on both accounts are more likely to side with the US over China. Interestingly, considering China's development as a world power as a critical threat does not play a role in either country,³⁹ but, in Lithuania, the more threatened citizens are by Russia's territorial ambitions, the more likely they are to side with the US. This underlines how front and centre Russia is for many Lithuanians and how they may assume the US would be a natural ally against Russia, even prior to the war in Ukraine.

For Lithuanian respondents, the distinction between alignment preferences for isolationists and unilateralists follows a similar trend to American respondents: those who score higher on isolationism are less likely to side with what one would consider a natural ally. This is not the case for unilateralists.⁴⁰ Siding with the US is affected by considering Lithuania's interests are best protected by avoiding involvement with other states, and not by considering Lithuania should at times act alone.

Despite the 'special relationship' and decades of close security and defence collaboration between the US and the UK, for UK respondents, the picture is rather different. Here, placing greater value on diplomacy is associated with a higher likelihood of not siding with the US, and not higher isolationist tendencies as found in the Lithuanian or American scenario. This comes against the backdrop of lower overall isolationist values in the UK,⁴¹ and could reflect concerns relating to a direct US–China confrontation.

Across all three samples, those who score higher on multilateralism and militarism are more likely to privilege siding with a key player other than China (such as the EU or the US). Feeling threatened by China or Russia can also play a role among American or Lithuanian citizens. In a world where even the bedrock of alliances that is NATO is at times questioned, and where states may adopt more flexible models of alliances instead of relying on fixed bonds, it is paramount to continue to work on uncovering the factors associated with these individual-level preferences. Just months prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, large segments of the population in diverse NATO member states such as the US, the UK and Lithuania did not have fully crystallised preferences in the area.

Is NATO, the EU or the US the Preferred Source of Support in Case of Foreign Interference in a Former Soviet State?

It is hardly surprising that in times of acute Russian threat, support for the organisation designed to counter the Soviet Union will increase. This is one of the readily predictable shifts in public opinion experts agree on in times of war. At a time when one of the possible war settlements includes Ukraine renouncing the possibility of NATO membership, but joining the EU,⁴² might the security role of the EU in cases of Russian interference be viewed as comparable to NATO's for citizens in the US, the UK or a post-Soviet state?

The survey included items asking which international players citizens in these three NATO member states think should play a role in case of foreign interference in a former Soviet state. Likely a reflection of the high levels of multilateralism discussed above, NATO was the most supported option across the board. As depicted in Table 8, both US and UK respondents are more likely to

38. Responses from Table 7 are included, except for those who responded 'don't know'.

39. Feeling threatened by China is on the verge of having a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of UK and Lithuanian respondents being more likely to side with the US. However, as the 95% confidence interval includes 0 (as evidenced by the whisker touching the vertical line in both quadrants of Figure 2), it cannot be concluded that feeling threatened by China increases the likelihood of preferring to side with the US. A similar situation occurs with feeling threatened by Russia in the UK sample (which also does not reach the conventional threshold for statistical significance).

40. Although in the Lithuanian sample unilateralism is on the 'more likely to side with the US' side of Figure 2, the effect of this foreign policy attitude on this national alignment item is not statistically significant.

41. The UK is the only country to reach the 50% rejection mark for one of the isolationist items in Table 3.

42. Max Seddon, Roman Olearchyk and Henry Foy, 'Russia No Longer Requesting Ukraine be "Denazified" as Part of Ceasefire Talks', *Financial Times*, 28 March 2022.

Table 8: Support if Russian Interference in Former Soviet State (US and UK Respondents)

	US	EU	NATO	Other	None of the above
If Russia is found to be intervening in the internal affairs of a former Soviet state like Lithuania, whose support should Lithuania seek?	US: 16%	28%	41%	4%	11%
	UK: 6%	24%	55%	5%	11%

Source: Author generated

Table 9: Support if Foreign Interference in Domestic Affairs (Lithuanian Respondents)

	US	EU	NATO	Other	None of the above
If another state is found to be intervening in Lithuania’s internal domestic affairs, which international player’s support would be most important?	LT: 8%	40%	47%	1%	5%

Source: Author generated.

believe that a former Soviet state under threat from Russia should seek support from NATO (55% of UK respondents preferred this option, as did 41% of Americans). Less popular options were to have such a state seek support from the EU (preferred by 28% of Americans and 24% of Britons) or the US (preferred by 16% of Americans and just 6% of Britons).

In both the US and the UK, those with more multilateralist attitudes were more likely to support NATO playing a role in the case of Russian interference in the domestic matters of a former Soviet state.⁴³ This is hardly surprising given that NATO is a multilateral military alliance. 47% of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement that their country should consider the views of its major allies selected NATO in the US sample. Support for NATO among UK multilateralists was even higher – 58% of those who agreed and 59% of those who strongly agreed with the statement that the UK should consider the views of its major allies privileged NATO in this scenario.

Here, too, further support can be found for the notion that multilateral and unilateralist attitudes can co-exist and lead to similar policy preferences. NATO was the most popular response among those who scored highly on unilateralist attitudes in the US and the UK. Not only is ‘multilateralism versus unilateralism’ a false dichotomy when it comes to support for NATO (as people who score highly on both scales support NATO), the same is true for placing high value on diplomacy and supporting the

military. NATO is favoured by both diplomats and those who are open to military action. For Americans and Britons, NATO is the preferred response among those who place the highest value in diplomacy as well as those who think the country needs a strong military to be effective in international relations. The story varies somewhat when it comes to diplomatic preferences in the UK, as although NATO is the preferred choice among those who place high value on diplomacy, it is even more supported among those who are less supportive of the use of diplomacy in times of crises. Support for NATO is higher among those lower on isolationist attitudes in both US and UK samples.

A different but comparable item was asked among Lithuanian respondents. Specifically, they were asked whose support would be most important if another state is found to be intervening in Lithuania’s internal domestic affairs. As evidenced in Table 9, almost half of Lithuanians (47%) saw NATO support as the most important, compared with 40% who chose the EU and just 8% who chose the US. Although support from NATO is clearly the most popular response (as was the case for US and UK respondents), their relatively high levels of multilateralism encompass considering support from the EU as paramount as well.

The main difference between the views of the Lithuanian public and those of US and UK citizens is that Lithuanians are quite split when it comes to whose support to seek. While both organisations are

43. Tables with these and other measures of association are available upon request from the author.

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supported by those with high unilateralist stances, Lithuanians with higher multilateralist attitudes gravitate more clearly towards NATO (as they did in the US and the UK). In Lithuania, 49% of those who agree with the statement that Lithuania should consider the views of its major allies, and 54% of those who strongly agree with this statement, selected NATO. The military nature of the NATO alliance means that Lithuanians who place more value on the military are more likely to prefer NATO support in such a crisis (again, comparable to US and UK respondents).

Discussion and Implications

The current international system is one in which revisionist states such as Russia and China have been gaining concessions using grey-zone tactics for decades. Russia could have militarily intervened directly in Ukraine in 2014, as it did in Georgia in 2008.⁴⁴ Instead, it calculated that staying below the radar at which public opinion would push democratic leaders into action was its best course of action. Today, that decision calculus has changed.

In times of war, public opinion follows readily predictable patterns – increased support for NATO being a present example. As far less is known about the relationship between pre-war and wartime attitudes in the grey-zone realm, learning more about public opinion in grey-zone crises is an important part of solving this puzzle. This is not just the case in the context of the war in Ukraine, but also in unpacking other potential challengers. For example, the ‘Thucydides Trap’ – in which a rapidly rising power challenges an established one – is the backdrop against which some predict that direct military confrontation with China is increasingly likely.⁴⁵

Since its establishment, NATO has grown from 12 founding members to 30, significantly extending the applicability of its Article 5 security guarantee while many of its newer members offer little additional military strength. As noted by Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar, ‘NATO’s core military power is much less than when it was half its present size.’⁴⁶ Citizens of two of the most powerful founding members, as well as those of an increasingly assertive Lithuania, are in agreement: NATO’s support should be sought

in cases of Russian interference in the affairs of a former Soviet state. The dynamics underlying such support vary between these three countries, however. Citizens who value multilateralism and militarism seek NATO support across the board – NATO is, after all, a multilateral military alliance. However, in Lithuania a significant minority would prefer resorting to the EU instead. This has potential policy implications as one considers Moscow’s recent move towards accepting Ukraine’s entry to the EU if it renounces its aspiration to join NATO.⁴⁷ The EU might not be an organisation that citizens in the US or the UK naturally gravitate to in cases of Russian interference, but it is for a significant proportion of constituents in a former Soviet state.

Strategically reinforcing communications regarding NATO’s most basic role as a multilateral military alliance should help cement support internationally. Differences in the underlying foreign policy attitudes of even historical allies can help to tailor communication efforts at a national level. It is easier for Americans to consider NATO as an important diplomatic tool in a way that does not come as naturally for Britons or Lithuanians (as Americans who place high value on diplomacy support NATO in a way not found in British and Lithuanian samples).

Care must be taken to avoid over-interpreting the importance of current cross-national support for NATO, as allying with a state in one organisational context does not carry over to automatically siding with that state in other circumstances. Between one-third to 40% of an overall sample of 6,300, when facing a binary choice, have no clear preference for relying on a pivotal member of NATO such as the US, or an organisation whose membership significantly overlaps with that of NATO (the EU), over China. Here, too, some patterns are shared across a sample of NATO member states, while national differences remain. While multilateralist and militaristic attitudes generally increase the likelihood of siding with the US or the EU, those with isolationist tendencies in the US or Lithuania will be weary of doing so. In the UK, those who place high value on diplomacy are less likely to naturally side with the US in this binary scenario.

States are not unitary actors: security preferences are influenced by underlying foreign policy attitudes. Headline public opinion polls, particularly if fielded

44. J Andres Gannon et al., ‘Why Did Russia Escalate Its Gray Zone Conflict in Ukraine?’, *Lawfare*, 16 January 2022.

45. Graham Allison, ‘The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?’, *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015.

46. Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar, *Tipping Point: Britain, Brexit and Security in the 2020s* (London: IB Tauris, 2020), p. 29.

47. Seddon, Olearchik and Foy, ‘Russia No Longer Requesting Ukraine be “Denazified” as Part of Ceasefire Talks’.

in times of war, often ignore important dynamics in public opinion that lie just underneath the surface. ■

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