



British Foreign Policy Group

# UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs

## Annual Survey – 2022

Sophia Gaston

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## The 2022 Survey

This report presents the findings of the 2022 Survey on UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs, authored by the BFPG and with the fieldwork conducted with Opinium Research on 8-21 February 2022 (sample of 2,000 UK adults, weighted to be nationally representative). This annual survey is an enduring partnership between the BFPG and Opinium, which has thus far produced three annual surveys and two interim snap surveys to date. Both organisations recognise the growing importance of public opinion on foreign policy and are committed to supporting further studies into this valuable area of social and political research.

## The British Foreign Policy Group



The British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to advancing the UK's global influence, at a crucial time in the nation's modern history. Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices are shaped by our social, economic and democratic landscape at home. Our mission supports Britain as a strong, engaged and influential global actor. We promote democratic values, liberal societies, and the power of multilateralism – and we recognise Britain's critical international responsibility to uphold and extend these throughout the world. The BFPG believes that a strong and united nation at home is the essential foundation of a confident and effective British foreign policy.

## The Author

**Sophia Gaston** is the Director of the British Foreign Policy Group. She is a social and political researcher, whose research particularly explores threats to governance and strengthening resilience in advanced liberal democracies. Through the British Foreign Policy Group, she works to support the advancement of the Global Britain agenda through a particular focus on the integration of domestic and international policy-making, the reinvigoration of Britain's international relationships, and the harnessing of social research as a tool of strategic foreign policy foresight. Sophia is a Research Fellow in the Institute for Global Affairs at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and an Academic Fellow at the European Policy Centre in Brussels.

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## Opinium Research



Opinium is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people think, feel and do. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

The BFPG's Annual Survey on Global Britain and UK Foreign Policy has charted the dynamic period of the nation's departure from the European Union, as well as seismic shifts in the international role and posture of the United States and the growing influence of a rising China. This year, the survey was undertaken in the spectre of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – yet another dramatic development in a turbulent decade, with profound consequences for European and global security.

Public opinion on foreign policy has not traditionally been afforded the credence it deserves as an instrument of building domestic public consent and as a tool of strategic foresight through which to understand the social and political strengths and weaknesses of our allies and strategic rivals. This Annual Survey, which continues to expand and deepen as a landmark project with our fieldwork partner Opinium, makes clear the central role that foreign policy attitudes will play in shaping the UK's choices on the world stage. It highlights areas of national consensus and profound areas of divergence between different social groups, regions and demographics, as well as both the areas in which the UK Government's strategic framework is backed by the legitimacy of public consent and the policies for which leadership will be needed to cultivate support.

The war in Ukraine is a generational event shaping public opinion in real time, and therefore the BFPG will continue to undertake additional surveys and focus groups throughout this year and beyond to understand the evolving perspectives Britons hold regarding the myriad implications of Russia's brutal invasion. The focus groups we have been conducting over the past six months have made clear that the emergence of a conflict with such proximity within our own European neighbourhood has compelled citizens to confront many trade-offs that otherwise sit in an abstract and hypothetical realm. In the meantime, this survey enables us to examine longer-term, structural trends in British public opinion, and to highlight the areas that will need to be prioritised in terms of both policy construction and communication, as the UK Government moves forward to implement the expansive ambitions of its Global Britain agenda.

Overall, we find a nation in a state of transition, moving between the twilight of the fractious Brexit debates, and into the realities of the UK's new independent status in a volatile geopolitical climate. The British people emerge from this emotive period of upheaval a little battle-weary, with perceptible impacts on their understanding of alliances, their belief in the powers of globalisation, and a degree of disillusion about the moral framework underpinning the liberal world order. There is a sense that the lasting effect of the pandemic will be to encourage nations to be more focused on sovereignty and less connected, and that the United States' domestic instability will necessarily encourage its leaders to focus inwards. More positively, it is clear there is a strong basis of public consent underpinning many aspects of the UK Government's international values agenda, including the UK's global climate leadership and the various Hong Kong, Afghan and Ukrainian visa pathways schemes brought to life in the past year. In addition, Britons recognise that even with some of the emotional weight falling out of our alliances, collective cooperation remains a fundamental source of resilience, and they are more inclined to say that they feel a sense of pride in the UK's foreign policy choices than to not.

The relatively low prominence now afforded to the Brexit debate in the UK's political sphere has diminished some of the more striking impacts this national conversation has had on British public opinion; in particular, the dynamic domestic and international identities associated with Brexit have become somewhat less salient, although with a European identity now firmly embedded – in part because it is the most well-understood identity. The 'Global Britain' project is itself poorly understood, particularly compared to the domestic story of 'Levelling Up', and there is clearly an opportunity to tell the story of the nation's international agenda with more proactive energy and focus. The more concerning aspects of the survey findings should compel renewed enthusiasm for engagement with the British people and helping them to understand

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the complexity of the choices being made in their interest. Equally, there is no room for complacency that the positive foundations of trust, support and goodwill will remain enduring over the coming years – with the dynamism experienced in our annual surveys over the past five years an indication of the capricious public opinion climate.

What is clear is that the domestic and international stories of modern Britain must be brought together in a cohesive manner. Doing so provides tremendous legitimacy to our voice on the world stage, enables us to be more ambitious with our plans, and to lead and persuade others to achieve them. There are several areas that should be regarded as particular risks in terms of the potential for emergent tensions around the allocation of domestic and international resources – specifically, the transition to net-zero during a cost-of-living crisis, the restoration of the 0.7% GNI international development spending commitment, and the generous refugee and visa pathway schemes being deployed as foreign policy instruments. The Indo-Pacific tilt, the rationale for which is not especially well-understood by citizens, will also need a convincing narrative to make the case for scarce funding and energies to be directed to a region lacking fundamental geographical proximity. Each of these policy areas has the potential to be presented as an opportunity to enhance the UK's prosperity and security, and the British people are typically more receptive to this form of strategic framing, but these arguments need to be crafted and consistently made.

The value of the data laid bare within this survey, and the many focus groups the BFPG has conducted around the length and breadth of the nation, should be self-evident. It enables all those with a stake in the UK's foreign policy to understand the structural environment in which choices are being made and, when harnessed effectively, to proactively anticipate and address any emergent social and political weaknesses and tensions that can and should be addressed. The utility of social research as a tool of strategic foresight is an argument that is slowly being advanced, but still needs to be won in many areas of our policy-making apparatus. As ever, I hope that the publication of this survey will help to break down the hard walls we had established between foreign policy and the lives of the citizens whose interests it serves.

**Sophia Gaston**  
**Director of the British Foreign Policy Group**  
**May 2022**

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# Executive Summary: Key Findings

## Mobility, Identities and Engagement

- Travel remains extremely depressed two years after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, which means large swathes of the population have not been exposed to the important shaping effects of lived experiences of mobility. This may have longer term consequences for British instincts regarding international affairs.
- The relative diminishment of the Brexit issue as a central theme of UK politics has had marked implications for the salience of international identities, which have tended to become less resonant, and for the wider interest the British people hold in international affairs. This reinforces the unique domestic-international hybrid of the Brexit era and the dynamism this provoked in Britons' visceral understanding of the nation and its role in the world.

## The Global Britain Project

- Despite the very turbulent domestic political environment over the months preceding the survey fieldwork, which had influenced wider trust in and support for the UK Government, trust in the Government to make foreign policy decisions in the national interest has remained steady.
- Britons are somewhat more likely to express pride in the UK's role in the world (43%) than to express a lack of pride (40%), with men, older Britons, and Conservative and Leave voters the most likely to say that they are proud of British foreign policy.
- More than a quarter (27%) of Britons have never heard of the term 'Global Britain', which is ten percentage points higher than the proportion of the population who have not heard of 'Levelling Up'. Only 12% of Britons believe they fully understand the meaning of Global Britain, and they tend to be the most economically and socially secure citizens.
- The UK's global reputation is seen by Britons to have been boosted by the nation's pandemic response – which, focus groups suggest is largely predicated on the vaccine development and roll-out processes – as well as the decision to join the AUKUS alliance pact, and the leadership role the UK has been playing in supporting the defence of Ukraine from Russia's invasion.
- By contrast, the choice to leave the European Union, the UK Government's temporary foreign aid spending reduction, and the nation's role in the allied Afghanistan withdrawal, are all seen by the British people to be more negative developments for the UK's international soft power. These observations do not mean that Britons necessarily agree with these perceptions, but that they are attuned to these being seen as controversial outside of the UK.

## The UK's Alliances

- Of our allies, Germany (63%) is seen as the most trustworthy nation in terms of its capacity and willingness to act responsibly in the world, above France (55%) and the United States (51%). India is seen as a more complicated ally, commanding just 27% of Britons' trust, and it appears to have experienced a deterioration in its reputation over the past year. China and Russia continue to stand distinct in their framing as our primary strategic rivals, with 81% of Britons actively distrusting China to act responsibly in the world, and 91% of Britons distrusting Russia.
- The United States remains Britons' choice as the UK's closest ally (42%). The strategic utility of the UK's relationship with the US is well-understood, and there is a recognition that there are some important common values underpinning this partnership.

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- However, a majority of Britons believe the instability in American politics over recent years has fundamentally weakened this alliance, and that America's fragile society and democracy will compel its focus inwards for the near future. A large plurality of Britons also believe that America's global power is in decline relative to that of China.
- Britons support a wide range of cooperation areas with the EU, with the most popular being to reduce trading barriers, to facilitate freedom of movement of people, research and academia, and both regional and global foreign policy cooperation. Only a tiny fraction of Britons reject all forms of cooperation, although a fifth of Britons are unsure about their preferences.
- When forced to make a choice between the US and the EU, Britons are less likely to consider the EU our most important relationship than they were a year ago. This may reflect a sense that the potential disruption from Brexit was anticipated to be more profound, to capture the particularly tense current relationship with France, or to indicate a 'Biden bounce' in the UK-US partnership.
- A significant portion of the British population (29%) believes the UK does not have any particularly close allies – a view held most commonly among women, older Britons, and those with low levels of political engagement.
- While Britons are clear that international relationships and cooperation do, on balance, make the UK more resilient (67%) – a fifth of Britons are unsure. There is a strong relationship between economic security and internationalist instincts, and the propensity to regard collaboration as a source of resilience.

## Globalisation and Trade

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- Recognition of the benefits of globalisation have declined significantly, both in terms of the perceived benefits to the UK as a whole, and to areas outside of London. This is a substantial change that has not been captured in previous surveys, and likely reflects the cut-through of the discourse around the Levelling Up agenda, the pandemic's effect on perceptions of place, and the broader concerns around the growing cost-of-living crisis.
- The two most important factors Britons wish to see emphasised in the UK's pursuit of free trade agreements are to uphold the nation's high environmental, animal welfare and food standards, followed by bringing benefit to the UK economy as a whole. These are considerably more popular choices than trading with nations that share our values, or providing greater choice and competition to British consumers.
- Migration has become an increasingly important instrument of UK foreign policy. A majority of Britons support both the Hong Kong and Afghanistan citizenship pathway schemes, with the support for allowing safe passage for allied support personnel in Afghanistan slightly more popular than the Hong Kong BN(O) scheme. Economically and socially secure Britons are the most supportive of both these schemes. The BFPG's focus groups suggest that there is scant understanding of the scale and success of the take-up of the Hong Kong BN(O) programme.
- There is no clear consensus about the best means of responding to the migration crisis in the English Channel, however the most popular option is to facilitate offshore processing of arrivals.

## The International Order

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- Britons believe there will be a range of lasting impacts from the pandemic, with the most clearly recognised being international governments on-shoring supply chains, imposing tougher ongoing border restrictions, and toughening their stances on China. A majority of Britons also believe that more preparations will be made for future health emergencies, and that nations will turn more insular and focused on domestic issues. A large plurality (46%) also think wealthier nations will work more closely with developing nations to ensure collective wellbeing.

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- With the Government having temporarily reduced the UK's 0.7% of GNI development commitment during the pandemic, the largest single group of Brits (34%) believe that the UK's development commitments should remain reduced. A further 24% believe the 0.7% GNI development commitment should only be restored when HMG finances reach their pre-pandemic level – as the Government has indicated – and 17% wish for it to be restored now.

## National Security

- The three most prominent security threats perceived by Britons are, in order, climate change, terrorism, and the rise of China as a world power.
- The UK Government and the British people have become increasingly attuned to the risks posed by China to the UK's national interest and the world order over recent years. While Britons are, on balance, more likely to believe that Russia (26%) is the UK's principal security threat than China (14%), a large plurality of Britons (45%) now regard them as equally dangerous rivals.
- Views on the UK's engagement with China have remained consistent over recent years – with Britons largely favouring the UK prioritising challenging China on its human rights record, collaboration on climate change, research cooperation and academic exchange. Less than a fifth of Britons support any form of economic engagement with China.
- Britons remain sceptical of the UK being involved in any form of military engagement and only support a fairly limited scope of scenarios for which the armed forces could be deployed, which mainly emphasise direct attacks on British soil or on British assets.
- While there is a recognition of the need to have withdrawn from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the largest group of Britons (40%) feel that earlier preparations should have been made to ensure it was more orderly and all personnel could be evacuated safely. Just 19% of Britons believe the UK should have maintained a presence in Afghanistan beyond the withdrawal date.

## Climate Change and the Net-Zero Transition

- Support for the UK's international climate action leadership remains robust, and is backed by two-thirds of Britons.
- It is, however, assumed that the UK's leadership on climate action will mean the UK will need to make its own domestic transition on net-zero at a faster pace than our peers.
- This will have domestic political consequences, as a majority of Britons believe the costs of this transition to net-zero will be greater for the disadvantaged than the wealthier in society.
- Interestingly, it is Britons from higher socio-economic backgrounds and/or with advanced education levels who are the most likely to be concerned about the asymmetrical social impacts of the net-zero transition, largely because the Britons perceived to be most vulnerable to these impacts are less confident and informed about their opinions on this subject.

The British Foreign Policy Group is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to advancing the UK's global influence, at a crucial time in the nation's modern history. To achieve this, we produce dynamic events and high-quality research, and facilitate networks amongst stakeholders with a vested interest in Britain's international engagement.

Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices and obstacles are shaped by our social landscape at home. Through pioneering research into the UK's social fabric, we seek to build understanding of the nuances of public opinion, and how our foreign policy can become more inclusive, responsive and relevant to citizens' lives.



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