



British Foreign Policy Group

UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs

Annual Survey – 2023

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About this Report



BFGP

The British Foreign Policy Group

The British Foreign Policy Group (BFGP) 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 BFGP believes that a strong and united nation at home is the essential foundation of an effective and cohesive UK foreign policy.



INTEGRITY

Integrity

Integrity is an international consultancy that provides informed, ethical, and expert services to governments, international organisations, and the private sector. Based on sound evidence, we help our clients design and deliver effective policy and programming in complex contexts around the globe. Our thematic expertise covers a wide range of challenges, including state fragility, violent conflict, climate security, aid effectiveness, governance and justice, refugees and migration, gender equality, and social inclusion.

We are pleased to support BFGP to conduct this year's survey and report on domestic public perceptions of British foreign policy and global affairs. This initiative highlights useful and relevant insights on UK foreign policy. It directly contributes to building an all-important evidence base to inform decisions, policy and programming affecting Britons today at home and abroad.



JLP

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J.L. Partners is a global market and public opinion research company with offices in London and Washington D.C. J.L. Partners is an accredited member of the British Polling Council and Market Research Society.

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The 2023 Survey and Methodology

This report presents the findings of the 2023 Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs, authored by The British Foreign Policy Group. This is the fifth edition of this survey of public opinion on foreign policy, which was first conducted in 2019. The fieldwork for this report was conducted with J.L. Partners between 26th May and 1st June 2023. In previous iterations of the survey, fieldwork was conducted by BMG Research (2019) and Opinium (2020 - 2022). In all editions of the survey we have conducted a nationally representative online survey but panel effects may vary between partners.

The report presents findings based on descriptive analysis of a nationally representative sample of 2,158 people, using quotas with the data weighted to be nationally representative. Subsamples such as age groups, regions or voter groups have not been individually quota'd and weighted to be representative of that group beyond the national quotas and weights.

All conclusions drawn are the authors' own and full editorial control and responsibility belongs to The British Foreign Policy Group.

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Executive Summary

The BFPG's annual surveys of UK public opinion on foreign policy chart the key trends in public perceptions of the UK's international activity, as Britons respond to an increasingly turbulent geopolitical environment. This year's report was undertaken in the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a theme which defines many of the findings of this report. With Britons standing firmly behind Ukraine, this report charts how this sharpened focus on the European security theatre has been met with reignited interest and pride in the UK's foreign policy, and has seen Britons re-evaluate the UK's relationships with allies and rivals alike, not least the European Union. Elsewhere, the report finds strong support for the UK Government's approach to migration and ongoing concerns about the economic costs of international development spending.

Key Findings

International Engagement

- Against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing instability in the US-China relationship, Britons' interest and engagement in UK foreign policy has risen sharply over the last year.
- However, substantial disparities remain between levels of interest (77%) and self-reported knowledge (55%) on foreign policy. These disparities are particularly substantial among younger Britons and women, and targeted engagement with these groups would therefore help strengthen the UK Government's democratic mandate on foreign policy.
- Britons' sense of international identity remain in flux but the proportion of Britons who associate with each of the following identities - European (53%), patriot (48%) and global citizen (47%) - has increased over the last year.
- While a majority of Britons identify as European, 41% of Britons do not, highlighting how many of the divides in how Britons view themselves, which became particularly prominent during the EU Referendum, continue to hold salience.

The UK's Role in the World

- Distrust in the UK Government on foreign policy continues to grow, with a majority of Britons (54%) distrusting the UK Government to take decisions in the public's interest when it comes to foreign policy. However, trust in the UK Government on foreign policy has also risen from 35% in 2022 to 41% in 2023, as Britons become more confident in their views on the UK Government's foreign policy agenda.
- The UK's global reputation is widely seen to have been boosted by the UK's role in supporting Ukraine since Russia's invasion of the country (62%). To a lesser extent, the coronation of King Charles III (45%) and the hosting of the 2023 Eurovision Song Contest (44%) are also seen to have had a positive effect on the UK's reputation overseas.
- However, the UK's decision to leave the European Union is widely regarded as having had a negative impact on the UK's reputation overseas (58%). While the decision to reduce aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of the UK's GNI is not understood to have had particularly substantive effects, the effects are more often seen to be negative (29%) than positive (24%).
- Despite a large proportion of Britons believing that some of the UK's major policy decisions have had negative effects on the UK's reputation overseas, levels of pride in the UK's role in the world have risen substantially since 2022 (43%), with a majority (52%) of Britons now feeling proud of the UK's role in the world. This is likely a reflection of distance from both the Covid-19 pandemic and the withdrawal from Afghanistan - which previous surveys have shown many Britons view with a degree of shame - and the very positive reception to the UK's response to the Ukraine crisis.

The UK's Allies and Partnerships

- Of the nations polled, the European Union (53%) is the most widely trusted nation in terms of its capacity and willingness to act responsibly in the world - above Ukraine (50%), the United States (48%) and France (46%). Strikingly, trust in France has fallen 9 percentage points over the last year, likely the result of ongoing debates about irregular Channel migration.
- China and Russia are overwhelmingly viewed as strategic rivals, with 86% of Britons distrusting Russia to act responsibly in the world, and 74% distrusting China. The United Arab Emirates, which hosts this year's COP28, is also distrusted by 57% of Britons.
- Britons' perceptions of the UK's relationship with the United States remains complex. While just 48% of Britons trust the US to act responsibly in the world, it is, by far, the nation most widely regarded as the UK's closest ally (46%). This is testament to how the 'special relationship' is seen by Britons to endure, even when the relationship, and indeed levels of trust, in the United States, are in flux.
- Britons are increasingly warming to cooperation with the EU and only a small fraction (5%) of Britons oppose all UK-EU cooperation. Support is particularly high for reducing barriers to trade in goods and services with the EU (61%), which is even supported by a majority of Leave voters (58%).
- More broadly, the UK's international partnerships are widely understood to make the UK more safe, particularly NATO, the G7 and AUKUS. Indeed, 75% of Britons believe NATO makes the UK more safe.

Strategic Rivals

- The largest proportion (43%) of Britons believe that Russia and China pose the same level of threat to the UK's national interest. However, three times as many Britons view Russia as a greater threat than China (35%) than vice versa (13%).
- Britons are more willing to cooperate with China on a range of fronts than they were in 2022. Nonetheless, the most popular form of engagement is still challenging China on its human rights abuses (42%), and there is little appetite for cooperation with China around technology (15%) or infrastructure (15%).

National Security

- Even with war raging in Europe, Britons feel safer now than they did in early 2022. Indeed, only 10% of Britons currently feel unsafe. This is likely the result of the subsiding of the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine's success in staving off Russia more effectively than many expected, providing reassurance about the strength of the Western alliance and the limitations of the threat posed by Russia.
- Nonetheless, the majority of Britons view continued Russian aggression (53%) as one of the three biggest threats to UK national security. The rise of China as a world power (39%) and terrorism (34%) are the next most widely cited threats.
- Furthermore, despite growing feelings of safety, Britons are still highly supportive of maintaining and even strengthening the UK's defensive capabilities. Support for the UK's membership of NATO is remarkably strong (78%), particularly among older Britons and those from higher (ABC1) socio-economic grades, and has risen 11 percentage points over the last two years.
- A majority (59%) of Britons support increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP at some stage, with 34% of Britons believing we should slowly increase defence spending to reach 2.5% of GDP over the next few years, while 25% of Britons believe we should immediately increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP.

Ukraine

- The Ukraine crisis is seen to have had substantial repercussions for the UK's economy, security and energy supply, as well as the wider geopolitical environment, including the UK's relationship with the EU and the likelihood of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.
- Nonetheless, the groundswell of public support for Ukraine in the immediate aftermath of the invasion has been maintained, with a majority of Britons supporting all forms of aid the UK has offered Ukraine. Indeed, 85% of Britons support providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Furthermore, the majority (53%) of Britons believe the UK should provide assistance to Ukraine for as long as it takes, and there is little desire for the UK to withdraw support from Ukraine.

Migration

- The majority of Britons (54%) support the UK's Illegal Migration Bill, compared to 23% of Britons who oppose it..
- There are also high levels of support for the UK's visa and migration schemes for selected Ukrainians, Afghans and BN(O) passport-holders, however there is little appetite to develop similar schemes for other nations currently producing substantial numbers of refugees and migrants.

International Development

- International aid and development spending remains a source of contention, and a majority (61%) of Britons believe it takes away money that should be spent on domestic needs. In turn, Britons are divided over whether the UK should return to the 0.7% GNI aid and development spending commitment.
- Despite these concerns, the majority of Britons believe that the UK has a moral duty to use aid and development to contribute to a more secure and prosperous world (55%), and, to a lesser extent, perceive there to be strategic economic and security benefits that the UK can derive from aid and development.
- Alleviating poverty, fighting climate change and supporting green investment, providing infrastructure for essential public services, and implementing basic health programmes are the areas most widely regarded by Britons as areas the UK should prioritise in its aid and development work.

Climate Change

- Despite, or perhaps even because of, the ongoing energy crisis, support for UK leadership on climate change continues to grow, with 70% of Britons supporting the UK taking a leading international role in tackling climate change.
- Support for the UK's climate leadership is particularly high among 18-25-year-olds (74%) and those in higher (ABC1) socio-economic grades (74%).

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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