

March 2023

AUKUS and China

Survey of British Public Opinion

New survey research conducted by Sophia Gaston, with research partners
Opinium, ahead of the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

2,000 GB adults aged 18+, nationally representative.

Fieldwork designed by Sophia Gaston and conducted by Opinium: Friday 10th March – Sunday 12th March.

Survey respondents were provided with impartial educative information regarding the AUKUS trilateral pact, the UK Government's assessment of China as a "systemic" challenge and the potential for China to launch an invasion of Taiwan.

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Key Data

Public Opinion on AUKUS

- Two-thirds (64%) of the British people believe that working more closely with allies on projects such as AUKUS will make the UK safer. Just 17% of the population disagree.
- Two-thirds of Britons (65%) believe that cooperating with our allies on cutting-edge technology projects will make us more competitive towards countries like China.
- 54% of Britons believe the AUKUS project will successfully act as a deterrent against Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, while 20% actively disagree.
- While there is widespread support across the population for the key AUKUS messages, there are clear political dimensions to the resonance of its narratives, with Conservative voters consistently more enthusiastic than Labour voters.
- The disparity in views between the two major parties indicates the need to develop a bipartisan story for AUKUS that can transcend political leadership, especially given the long-term project timeframes.

Public Opinion on China Security Threats

- Britons are not confident in the UK Government's ability to protect the nation from threats from China. Just 36% of Britons are confident in the Government's security capabilities towards China, and 45% are actively not confident.
- Only 6% of Britons believe China does not pose any threats to the UK.
- There are clear political dimensions to responses to this question, which is to be expected when researching public opinion on "the UK Government".
- A majority of Conservative voters (58%) are confident in the Government's capacity to shield citizens from threats from China, compared to 32% of Labour voters, 36% of Liberal Democrat voters, and 23% of SNP voters.
- However, a third of Conservative voters (31%) are actively not confident in the UK Government's ability to protect them from threats from China.

UK Military Support for the Defence of Taiwan

- Britons are divided in their views about whether the UK should send hard power support in response to a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, with 38% supporting this and 37% opposing such action. A quarter of Britons (24%) are unsure.
- Conservative (51%) and Liberal Democrat (51%) voters are the most likely to support the UK Government sending hard power assets to respond to an invasion of Taiwan.
- Their enthusiasm stands in contrast to Labour voters (38%) and SNP voters (22%) – both of whom are more likely to actively oppose such an act, and express uncertainty about their position.

Full Results and Demographics of Note

Working more closely with allies on projects such as AUKUS will make the UK safer

- Two-thirds (64%) of the British people believe that working more closely with allies on project such as AUKUS will make the UK safer, and just 17% of the population disagree.
- Conservative voters are the most likely to believe that AUKUS will make the UK safer, at 79%, of which 35% strongly agree this is the case. While two-thirds (64%) of Labour voters also believe AUKUS will positively contribute to the nation's security, only around half as many (19%) strongly agree with this.
- This disparity between the two major parties indicates the need to develop a bipartisan, cross-party message for AUKUS that can transcend political leadership, especially given the extensive project timeframe.
- SNP voters are the least enthusiastic about AUKUS, with just 48% of their voters agreeing that the pact will make the UK safer – partially because more than a quarter (26%) actively disagree that there will be positive security dividends, and partially because a considerably higher proportion of their voters are unsure of their position compared to other parties.
- Some distinctions are evident between Leave and Remain voters. Leave voters are somewhat more inclined than Remain voters to believe that AUKUS will make the UK safer, at 70% vs. 63%. There are no distinctions between graduates and non-graduates.
- Women are almost three times as likely than men to be unsure of their position (28% vs. 11%), which translates into a lower degree of overall enthusiasm (57% vs. 70%).
- Older Britons aged 65 years and over are distinctly inclined to agree that the UK will be safer as a result of AUKUS, at 71%. Britons under 35 years are enthusiastic, at 62%, but a fifth are actively sceptical of its capacity to make Britain safer (21%).
- Britons living in Wales (72%) and the Midlands (70%) are the most likely to believe that projects such as AUKUS will make the UK safer, and those living in Scotland are distinctly less convinced (47%).

The AUKUS project will act as a deterrent against Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region

- 54% of Britons believe the AUKUS project will successfully act as a deterrent against Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, while 20% actively disagree.
- Once again, Conservative voters are the most likely to believe that AUKUS will act as a deterrent (71%), and the most likely by a long margin to strongly agree that this will happen (31%). This compares to 52% of Labour voters who are persuaded that AUKUS will act as a successful deterrent, of whom 15% strongly agree.
- Liberal Democrat voters are the second-most enthusiastic (60%) after Conservative voters, and SNP voters are the least enthusiastic (44%).
- The gaps between Leave (59%) and Remain voters (54%) are relatively insubstantial, with a majority of both believing that AUKUS will succeed as a deterrent towards China. There are also again little differences between the views of Britons with and without further education.

- The distinctions in men (59%) and women's (49%) agreement that AUKUS will act as a deterrent are wholly explained by women's lack of certainty around their position, as men are in fact more likely to both actively agree and actively disagree than women.
- Britons aged 65 years and over are once again most likely to agree that AUKUS will act as a deterrent (61%), but it is Britons aged 35-49 years who are the least persuaded (49%).
- Britons living in Wales are the most confident (64%) about AUKUS' potential to act as a deterrent, and Britons living in London are the least confident (49%).

Collaborating on cutting-edge technology projects with allies will make us more competitive against countries like China

- Two-thirds of Britons (65%) believe that cooperating with our allies on cutting-edge technology projects will make us more competitive towards countries like China.
- Conservative voters (79%) are the most likely to agree that technological collaboration with allies will make us more competitive, followed by Liberal Democrat voters (68%) and Labour voters (65%). SNP voters are the least enthused (53%).
- There are only small distinctions between Leave and Remain voters. There are no distinctions between graduates and non-graduates. And the gaps between men and women are once again explained by women's considerably higher levels of uncertainty.
- Older Britons are the most convinced that allied cooperation on new technologies will make the UK more competitive towards China (75%), while Britons under the age of 49 years agree, but are somewhat less convinced (60%).
- There is a relatively even distribution of consensus that technology cooperation makes the UK more competitive across UK regions, with the exception of Britons living in London (59%) and Scotland (57%), who are less enthusiastically persuaded.

Confidence in the UK Government's capacity to protect Britain from the threats posed by China

- Britons are not confident in the UK Government's ability to protect the nation from threats from China. Just 36% of Britons are confident in the Government's security capabilities towards China, and 45% are actively not confident.
- Only 6% of Britons believe China does not pose any threats to the UK.
- There are clear political dimensions to responses to this question, which is to be expected when researching public opinion on "the UK Government".
- A majority of Conservative voters (58%) are confident in the Government's capacity to shield citizens from threats from China, compared to 32% of Labour voters, 36% of Liberal Democrat voters, and 23% of SNP voters.
- It should be noted, however, that a third of Conservative voters (31%) are actively not confident in the UK Government's ability to protect them from threats from China.
- For the other parties, 58% of SNP voters, 50% of Labour voters and 49% of Liberal Democrat voters are not confident in the Government's abilities.

- Despite the divisions between Conservative and other voters on this issue, the distinctions between Leave and Remain voters are relatively modest. Just 39% of Leave voters are confident in the UK Government's capacity to defend the country against China, compared to 33% of Remain voters. The distinctions between non-graduates and graduates are relatively similar.
- It is also interesting to note that younger Britons are in fact more confident (46%) in the UK Government's capacity to protect the nation from threats to China than other age groups. Older Britons are the most likely to be actively not confident in the Government's arsenal towards China, with a majority of Britons aged 50 years and over believing the Government cannot protect the UK.
- Londoners are also the most confident (44%) in the Government's capabilities, while Britons living in Scotland (49%) and the South of England (49%) are the most actively not confident.

The UK sending hard power military support to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion

- Britons are divided in their views about whether the UK should send hard power support in response to a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, with 38% supporting this and 37% opposing such action. A quarter of Britons (24%) are unsure.
- Conservative (51%) and Liberal Democrat (51%) voters are the most likely to support the UK Government sending hard power assets to respond to an invasion of Taiwan.
- Their enthusiasm stands in contrast to Labour voters (38%) and SNP voters (22%) – both of whom are more likely to actively oppose such an act, and express uncertainty about their position.
- There are scant distinctions between Leave and Remain voters, and between graduates and non-graduates.
- Men are more likely than women to support the UK sending hard power support to the Indo-Pacific (43% vs. 34%), and also to oppose it (40% vs. 35%), as women are almost twice as likely to be unsure about their views on the matter.
- Despite their general tendency to condemn military interventionism, younger Britons in fact are the most inclined to support the UK sending hard power capabilities to defend Taiwan (45%), and the least likely to actively oppose this (31%). They are followed by Britons over 65 years, who are evenly divided at 40% support and opposition. The 35-64-year-old working age population is more likely to oppose the UK sending hard power support than the youngest and oldest age cohorts.
- Britons living in the Midlands are the most likely to support the UK sending hard power capabilities (47%) and Britons in Scotland are the least supportive (23%) and most inclined to actively oppose it (50%).