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What Explains American Perceptions of Russia and China?

Shane Stryker

WHAT EXPLAINS AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIA AND CHINA?

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By

Shane Jeffrey Stryker

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CE/T Committee:

Dr. Timothy Rich, Chair

Dr. Kevin Modlin

Dr. Gordon Baylis

ABSTRACT

This undergraduate senior thesis project aims to investigate the question of how Americans perceive the challenges posed by Russia and China comparatively, and which factors have the greatest influence on these perceptions. This is important for many reasons, such as a greater understanding of American public opinion on foreign affairs that may help frame approaches to U.S. foreign policy. Additionally, finding where the American public agrees and disagrees on competitors and challengers provides us with insight that can be used to explain perceptions.

First, there will be a literature review concerning the importance of understanding public opinion, explanations and theories as to what may be informing American opinions on Russia and China, and a discussion on partisanship and how it serves a large role in differences of opinion. Second, the methodology of the original survey that was sent out for this thesis will be presented, initial data collection will be explained, and the survey questions will be presented. Third, implications and explanations of the data will be discussed, positioning the public opinions of Americans into an analytical lens. Some key findings include the usefulness of partisanship in predicting American opinions on foreign affairs, but also the bipartisan opinion on where concerns stem from regarding Russia and China. The final section will be a conclusion which will wrap up the analysis and provide recommendations for future research.

I dedicate this thesis to my late Grandfathers, David Lowe and Earl Stryker, whose

commitments to public service through the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Foreign Service

(David), and the U.S Army (Earl), have always been a large inspiration to me in my

academic journey and future professional goals. I plan to continue the good work they

left behind.

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VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Ky | May 2024
     B.A. in International Affairs and History – Mahurin Honors College Graduate
     Honors Thesis: *What Explains American Perceptions of Russia and China?*

The Washington Center, Washington, D.C. | Spring 2022
     Career Readiness Program

West Jessamine High School, Nicholasville, Ky | May 2020

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

U.S. Department of State East Asia and Pacific Bureau | September 2023 – Present
     VSFS Research Intern

Refugee Navigator Program, WKU | January 2023 – January 2024
     Refugee Mentor

Mercatus Center, Arlington, VA | June 2023 – August 2023
     Project Assistant Intern

Lincoln Archives Digital Project, Washington, D.C. | January 2022 – April 2022
     Digitization Intern

College Heights Herald, WKU | August 2020 – January 2022
     Commentary Editor

AWARDS & HONORS

Magna Cum Laude, WKU, May 2024
Faculty Undergraduate Student Engagement Award, 2023-2024
WKU Carlton Jackson Award for Excellence in Cultural History, Spring 2023
WKU Geneva Lafferty Martin Scholarship, Spring 2021

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Introduction

For the past decade, most Americans have viewed Russia and China as the countries which pose the biggest challenge to the United States. The strategic competition between the United States and China is often discussed in the media, studies, and journals, with the prevalence of discussion only growing larger as China continues to grow global influence through policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and as China's posture remains passively aggressive with Taiwan. Russia has been a prime foreign affairs topic in the United States since the Cold War, with events such as the potential interference with the American Presidential election in 2016 or the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only amplifying American concerns. So, what explains the perceptions that Americans have towards Russia and China?

As of summer 2022, "64% of Americans see Russia's power and influence as a major threat to the wellbeing of the United States while 67% believe the same thing about China" (Silver, 2022). However, despite both countries measuring at similar levels of concern for Americans, there are areas in which there is a lack of consensus when Russia and China are put into comparison with one another. This comparison is important because as China and Russia have been deemed two of America's biggest challenges, it is imperative that we understand where the public agrees and where they do not. For example, the public may agree that both countries are a concern, but the public may not agree on where those concerns stem from and which country is more of a concern. Additionally, the public may be concerned about a coordination of foreign policy goals

between Russia and China, and view them as a monolithic threat that would drive a consensus. It is also important to note that the resources of any given administration for foreign policy purposes are finite, so it is essential to weigh the potential challenges posed by both countries so that the United States can put its best foot forward. By understanding both the consensus and the lack thereof, we can assess where U.S. foreign policy attention should be focused and where the priorities for approaching relations with both Russia and China should lie. Additionally, understanding which factors may weaken the consensus is incredibly important, such as partisan views, which will be discussed heavily in this paper.

It is important that we do not group opinions of Russia and China together as one, and instead compare opinions to be sure that our approaches are different and more effective towards their respective states. This thesis plans to build upon existing studies, to address influences or rationale of Americans and their perceptions of these countries while also putting them in direct comparison with one another. There are studies that show that Americans view China and Russia as being more powerful than the United States (Shinkman, 2018), that Americans are concerned about the relationship between Russia and China (Pew Research Center, 2023), and that Americans view Russia and China unfavorably (Pew, 2023), but there should be more studies that put American perceptions of Russia and China in direct empirical comparison. There are major risks in lumping views of countries together, as it may become easy to ignore the unique risks posed and instead focus on both countries as one challenge. In effect, this paper plans to not lump together Russia and China but instead view them separately and comparatively.

Overall, this undergraduate senior thesis project aims to investigate the question of how Americans perceive the challenges posed by Russia and China comparatively, and which factors have the greatest influence on these perceptions. First, there will be a literature review concerning the importance of understanding public opinion, explanations, and theories as to what may be informing American opinions on Russia and China, and a discussion on partisanship and how it serves a large role in differences of opinion. Second, the methodology of the original survey that was sent out for this thesis will be presented, initial data collection will be explained, and the survey questions will be presented. Third, implications and explanations of the data will be discussed, positioning the public opinions of Americans into an analytical lens. The final section will be a conclusion which will wrap up the analysis and provide recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Public Opinion: Circular Influence and Importance

Some scholars argue that public opinion is vastly important in the formation and improvement of American political policy (Page and Shapiro, 1983). In democratic nations, it is commonly believed that the government is a servant of the people, and public interest should always be considered when new policies are being formed. Although the value of American public opinion towards foreign affairs has been debated in literature (Page and Shapiro, 1988), it is crucial to have a common understanding of the American public's views of international issues, how these views are formed and what level of impact they may have on foreign policy decision making.

There is significant literature that suggests the importance of public opinion in the decision-making process of foreign policy actors, as well as how public opinion may be shaped by news coverage and awareness of international issues. In 2022, a study was done in which Members of British Parliament (MP's) were asked for their views on UK military presence in the South China Sea, with some receiving accompanying polling information. It was found that the MP's who received the polling information provided views that most aligned with the consensus of the public (Chu and Recchia, 2022). This study only furthers the notion that an understanding of public opinion on foreign policy is not only important as a contribution to academic literature but also holds a potential to influence the actions of foreign policy actors.

This was also tested in 2022, with a study that sought to assess how hostile discourse from political leaders against Islam affected American public opinion towards foreign Muslim populations. The study found that Americans are less likely to view persecuted Muslim populations abroad as under threat and are less likely to support foreign policy actions to assist them, and Americans are more likely to see Muslim countries as threatening compared to other religious states (Sandlin and Simmons, 2022). Sandlin and Simmons argue that this is due to the consistent national political discussions around Islam, especially after the September 11th attacks in 2001. Thus, it can be argued that the transaction of influence is the other way around, with the rhetoric of governmental officials influencing the opinions of the public. This has been explored in literature with examples such as the creation of the Putin caricature, in which public officials and politicians focus heavily on the person that is Putin rather than the country that he leads, which effects the nations perceptions of Russia as a whole (Starobin, 2016).

This same concept found in Sandlin and Simmons can be applied to the topics of this paper; Russia and China, due to the various opinions of U.S. political figures and pundits on the two countries. What U.S. political officials and pundits choose to talk about can directly affect American opinions and perceptions, which can in turn effect decisions made by U.S. foreign policy actors who benefit from listening to public concerns. For example, former U.S. President Donald Trump was very outspoken on his firm opposition to China, even saying in February of 2024 that the U.S. should impose tariffs on Chinese goods, potentially exceeding 60% (Reuters, 2024). Additionally, conversations surrounding nuclear proliferation in Russia have occurred in the U.S. political sector a significant number of times. At this point, most if not all Americans should be aware that Russia has nuclear weapons, which could be viewed with a certain level of concern and in turn influence public opinion.

While the influence of public opinion on foreign policy action and the influence of politicians on the formation of American opinion is up for debate, so is the direct influence of media coverage on the formation of those opinion. Both those who identify as conservative and liberal have been shown to hold media-influenced opinions due to the sources they choose to take in, and these sources are framed by their editors in a specific manner to appeal to their desired audiences (Entman, 1989). Although it is ultimately the individual's choice to consume a certain type of media based on their personal preferences and political leanings, the content of these media platforms ultimately influences the public opinion through the platforms decision on what is important to report on and what is not. Through this logic, it can also be argued that a change in media coverage can shift American viewpoints and opinions. This is important to keep in mind

in any form of research that deals with public opinion, as it can consistently be used as an explanation for stable perceptions or changing opinions amongst American's, especially when it comes to political leanings and ideologies.

Another important thing to consider regarding public opinion is whether the American public is informed enough to have significant opinions and thoughts on international issues. A survey conducted in 2019 by the Council on Foreign Relations showed that Americans have a significant lack of knowledge when it comes to their knowledge of geography and global affairs, with only 6% of respondents answering at least 80% of the 10 questions correctly, despite 70% of respondents saying that they consider international issues relevant to their daily lives (CFR, 2019). On a similar survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2022, Americans only scored an average of 6.2 correct answers out of 12 international issue-based questions once again showing a significant lack of knowledge on global affairs from American citizens (Pew, 2022). Although this lack of knowledge may stem from Americans who are more concerned about domestic issues and do not have a large interest in what is happening outside of the United States, it is still important to note that American's views on international issues may not stem from knowledge but instead from media and political influence. Additionally, it is important to note that the lack of American knowledge may instead come from a general lack of interest. An example of this would be Americans who don't often think about Russia and China, and may only be forced to think about them while answering questions on a political survey. This would mean that the general American public may not be engaged enough in foreign affairs to build a strong baseline of knowledge.

Regardless of whether the public influences foreign policy actors or foreign policy actors and the media influence the public, it is still clear that the importance of understanding public opinion and where it comes from provides necessary exploration into a nuanced topic. There is no question that the public, the government, and the media are intertwined, and that all three have some level of influence on each other. The media and politicians may influence public opinion, the public may influence the action that is taken by politicians, and the public may not be informed enough to have significant thoughts on international issues, but that does not mean that public opinion is not important. In fact, I argue that public opinion is incredibly important for the very reason that it is so intertwined with all other aspects of its formation and origin. Public opinion serves as a way for researchers and political actors alike to understand the desires of the American public, whether those desires are influenced or informed or not. Additionally, global situations, crises, and the changing political climate ensure that public opinion will continue to develop over time, insisting that public opinion researchers consistently run a pulse check on public attitudes so that these attitudes can be employed as a guideline for action that Americans would be in support of and an avenue for further research and analysis.

Understanding American Views of Russia and China

One of the most prominent international issues that public opinion analysts have focused on in recent history is the positioning of the United States to its largest global competitors. Historically, American views towards Russia and China have not always been consistent. According to Gallup's Historical Trends database, the percentage of Americans that have viewed Russia mostly unfavorably ranged from 25% to 59% from

1991 to 2011, with views jumping back and forth between favorable and unfavorable every two years. In 2015, the percentage of unfavorability hit an all-time high of 70%, which has yet to recover and only seen increase in recent years, with the 2023 poll measuring an all-time high of 89% unfavorability from Americans. It can be assumed that the spike in unfavorability in 2015 came from the accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and the second spike in 2023 is likely a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

The story is slightly different for American perceptions of China, with record low unfavorability at 13% in 1989, at the tail end of Deng Xiaoping's major economic reforms in China, and then a big jump to 53% in 1991. This jump was likely due to the aftereffects of the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests being violently cracked down on by the PRC. The percentage hung around 50-51% until 2021, which saw an increase to 67% unfavorability and then another large jump to 84% unfavorability in 2023. There could be many explanations for the recent increase, whether it be former President Trump's anti-China campaigning, the prevalence of conspiracy theories regarding China and COVID-19, China's slightly more aggressive posture toward Taiwan, or the increase of China's economic involvement in Belt and Road states.

Due to the recency of the incredibly high level of negative views from Americans toward Russia and China, it is integral that we flesh out an explanation for these views and see where the American public may differ. As it stands now, 91% of Americans view Russia unfavorably, with 64% referring to the country as an enemy of the United States (Pew, 2023). American views of China are not much better, with 83% of Americans viewing the country unfavorably. However, as of April 2023, Americans are more likely

to view China as a competitor rather than an enemy, with 52% believing that to be the case (Pew, 2023). Within the same study, 62% of Americans said that the partnership between Russia and China is a very serious problem.

A growing concern for Americans regarding China is strategic economic competition, as the PRC has expanded its influence in its home region and has made significant efforts to get economically involved in other regions as well, namely the Middle East and Africa. Studies have shown that this acknowledgement of Chinas economic growth and rise as an international power has been on the minds of Americans since 2010, and has only increased over time (Aldrich et al, 2014). Although the intentions of China's increased involvement on the global stage are still unclear, there is no question that it has sparked great power competition with the United States who is a stakeholder in all the regions that China has begun stepping into (Brookings, 2019). Although great power competition does not necessarily lead to a zero-sum result, the American public may be more concerned that a foreign nation is growing in power that may threaten the United States political and economic influence abroad. In fact, as of April 2023, 47% of Americans said that China is getting more out of the bilateral economic relationship with the United States and 81% said that economic competition with China is a somewhat serious problem (Pew, 2023). Aside from economic competition, the economic interdependence between the U.S. and China is another source of concern for Americans. China is the United States third largest trading partner, and the United States is China's largest, meaning that any economic policy that either country makes could significantly affect the economy of the other. However, this economic interdependence may deteriorate with rising tensions between the U.S. and China, with

China putting a large emphasis on reducing reliance on Western suppliers to reduce economic interdependence with the US (CSIS, 2023). Economic competition and interdependence are shown to be the main concern of Americans throughout existing polls and even the one conducted for this paper, but they are not the only concern.

Studies have also shown that Americans who have chosen to blame China for the COVID-19 pandemic are far more likely to support aggressive and "punishing" policies towards China (Lin, 2020). These policies include things like economic sanctions, higher tariff rates, and an increase of military presence in the region. This is important to note, as there has been a clear increase of unfavorable American views towards China after the outbreak of COVID-19, and it could be an important factor to refer to while discussing American opinion.

China's growing influence has also provided personal and national security related concerns for the American public, with 88% of Americans in 2023 saying that they have little or no confidence in Chinese social media companies to follow privacy policies that have to do with personal information, with 59% saying they have no confidence at all (Pew, 2023). U.S. government agencies further this concern, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) website stating that China is seeking to become the world's greatest superpower through "predatory lending and business practices, systematic theft of intellectual property, and brazen cyber intrusions". Although economic issues seem to be the largest concern when it comes to American perceptions of China, there is a clear argument for security issues to be in consideration as well.

As for Russia, economic concerns are not at the forefront of American's minds. Scholarly work has shown that Russia is viewed as the most threatening country towards

U.S. security (Smeltz and Wojtowicz, 2019). As of April 2022, 64% of Americans viewed Russia's power and influence as a major threat to the United States, with that specific survey being conducted a year after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine (Pew, 2022). Also in April 2022, 69% of Americans showed concern of a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and Russia, suggesting that security is a large concern for Americans (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022). Additionally, 60% of Americans in 2018 believed that Russia meddled in the 2016 Presidential election, which would further inform perceptions towards the Kremlin.

Academic research has also shown that both American and Russian populations have begun to view global divisions along old Cold War lines, and both groups hold a fear that there may be an escalation towards nuclear war. Along with this, both American and Russian populations have shown a favorability towards the other countries enemies, and an unfavourability towards their allies, which helps to frame American views of Ukraine and China regarding American views towards Russia (Smeltz et al, 2022). These statistics, scholarly works, and studies show that American's will likely view Russia through a threat level perception lens as opposed to a strategic competition one, which will be further examined in the results of the survey that was conducted for this paper.

The Relevance of Ukraine and Taiwan

While discussing American perceptions of Russia and China, it is helpful to establish the importance of countries like Ukraine and Taiwan in potentially informing these perceptions. Ukraine and Russia have a nuanced historical relationship, with Ukraine being a former Soviet state and holding a population in which 17.3% of people

self-identify as ethnically Russian. Ukraine was home to much of the USSR's agricultural production, defense industries, and some nuclear weapons, which meant that the USSR lost a lot of vital factors when Ukraine decided to leave the Soviet Union in 1991 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Although Ukraine has made significant efforts to separate itself from Russia through nationalism and an attempt at closer relations with Western Europe and the European Union, The Kremlin still sees Ukraine as a vital country for Russia's future and growth of power. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 resulted in armed conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine and more recently Russia has been conducting a full-scale invasion of Ukraine since early 2022.

The story of China and Taiwan is a similar one, with Taiwan being the choice of refuge of the fleeing Kuomintang (KMT) from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the tail end of the communist revolution in China in the mid 20th century. The KMT brought the Republic of China (ROC) to the island of Taiwan while the CCP and Mao Zedong formed the People's Republic of China on the mainland in 1949. At the start, both the ROC and the PRC claimed that they were the one true China. However, a sense of Taiwanese nationalism has grown on the island due to the country's democratization overtime, and the governments of Beijing and Taipei operate very differently. Despite this, the PRC continues to argue that Taiwan is a part of China, which has led to a rhetoric of many threats of military action from the PRC towards the ROC.

The reason that Ukraine and Taiwan may be relevant in interpreting American perceptions towards Russia and China may come from the simple fact that the smaller countries in these relationships tend to be more westernized and democratic than their larger counterparts. Both Ukraine and Taiwan have democratized, and both countries are

not nearly as opposed to westernization as Russia and China are. So, when Americans read or hear about these countries being threatened our outright invaded by a much larger country with different ideals and that are generally understood to be authoritarian, it becomes hard not to root for the country that is closer to the United States in ideology and philosophy. It also informs American perceptions towards Russia and China themselves, as Americans may start to see the two countries as aggressive and concerning on a global scale.

It should also be noted that it is possible that support for Taiwan and Ukraine may depress views of China and Russia respectively, or it could only reinforce views that are already held. Prior studies have suggested that reinforcement is more likely, as Americans have shown to view their largest competitors' enemies as friends and their allies as additional enemies (Smeltz et al, 2022). This is supported by poll work as well, with 65% of Americans saying that the relationship between the US and Taiwan is beneficial to US security, suggesting that Americans may view the partnership as a strategic step against China (Kafura, 2023). The statistic is similar with Ukraine, with 60% of Americans saying the same thing about the Eastern European country (Kafura and Smeltz, 2024).

This is not to say that all Americans view Ukraine and Taiwan in a similar way or that their understanding of the two countries will heavily inform their perceptions of Russia and China, as opinions are never unanimous. However, it is to say that Ukraine and Taiwan serve as excellent predictors for how Americans may view Russia and China, and provide a deeper understanding of where these perceptions are coming from and the explanations that come along with that.

Partisan Divide on Opinion

While views have been consistently negative in recent history, the greatest division of opinion on Russia and China comes from partisanship in American politics. Studies have shown that political ideology regarding domestic politics tend to have a large effect on the foreign policy preferences and perceptions of Americans, especially when it comes to perceived threats (Mirilovic and Kim, 2016). As it pertains to Russia, recent polls show that Republicans and Democrats are close in their views of Russia as a competitor or an enemy, but a significant divide appears when discussing the Russia-Ukraine war. As of October 2023, 62% of Republicans say that the United States is doing too much to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia, with only 14% of Democrats agreeing with that statement (Gallup, 2023). The partisan divide is more clear concerning China, with 53% of Republicans viewing China as an enemy compared to 27% of Democrats saying the same (Pew, 2023). Since 2005, Republicans have consistently viewed China more negatively than Democrats have, but it is important to note that both parties have seen a significant rise in unfavorability since 2018 (Pew, 2020).

The split in perception across party lines specifically on China arises for a variety of reasons. First, studies have shown that ingroup bias plays a large role for Americans and their souring perceptions of China, meaning that as the population moves further towards negative views, the negative views will continue to increase amongst other areas, which is a larger theme for Republicans (Irwin et al, 2023). Additionally, in recent history, conservative news platforms have tended to highlight China as a large threat to the United States due to their strong, growing economy that in many pundits' eyes threatens free trade and American economic interests abroad. This paired with Trump's

notorious anti-China campaigning would swing most Republicans towards negative perceptions. Similarly, conservative political commentators were quick to spread conspiracy theories regarding China and the COVID-19 pandemic, often suggesting or fully asserting that the spread of disease was an act of biological warfare from China. If we are to assume that most Republican individuals consume media from platforms that align with their political ideologies, their opinions on China could be informed as such.

As prior studies show, American opinions of Russia and China are commonly negative, even across political lines, and are also often put in contrast with one another. There is a large variety of American public opinion studies concerning Russia and China, as relations are always developing between the two countries and the United States. Many studies concerning American public opinion on Russia and China focus on the *what* rather than the *why*. To be more specific, polling researchers tend to present the facts and interpret the data as it is, and rarely go further into the explanations for American perceptions towards Russia and China. There is significant academic literature that goes further than the *what*, and this thesis plans to add more to the *why*.

The *why* is incredibly difficult to provide a distinct and concise answer to regarding this subject matter, and this thesis aims to tease out some explanations to the best of its ability. It aims to uncover the potential reasons for American perceptions of Russia and China, the implications of these differences, which factors seem to be the most important, and what further research can be done to provide a well-rounded and informed understanding of American public opinion.

Methodology

Design and Procedure

The original survey that was conducted for this thesis was distributed by Amazon's mTurk from September 2nd to September 10th of 2023. The survey was written to tease out American perceptions towards Russia and China, focusing on topics that would be familiar to most Americans, such as perceived threat level, favorability, and potential stressors. The survey garnered 558 responses, resulting in a large enough sample for analysis. The age ranged from 21 to 79, with the average age being 43. The sample had slightly more male respondents, with men making up 52.6% of responses, while 47% of the responses were filled out by women. In terms of partisan split, 58.9% of respondents identified with the Democratic party, 28.3% identified with the Republican party, and 12.9% of respondents considered themselves independent or members of smaller third parties.

To go deeper than party lines, 15.8% percent of respondents considered themselves extremely liberal, 25.2% considered themselves moderately liberal, and 14.3% considered themselves slightly liberal. 8.2% considered themselves extremely conservative, 13.6% considered themselves moderately conservative, and 10.9% considered themselves slightly conservative. To round out the percentages, 12.1% of respondents considered themselves neither liberal nor conservative. As for education, 68.5% of respondents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while 31.5% are either in college, hold an associate degree, have a high school diploma or GED, or have only completed some high school. It is important to note that this survey is skewed towards a

more educated population, with the sample having over 2/3 of respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 1/3 of the U.S. population having one overall.

Media intake was also assessed, with 33.8% of respondents saying their primary source of news related to Russia and China is televised news stations. 28.5% find their main source to be printed or digital news, 24% find theirs in social media, 7.3% find theirs in podcasts and radio, and 5.5% either do not often get news about China or Russia or only hear things by word of mouth.

Questions of Focus

General Assessment of Russia and China

The first questions of focus were directly related to Russia and China. First, I asked respondents which country they think that U.S. foreign policy should be more focused on, with Russia and China as the only available answers. Second, I asked respondents which country they would rather have the U.S. cooperate with in the future, between Russia and China, assuming positive cooperation becomes possible. The inclusion of these questions provided us with quick answers on how the public broadly views Russia and China, by teasing out the state that they find the most important for policy focus but also the one that they believe is the best fit for cooperation.

Assessing Specific Concerns and Worries

A large bulk of the investigative questions on the survey were intended to assess the concerns and worries of the American public pertaining to Russia and China. I asked two separate but similar questions, one being "Which aspect of U.S.-China relations

worries you the most," and the other being "Which aspect of U.S.-Russia relations worries you the most". For both questions, the available answers were economic issues, security issues, political influence, and other with an optional open response box. We then asked to what degree respondents are concerned about relations between Russia and China, with 5 multiple choice options ranging from not at all concerned to extremely concerned.

Ukraine and Taiwan

I then shifted to assess opinions on major topics within American understandings of Russia and China, specifically the question of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's increasing tension with Taiwan. I asked respondents two yes or no questions, one about if they think that the U.S. has a responsibility to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia, and the other about if they think that the U.S. has a responsibility to defend Taiwan from a potential Chinese invasion.

Results

General Perception of Russia and China

Of all the commonly assessed subsets of the American population, partisanship and political difference remain at the forefront, which is why the bulk of this analysis will be broken down by party lines. Although a clear self-determination of independent leaning from American voters is at an all-time high, in 2024 88% of Americans will still say that they lean towards either party (Gallup, 2024). Thus, it is still incredibly important that we analyze any sort of public opinion through a partisan lens, due to that lens being employed often by Americans themselves. As a quick disclaimer before

analysis, it should be noted that our sample size was skewed heavily towards the Democratic party, with 58.9% of respondents identifying as Democrats. This may have been a flaw of the survey platform we used, as the reliability of mTurk has been debated in literature (Aguinis et al., 2021). It is also possible that Democrats are more likely to fill out political opinion surveys, but it should be mentioned as a potential error regardless.

I first asked respondents which country U.S. foreign policy should be more focused on between Russia and China. As seen in Table 1, there is a strong preference from Americans for U.S. foreign policy to be focused on China, but there are some clear deviations when it comes to the partisan lens. This is both consistent with historical views of China and Russia, as well as recent public opinion research and scholarship as seen in the literature review. A much larger portion of Republicans would rather have U.S. foreign policy be focused on China than Russia, suggesting that Republicans are significantly less concerned about Russia than they are China. Democrats on the other hand are still more concerned about China, but significantly more of them show concern for Russia when compared to Republicans. This likely follows along with pundits and politicians from either side of the partisan spectrum, as Democrats are more likely to advocate for aid to Ukraine in its war against Russia while Republicans are more likely to advocate for the opposite.

Which country should the U.S. focus its foreign policy attention on more?			
	Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Russia	34.48%	41.53%	27.09%
China	65.51%	58.46%	72.90%

(Table 1, American Views on Foreign Policy Attention)

I then asked respondents to assess whether they would want to U.S. to cooperate with Russia or China, assuming positive cooperation would be possible in the future. This question serves as a way for us to tease out how Americans view cooperative potential with their global competitors or threats. In this case, respondents had to choose between Russia and China, which provided interesting results as seen in Figure 1. There is a clear preference amongst all party identifications that the American public would prefer the United States to cooperate with China if positive cooperation is possible at all, which is consistent with polling done by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in late 2023, but that preference is not as strong within this sample's Republican representation.
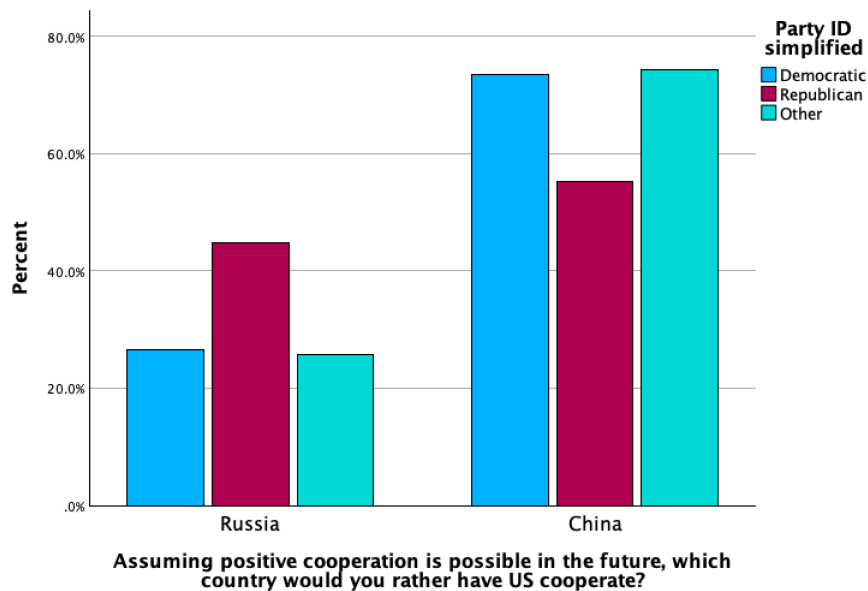
(Fig. 1, American Views on Cooperation)

It is entirely possible that the Republicans who took this survey had to decide whether or not their answer would be based on a true desire for cooperation or an aversion to who they see as the largest competitor, which would make sense with 72.9% of Republicans who answered the survey saying that the U.S. should focus its foreign policy attention on China more than Russia compared to 58.5% of Democrats. Thus, even

if cooperation with China as a rising global power could be more beneficial to the United States than cooperation with Russia, Republicans may be wearier of China's growing power and be more likely to choose Russia with how the question was posed. Additionally, it is entirely possible that Republicans have become tired of the Ukraine situation, and may be more likely to support cooperation with Russia to end the ongoing war.

It is also worth mentioning that overall, Republicans are more concerned with potential malicious intents of China. In September of 2023, 68% of Republicans said that the US government has not gone far enough in preventing China's surveillance of the United States, and 71% said the same about the theft of US intellectual property by Chinese companies, compared to 59% and 60% of Democrats respectively (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2023). If there is already a concern about malicious intent from Republicans, it is far more likely that they would not want to cooperate with China in the future, even if the cooperation may have positive outcomes.

Partisanship serves as a common explanation for American public opinion, especially with regards to Russia and China. However, results from this survey show that although there are differences of opinion across partisan lines, there are also areas in which the public agrees regardless of party identification. Republicans tend to be more critical of China, while Democrats see more opportunity for collaboration, but both parties agree on the specific sources of concern and worry towards both countries.

Assessing Specific Concerns and Worries

  I first found that partisan views are consistent when it comes to the specific sources of concern regarding Russia and China. As seen in Figure 2, Republicans and Democrats alike overwhelmingly agree that their largest worry regarding U.S. - Russia relations are security related issues. Although it was not directly asked, it can be assumed that most Americans attributed things such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the threat of nuclear warfare, and cyber-attacks as security issues. Concern for security is rated significantly higher than political influence and economic issues, suggesting that concerns arising from the continuous conflict in Ukraine and occasional nuclear threats from the Kremlin, some as recent as early 2024 as reported in Reuters, are quite unanimous across party lines. Democrats are slightly more likely to be concerned with the political influence that Russia holds, which could stem from the controversies surrounding potential Russian collusion in the 2016 presidential election. A Politico poll in 2018 showed that 85% of Democrats believed that Russia meddled in the election in favor of former President Trump, compared to 46% of Republicans (Politico, 2018). However, that only informs the slight difference of perceptions on the Russian side.

  Something interesting of note is the fact that a very small percentage of respondents answered that they were concerned about the political influence of Russia, even though a large percentage of Americans believe that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election. It is possible that this arises from the fact that respondents were only able to provide one answer, and that their largest worry was security issues. Additionally, due to security issues and political influence not being defined in the

survey, it is possible that respondents attributed something like election interference as a security issue and not political influence.
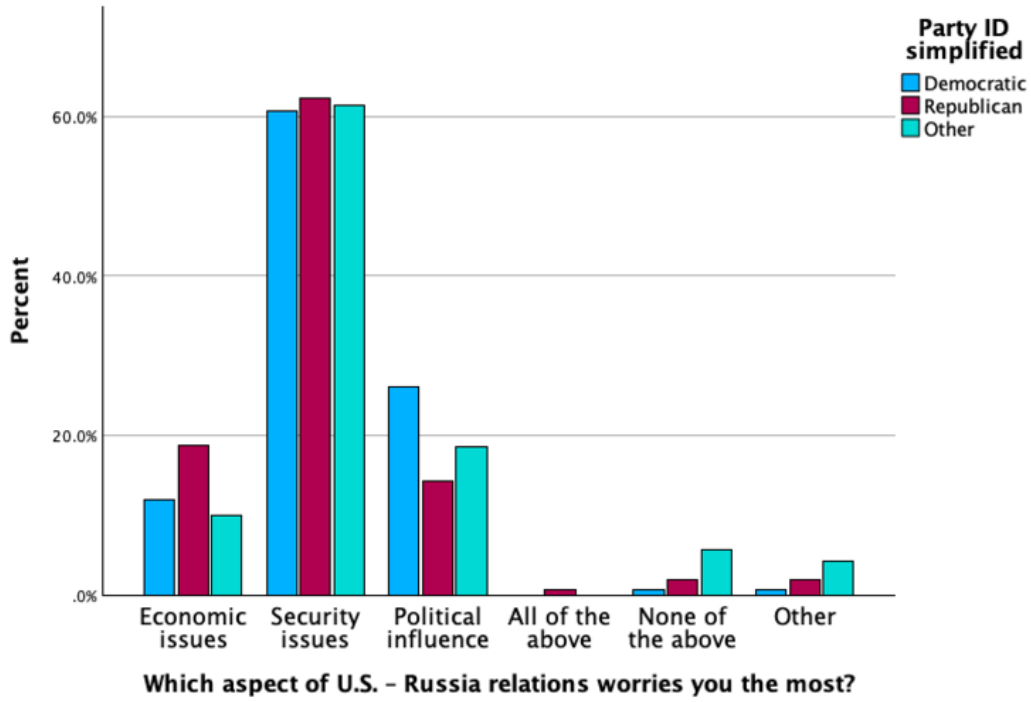
(Fig 2, Specific American Concerns Towards Russia)

As for China, Figure 3. Shows that Democrats are more concerned about the economic issues posed by China than security issues while Republicans are almost equally concerned about the two. Once again, although it was not directly asked, economic concerns of Americans could be the ongoing trade war between the US and China, China's growing economic power, and the interdependency between the Chinese and American economy. Surprisingly, Democrats are a little bit more concerned about political influence than Republicans, but it is possible that this arises from a sampling error. Regardless, the perceptions are quite close to one another, suggesting that partisanship does not play a large role in specific American concerns about China. It is equally true that China's growing economic power is viewed as a threat and that recent

events such as the China spy balloon (AP News, 2023) and the TikTok hearings (NYT, 2023) are concerning Americans at a security level.
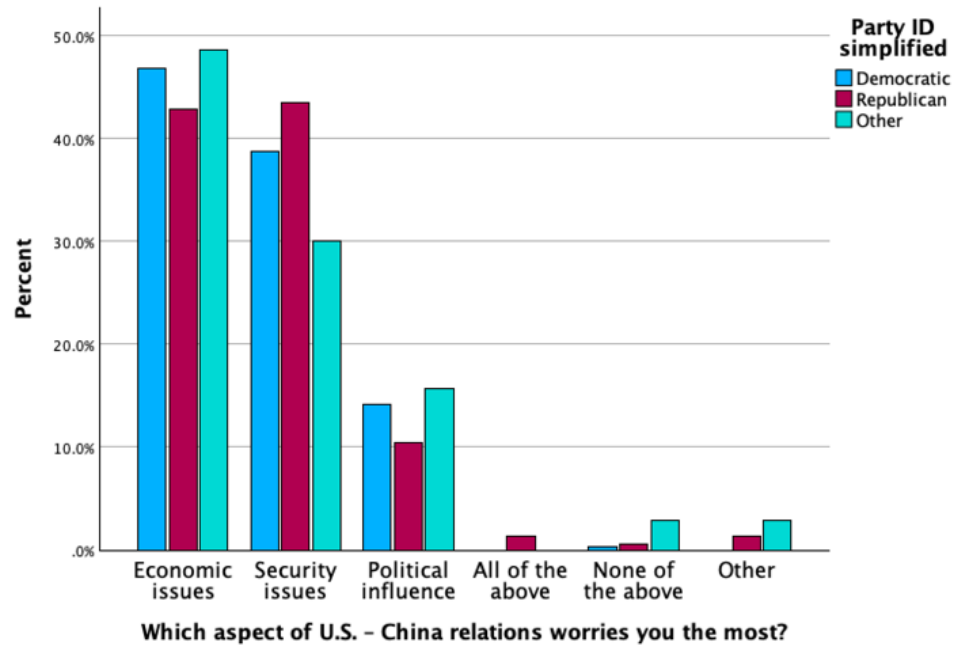
(Fig 3, Specific American Concerns Towards China)

These sources of concern were laid out earlier in the literature review section of this paper, and the data is aligned with the assertion that Americans generally would be more concerned with the economic relationship between the United States and China while also taking large consideration for security issues. Similarly, it was predicted in the literature review that Americans would mainly be concerned with security issues when it came to Russia, which is also apparent in the figures.

Ukraine and Taiwan

Assessing American public opinion on Ukraine and Taiwan provide an alternative outlook on how Americans view their international challengers and competitors. As stated in the literature review, both Ukraine and Taiwan have partaken in westernization and

democratization, which would likely put them in a more favorable view with American's. Due to both Ukraine and Taiwan being in threatened positions by Russia and China, the former more significant than the latter, we can likely extrapolate opinions towards Russia and China by simply asking about Ukraine and Taiwan. If nothing else, an alternative angle for analysis and an additional explanation for American opinion could be provided.

As seen in Table 2, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to say that the U.S. has a responsibility to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia. This is consistent with the rhetoric that Democrats are more likely to support aid packages for Ukraine, while their Republican counterparts are less likely to do so. Additionally, as unpacked above, Republicans are far less concerned with Russia and far more concerned with China, which would suggest that they would be less likely to support foreign policy action that has motives in deterring Russia abroad. This explanation could serve well in the inverse, with Democrats being more concerned about Russia and therefore being more likely to support U.S. aid. It is also important to note that Republicans may be less interested in foreign entanglements in general, and that is what is informing this statistic. Additionally, the "overall" category is unreliable for a complete opinion, as the sample for this survey was skewed heavily towards Democrats.

Do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia?

Answer	Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Yes	60.47%	77.23%	33.11%
No	39.52%	22.76%	66.88%

(Table 2, American Views on Responsibility to Aid Ukraine)

Table 3 yields some interesting results, as it shows that a majority of both Democrats and Republicans believe that the U.S. has a responsibility to defend Taiwan

from a potential Chinese invasion. However, Democrats are still more likely to support this. What is also interesting is that a lesser percentage of Democrats are willing to show support for U.S. Defense of Taiwan than are willing to support U.S. aid to Ukraine. It is possible that this comes from the change of support type, with the Ukraine question using aid and the Taiwan question using defend, which would suggest military involvement.

Do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to defend Taiwan from a potential Chinese invasion?

Column1	Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Yes	56.64%	61.23%	52.59%
No	43.35%	38.76%	47.40%

(Table 3, American Views on Responsibility to Defend Taiwan)

The almost even split of Republican opinion could arise for a variety of reasons. First, as shown in earlier data, Republicans are far more critical of China than they are Russia, meaning that they may be more willing to support U.S. action that would prevent China from growing its power. Additionally, the large portion of Republicans who answered no could be informing their answer with the current situation in Ukraine, which they already tend to avoid supporting aid for, and are looking ahead and wanting to avoid a similar situation. Additionally, Republicans may view the costs of defending Taiwan as less tangible than Ukraine, because they can see the direct costs and value of aid packages that are being sent to Ukraine and might not know how much it would cost to defend Taiwan if China were to invade.

Alternative Outlook: Interest in International Affairs

As an alternative lens of analysis, I asked respondents to self-rate their interest in international affairs on a scale of 1-5. The results appear to follow a normal curve distribution, with 5.8% of respondents ranking their interest as a 1, 11.3% ranking their

interest as a 2, 34.5% ranking their interest as a 3, 32.5% ranking their interest as a 4, and 16% ranking their interest as a 5. It is not surprising that the largest percentage of respondents selected a 3 as their self-rate, as it can be assumed that most people would put themselves at an average score due to not wanting to come off as uninformed. Additionally, it is important to note that partisanship was not strong amongst the interest categories, with the largest difference being 5 statistical points with 35% of Democrats rating themselves as a 4 compared to 30% of Republicans. While using the self-rate question as a predictor for American perceptions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I yielded some interesting results.

A clear takeaway from Figure 4 is that those who claim to have a higher interest in international affairs are more likely to support American aid to Ukraine, or at least believe that the United States has a responsibility to. This sort of opinion could align with international affairs interest for many reasons. First, people who are more interested simply might want more engagement. Additionally, it is likely that those who are interested in international affairs would tend to lean towards less biased and politicized news sources, and may even get their news from foreign broadcasters and news companies. It is common cause that a higher intake of information from a variety of sources would create a more informed opinion, and it is entirely possible that those who are highly interested would diversify their media intake. It is also possible that those who are more interested would be more likely to seek out information and thus be more aware of the broader concerns regarding Russia and China.
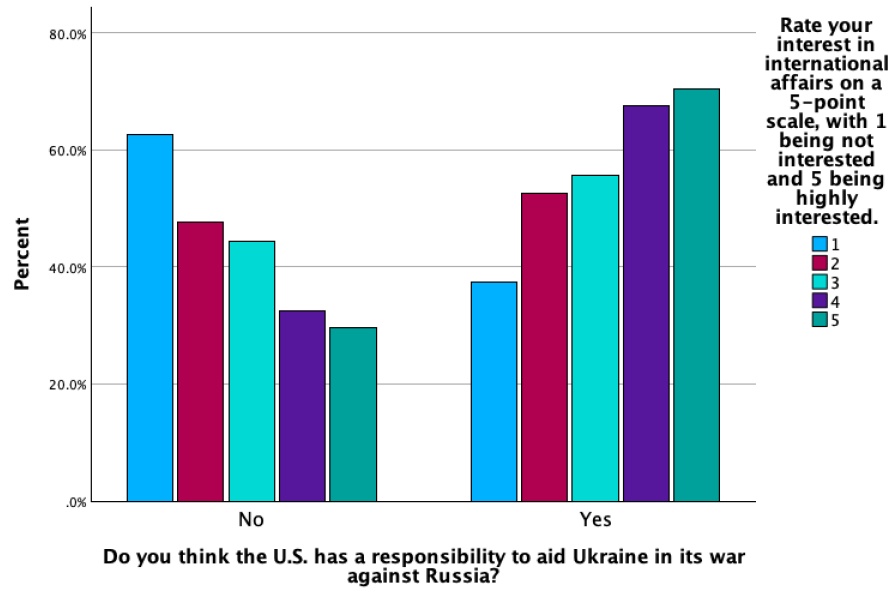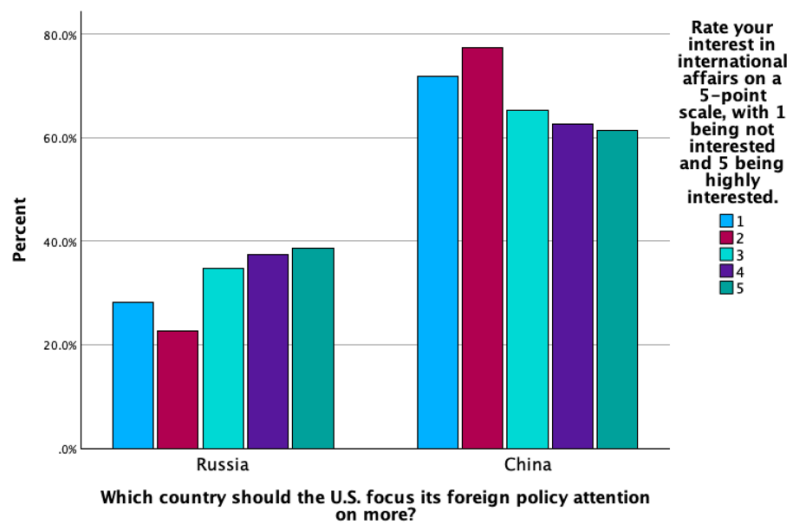
(Fig. 4, Interest in International Affairs Shaping Support)

Additionally, those who are well researched in international events understand that there is a high level of nuance to any global situation. It is entirely possible that those who are well researched would be more likely to understand the gravity of the situation in Ukraine, and therefore would be more inclined to support the U.S. sending aid to ensure that Russia does not win the war. This is consistent with another question I asked on the survey, specifically about which country the U.S. should focus its foreign policy attention on more between Russia and China. Although the concern of China was consistently higher than Russia within the responses of that question, those who rated their interest in international affairs as a 4 or 5 were more concerned than the 1, 2, and 3 categories by almost ten percentage points. This suggests that those who are paying more attention to the situation in Ukraine are consequently more concerned about Russia, and are more likely to say that U.S. Foreign Policy should be focused on the Kremlin rather than the PRC.

It should be noted that on the parallel question about if the U.S. has a responsibility to defend Taiwan amid potential Chinese invasion, the results were incredibly similar with those who have a high self-rated interest in international affairs being far more likely to support the notion that the U.S. should defend Taiwan. The rationales used above could also be used to explain the results of the Taiwan question, so this is noted briefly to avoid repetitiveness.

Figure 5 shows that although those with a higher interest in international affairs are more likely to support aid for Ukraine and a defense of Taiwan, China is still the clear concern over Russia for the American public. There is a slight divergence of opinion with those who are more interested being more concerned about Russia, which was noted earlier, but China is still at the forefront of the interested population's minds. It is highly likely that this is due to the large amount of areas that concern about China could arise in, such as the PRC's increased involvement in global trade and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative, events such as the Chinese spy balloon incident that occurred in early 2023, or China's continuously tense and threatening posture with Taiwan and the ROC.

(Fig. 5, Interest in International Affairs Shaping Foreign Policy Attention)

In short, there are many more areas of concern when it comes to American's thinking about China, and when those concerns are compared to ones Americans may have of Russia, which could be distilled to two major themes of invasion and nuclear arms building, the PRC feels more worrisome than the Kremlin through its large scope of influence in the world.

Interest in international affairs brings us to another explanation of American opinion on Russia and China. Through the results of this survey, it was uncovered that Americans who are not interested in international affairs tend to fall in line with partisan viewpoints, choosing to remain consistent with party opinions. However, Americans that do find strong interest in international affairs are more inclined to support things such as aid or defense, despite those who are highly interested representing both parties strongly.

To wrap up analysis, there is a strong preference among Americans for a focus on China compared to Russia. Americans tend to see China as more of a concern, answering in majority that American foreign policy should be more focused on the PRC rather than Russia and the Kremlin. While viewing through a partisan lens, Republicans are much more concerned about China over Russia than Democrats are, but Democrats still show more concern for China than Russia. In terms of potential cooperation, Democrats are far more likely to prefer cooperation with China over Russia while Republicans are only slightly more likely to preference China. While shifting to specific worries, there is a close to bipartisan viewpoint on where concerns stem from. For China, economic issues are rated as the highest concern, while security issues are a close second. For Russia, security is the main concern for Americans on both ends of the political spectrum.

As it pertains to Ukraine and Taiwan, Republicans are far less likely to support aid for Ukraine but slightly more likely to support U.S. defense of Taiwan. Democrats are more likely to support both aid and defense. While looking towards a self-rated interest in international affairs as an alternative outlook, it is found that those who have a higher interest are more likely to support aid for Ukraine and a defense of Taiwan amid potential Chinese invasion. Additionally, those with a higher interest in international affairs still prefer a U.S. foreign policy focus on China, but more prefer a focus on Russia as interest goes up. It is possible that the increase of focus on Russia from interested individuals comes from the fact that Russia is an immediate threat with the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

A clear implication from this survey is that China is the main concern for Americans, but Russia should not be discounted. Through the data and prior literature, it appears that Americans may view China more as a strategic competitor while they view Russia as an outright threat, with high levels of concern for economic competition with the PRC and the forefront concern being security issues with the Kremlin. It also appears from the data and literature that Americans have at least some understanding that the U.S. relationship with China is more nuanced than its relationship with Russia, which could be driving a higher level of concern. If the main concern for Americans with Russia is the threat of nuclear warfare and the ongoing war in Ukraine, they may understand concerns in a singular way and feel less worried about the future of U.S. – Russia relations. However, when it comes to the varying areas of concern regarding China, as shown in the data, there is a lot more for Americans to worry about. There seems to be more question

marks when it comes to China for Americans, and perhaps this lack of understanding leads to higher levels of concern and worry.

To mention some obvious limitations, the sample size for the survey could have been larger for a more thorough analysis. Additionally, once results came through, it was made apparent that questions could've been framed better to avoid confusion, such as defining what constitutes a security issue, political influence, or economic issue. Additionally, the sample could have been closer to an even split partisan wise, as the sample for this survey was skewed heavily towards Democrats.

So, what explains these perceptions? As stated earlier, this thesis is wholly unable to provide a concise answer or explanation, but aimed to provide some understanding and build upon other studies. As discussed in the literature review, ingroup bias and partisanship serve as solid predictors for how Americans may think about U.S. foreign policy, and the data from this survey mainly supports this notion. The statistics on the partisan split questions followed relatively closely with the outcomes of other surveys and assertions made in prior literature, which reinforces how partisanship influences American perceptions on foreign policy. However, there were some areas in which partisanship did not serve as a good predictor, with the specific concerns and worries regarding China and Russia being closely aligned for both Democrats and Republicans. This suggests that there are more ways to understand or explain American opinion aside from partisanship.

One of the alternative outlooks that was explored in this paper was an interest in international affairs. It was found that those with a higher interest were more supportive of foreign policy engagement, through aid for Ukraine and a potential defense of Taiwan,

and were also more concerned about Russia then those with less of an interest. The samples Republican and Democrat populations were evenly split amongst the interest categories, which further suggests that alternative outlooks such as an interest in international affairs can provide a deeper explanation for American perceptions.

As seeking to answer the *why* of American perceptions has proved to be a difficult and daunting task, there are many avenues for further research on this topic specifically. An obvious suggestion would be to explore factors aside from partisanship, as it is a popular predictor for political studies, and it can be refreshing to look at alternative angles. Some suggestions include media intake, prior understanding of global affairs, and generational differences. Obtaining a broader assessment of the factors that drive American perceptions could be obtained through any of these suggestions. Still, it is important to note that all research attempting to understand the *why* may only fit one piece into a much larger and everchanging puzzle, requiring consistent pulse checks on American opinions and a tenacity to explore any and all options for explanation.

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