Gendered international-threat perceptions

Abstract

Gender gaps are commonly observed throughout international relations. However, such gaps have received less attention in the context of threat perception, despite such perceptions' important role in generating and sustaining conflict. Women and men might be especially likely to diverge in how they assess threats because women often seem relatively less interested in the international economy than men are. Women's reduced concern about issues such as trade and migration may correspondingly reduce the salience of threats in the economic realm compared to those related to military security. Survey evidence from eighteen high- and middle-income countries evaluating the intensity of various threats China posed in 2022, as well as from the United States in 2020 and 2024 about the degree to which various other countries posed a threat, confirms that women and men diverge on average in their relative evaluation of threats. Women tend to express relatively greater concern about the military dimension of threats than men do, even when comparing people in the same country who by definition face the same national-level threats, although women are also relatively likely to evaluate countries that have relatively limited military capabilities as more threatening. Gendered differences thus characterize many threat perceptions among the public.

The international arena teems with potential threats. War and terrorism are often the most vivid of these, but more mundane hazards also come with exposure to the rest of the world. The potential for loss of jobs, national identity, skills, and self-sufficiency have inspired the longstanding axiom that 'economic security is national security' (e.g., *National Trade Policy Agenda*, 1989: 118), that threats to a country's standing can involve international economic flows as well as bombs (Kleinberg and Fordham, 2010). Indeed, the potential for economic loss can itself directly lead to conflict (Li and Reuveny, 2011). But how do individuals and societies weigh the economic flows against the bombs in determining which matters more? When foreign policy involves setting priorities across issue areas, choices depend on perceptions of which threat is really more threatening—perceptions that in turn can depend on psychological factors of the decisionmaker as well as objective characteristics of the situation. Two people, confronted with a particular scenario, may draw upon divergent information on which to base a decision or weigh trade-offs differently. And such threat perceptions are often pivotal for a relationship to escalate into conflict (Landau-Wells, 2024).

What is more, differing reactions to international affairs often reflect foundational social identities. Race and ethnicity, for example, feed into a wide range of attitudes about international conflict and economic interaction (e.g., Baker, 2015; Green-Riley and Leber, 2023). But while countries vary dramatically in what ethnic divisions if any are socially meaningful, virtually every country (give or take a Vatican City) has both women and men as major social categories. Sex, too, associates with distinctive preferences across international affairs. Women differ on average from men in their reaction to international conflict and violence (Brooks and Valentino, 2011; Wagnsson et al., 2020), as well as to the global political economy (Guisinger and Kleinberg, 2023). Sex might also reasonably be conjectured to affect how women and men differ not just in their opinions about the best response to a given situation, but also in how they prioritize different foreign-policy situations and issue areas: the divergent preferences about war and trade suggest that the sexes tend to analyze world affairs differently. But most

accounts of gender gaps in foreign-policy preferences (e.g., Fite et al., 1990; Togeby, 1994) focus on factors other than the perception of threat (but for an exception, see Ben Shitrit et al., 2017).

Theory and past literature are ambiguous about whether women would be more or less likely than men are to see a given economic threat as more serious than a simultaneous military threat. One could surmise that women's consistently higher levels of economic protectionism suggest they may tend to feel economic threats especially acutely, but women's tendency to express less interest in economics may conversely suggest they tend not to find it a significant enough threat to prioritize. Additionally, these relationships are apt to be sensitive to conditions. When bombs are falling on a country, the military threat is likely so salient that everyone can agree it is the primary hazard, attenuating potential gender gaps.

To help resolve whether women and men tend to diverge in what they perceive as threats in the international arena, this article draws on evidence from multiple surveys, consistently finding gender gaps in perceived threats. In an eighteen-country survey fielded in 2022, women were likelier than otherwise similar men were to perceive China as more threatening in the security realm than economically. Complementing this, in survey responses from the United States in 2020 and 2024 assessing the threat from various countries, women generally rated most countries as significantly greater threats to the United States than men did, but men rated the threat from China as greater than women did. These results indicate that, in a variety of contexts, women and men weigh global political threats differently.

Gendered reactions to military and economic threats

Gender permeates international relations. Societies with more-unequal gender relations tend to have distinctive, typically more-belligerent, foreign policies (Cohen and Karim, 2022; Hudson et al., 2009; Nagel, 2021), and putting women into positions of influence over foreign policy can shape outcomes (Dube and Harish, 2020; Humayun, 2025; Koch and Fulton, 2011). Stereotypes about women likewise play into the conduct of international affairs (Lawless, 2004; Post and Sen, 2020; Reiter and Wolford, 2022). Even quintessentially system-level features such as the international structure may have gendered implications (Sjoberg, 2012).

One important manifestation of gender differences involves the preferences of the mass public. These preferences are, especially in democracies, a key input into the making of foreign policy (Tomz et al., 2020) and often exhibit gender differences across many issue areas. Such differences derive from several mechanisms, from gendered norms of socialization to policies and outcomes having distinct implications for the interests of women and for men. Women often face differing hazards in conflict (Stallone and Zulver, 2025); for example, men can be and are victims of sexual violence, but women disproportionately suffer as its targets (Nordås and Cohen, 2021). At the same time, exposure to international market forces through open trade and capital-flow policies contributed to deindustrialization in the rich world in ways that have in many though not all cases led to more job loss among men than among women (Clarke et al., 2024).

As those examples suggest, threats or perceived threats from abroad are among the ways that gender differences can enter into public opinion. Indeed, a feeling of threat is a primary way that foreign affairs break through to public attention (Dolan and Ilderton, 2017; Meunier and Czesana, 2019; Oppermann and Viehrig, 2009), and threat perceptions can drive many other preferences and beliefs about global issues (Conrad et al., 2018; Shinamoto, 2023; Zeng and Li, 2019). Perceived threats thus have substantial policy consequences, encouraging aggressive action and war (Stein, 2013).

Threats and crises do not occur in isolation: politics and policy often involve trade-offs. Actors must choose how much to prioritize one issue over another, which is to say they must at least implicitly compare the two issues to determine what attention and resources to devote to each. The ability to forge consensus on the ranking of threats faced is central to countries' effectively implementing foreign-policy strategies (Cappella Zielinski and Schilde, 2019; Schweller, 2006). It accordingly matters how people compare different sorts of threats. Comparisons are in any case particularly useful because, as a matter of psychology, they tend to be more confident and meaningful sorts of judgments; asking someone how painful a stimulus is usually less reliable than is asking which of two stimuli is more painful, and the relative ease of comparison extends across many other dimensions of human perception, thought, and subjectivity (Stevens, 1975). In the context on international relations, it may not be very clear what it

means for someone to identify a threat as acute, but that person describing one threat as more acute than another provides a clearer and likely more consistent signal of foreign-policy priorities.

This sort of comparison of threats is also common in international-relations theory, for example in omnibalancing, where states try to prioritize between internal and external threats to their survival (David, 1991), or the classic guns-versus-butter debate pitting military and economic priorities against one another (Skaperdas and Syropoulos, 2001). Admittedly, the line between a military threat and an economic one is not always clear-cut; military conflict has economic consequences (often gendered ones: Tir and Bailey, 2018) and economic disruption likewise can have military effects (Carnegie and Gaikwad, 2022). A cyberattack on a communication system or electrical grid, for instance, may impede military coordination while also causing economic chaos. But the divide between military and economic is very widespread from the organization of government agencies to academic-subfield boundaries, suggesting it has purchase in how people think about and act upon international affairs.

The distinction also holds interest in the context of gender, because previous results indicate that women tend to have distinctive reactions both to questions of war and security and to the global economy. For example, women are in many circumstances more skeptical of military conflict (Conover and Sapiro, 1993; Crawford et al., 2017; Eichenberg, 2019), more concerned about threats to human rights and humanitarian concerns (Lizotte, 2021), and more disapproving of aggressive behavior (McDermott, 2015). Differences can apply to one's entire approach to international relations: some argue that the very logic of deterrence, of seeking peace through preemptively intimidating might, is a gendered, essentially masculine way of thinking (Caldicott, 1994; Lupovici, 2010). But these differences in policy preferences or mental models of conflict do not require that women are systematically more or less concerned than men are with military threats.

The economic side of the comparison suggests greater scope for potential for gendered difference in level of threat perception, as the distribution of interest and information about economic threats shows wide gender gaps in several contexts. Though many exceptions exist, women on average show relatively little interest in economics as academic institutions construct it. In Western countries, even as women

comprise a majority of college students overall, they are vastly outnumbered among undergraduate economics majors at both the undergraduate (Bayer and Wilcox, 2019) and the graduate (Weeden et al., 2017) level. Pre-college, too, boys are more likely than girls to choose economics-related options (Buser et al., 2017); perhaps as a result, women more often cannot correctly answer basic financial-literacy questions, suggesting they were less socialized to learn about even those economic concepts with practical, everyday utility (Bucher-Koenen et al., 2012).

Outside the classroom, women also report being less likely to follow news about business, finance, and economic institutions (Mochhoury, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2006), especially including international economic news (Morley, 1992).[1] Even beyond news consumption, women tend to pay less attention to most macroeconomic conditions (Link et al., 2023). And in the United States, women are less than half as likely as men are to point to international trade or related international-economic topics as the most important problem facing society (Heffington et al., 2019). These results from the most-important problem query are, to be sure, ambiguous about whether women consider the international economy less important or less problematic (Wlezien, 2005), but either possibility suggests they would find it less of a threat. In a notable contrast, women are likelier than men by this measure to point to issues related to international security as the most important problem: they do not think all international issues are less likely to be the most important problems, only those more narrowly focused on the international economy.

This, on average, relatively lesser economic interest and concern among women could lead them to assume, in the absence of further information, that the economic threat is particularly pointed. Indeed, if the lack of interest reflects a feeling that economic forces are intimidating or overwhelming, the feeling of grave economic threat may be precisely what inspires the lack of interest (Robichaud et al., 2003; Sweeny et al., 2010). In potential support of this possibility, women do seem when considering the

[1] Women disproportionately dropped out of Mochhoury's (2023) survey when confronted with an economic report, which she infers also indicates women's lack of interest in economic or financial topics.

international economy to focus more on the domestic downsides of trade than on the virtues of international economic competition (Gidengil, 1995). But it is also possible that a relative lack of interest in economic matters reflects a judgment that the topic is less important, too esoteric to be worth bothering with given all the other day-to-day demands on one's time and attention. In most circumstances, after all, people prioritize rather than ignore matters they see as important risks to deal with.

In any case, the lack of interest in the international economy is apt to have downstream consequences that reduce the relative perception of economic threats. Lower interest in economics-related information would tend to reduce how much people sought out and hence were exposed to such information. But one of the readiest sources of economics news and information, the mass media, has a notable negativity bias, emphasizing potential hazards (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Soroka, 2006). If attention to the international economy is gendered such that women see less news coverage on the topic, it might tend to encourage men to evaluate economic threats as more severe than women do. Men would hear more about the risks of trade and cross-border finance, which would tend to reinforce the feeling that threats pervade the international economy.[2] This can lead to positive-feedback loops, where the perceived threat leads to greater issue salience specifically among men and hence motivates them to pay more attention to the issue, further exacerbating gender differences in perceived economic threat.

Women's relatively lesser interest in the international economy may then suggest a hypothesis about the average assessments of the relative urgency of military and economic threats.

Hypothesis 1a: Women perceive military threats as relatively more acute than economic threats, compared to how men perceive them.

However, differences in interest and information are not the only gender divide over the international economy. Even when accounting for differences in information, the sexes tend to diverge in

[2] This logic may be tempered by Guisinger's (2016) finding that providing more information about trade increases rather than mitigates gender gaps in trade attitudes. Even if women are exposed to less information about the economy, they may react more strongly to the information they do receive.

what they value about society and economics (Mansfield et al., 2015). This divergence in most societies involves women expressing more aversion to international trade and free markets than men do, one of the most widely seen findings in studies of trade-policy preferences (e.g., Drope and Chowdhury, 2014; Ehrlich and Maestas, 2010; Kaltenthaler et al., 2004; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mayda and Rodrik, 2005; O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2001; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). More intensely disliking the job losses and supposed volatility that come with exposure to the international economy, as women seem to do, could equate to finding that the economy poses greater threat.

In fact, women frequently do perceive greater threats from the macroeconomy—or at least report perceiving such threats, which may not be the same thing if social pressures make it more acceptable for women than men to report feelings of threat—but they also perceive greater threats from non-economic conditions (Djerf-Pierre and Wängnerud, 2016; Stevens et al., 2021). This makes it unclear whether the absolutely higher perception of economic threat would translate into perceiving that economic threats are greater than military-security threats. If the greater level of absolute threat perception did however imply that women found economic threats particularly acute, it would reverse the logic and implications of Hypothesis 1a.

Hypothesis 1b: Women perceive military threats as relatively less acute than economic threats, compared to how men perceive them.

The presentation of Hypotheses 1a and 1b was very generalized, stripped of most context. But context is highly likely to influence the size of any gender gaps in threat perception. Many dimensions of context may be relevant to threat perceptions, but previous literature particularly flags the importance of issues' salience. Salience is furthermore a natural focus for further inquiry because it is intrinsically involved in threat assessment and comparison. Of particular note is that salience often matters for gender gaps in public opinion about international issues, as when gender gaps in attitudes about security and the use of force can lessen when conflict becomes salient (Rosler et al., 2023; Tessler et al., 1999).

When military conflict in particular becomes more salient, it tends to dominate threat assessments. The potential for compatriots, let alone close social contacts or oneself, to be outright killed

or suffer grievous injury is a particularly emotive threat; even people who are relatively attentive to economic concerns are likely to acknowledge the primacy of military issues when such bloodshed becomes common. Only when the military context becomes less pressing would people be likely to deem possible economic threats as the more worrisome. It is possible that this effect of salience would be symmetrical so that particularly intense economic threats might likewise reduce gender gaps by forcing the attention of even those normally oblivious to economic threats, but prior literature offers relatively less support for this suggestion. It may be telling that episodes of high unemployment, which would seemingly be a time for heightened economic threat, also often feature military engagement, whether because states find it cheaper and strategically diversionary to be more aggressive or because economic weakness reduces defense resources and so invites attack (Fordham, 1998; Wang, 2023). But the potential for heightened military alert to close gender gaps seems clearer.

Hypothesis 2: Gender gaps in the relative evaluation of military and economic threats will diminish in contexts that increase the salience of military threat.

Sex is as an independent variable less amenable to experimental research designs than are many social-science concepts, so studies of differences in political outlook or behavior between women and men generally have to rely on observational data. The empirical approach here will along these lines draw on evidence from two large surveys in varying countries and contexts. While this approach cannot provide the causal certainty that an experimental study could, it does somewhat compensate in providing some evidence of external validity to a range of real-world situations.

Relative assessment of Chinese military and economic threats, 2022

One source of information allowing comparison of the public's feelings across different sorts of international threats is Pew Research's Spring 2022 global-affairs survey (Pew Research Center, 2022),

which asked respondents in nineteen high- and middle-income countries questions relevant to threats.[3] Most pointedly, a pair of questions asked (in random order) whether 'economic competition with China' and 'China's military power' were 'a very serious problem, somewhat serious problem, not too serious problem, or not a problem at all' for the respondent's home country. Stated differences in concern between these two issues then suggest whether respondents are relatively more concerned about the economic or the military threat their country faces from China. A divergence between women and men in their relative tendency to see China as a primarily economic threat—even when those women and men live in the same country and seem otherwise similar and so might face comparable international threat—can test the hypotheses here.

The key dependent variable subtracts the answer to the question about China's economy from that to the question about China's military power on this variable. This creates a seven-point scale of difference between the two identified levels of threat, where higher values indicate more perception of an economic rather than a military threat.

This subtraction of two categorical responses does limit this measure's precision. The variable's construction makes it less clear than might a direct comparison whether respondents felt one threat was more acute than the other. Respondents who think both the military power and the economic competition are very serious would show up as thinking them equally concerning even if they in fact judged one or the other sort of competition *more* very serious, for example, so that a value of 0 on this scale merely implies that the two types of threat were in the same category of seriousness—similar but not necessarily identical in degree. Perhaps predictably, a relatively large proportion of respondents are coded at that midpoint,

[3] Pew surveyed nineteen countries, but respondent sex is not available for Australia. Only eighteen are thus included in the reported results. These are Belgium (with 1,005 respondents surveyed), Canada (1,324), France (1,328), Germany (1,318), Greece (1,002), Hungary (1,041), Israel (1,000), Italy (1,306), Japan (1,154), Malaysia (1,003), Netherlands (1,011), Poland (1,043), Singapore (1,001), South Korea (1,008), Spain (1,024), Sweden (1,029), the United Kingdom (1,313), and the United States (3,581).

with around 48% of respondents giving identical answers to the two questions.[4] The imprecision might be expected to decrease effect sizes while increasing standard errors, biasing the results against showing significant correlations. Still, 32% of respondents unambiguously indicated that they thought China's military power the graver concern, while only 20% did so for the country's economic competition. Because answers to the question about economic competition constrained respondents' possible values for the difference between economic and military competition—someone who said that economic competition was a very serious problem could only rate military competition as equally or less of a problem, not more of a problem—regression models below control for respondents' answer to the economic-competition question.

Sex was coded as a binary variable by interviewer observation, except in the United States where it was self-reported. United States respondents could specify that they identified neither as 'a woman' or 'a man' but 'in some other way.' The 0.6% of the country's respondents who did so are not included in reported results for consistency with the binary coding used in other countries. In a simple bivariate comparison across all countries, women prove slightly more inclined than men are to say that China's military threat is the greater threat, with a difference of 0.05 on the seven-point scale (99% confidence interval [0.02, 0.09]).

Hypothesis 2's potentially moderating effect of salient military threats turns the focus to contextual variation across the countries surveyed. In particular, Japan and Malaysia had at the time of the survey active territorial disputes with China over islands in the East and South China Seas. These disputes, moreover, entangle with broader regional disagreements, as the islands are also implicated in Chinese rows with Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, further stoking the potential for China's military ascendance to provoke clashes. Citizens of these countries thus have reason to find Chinese

[4] The 48% figure applies whether or not the raw respondent counts are weighted by the survey weights. Other results are also very similar regardless of the use of survey weights; for simplicity, unweighted results are reported.

military power more directly salient than do residents of faraway locales such as Belgium or Sweden—East Asian conflicts certainly have the potential to cause disruption in Europe, but with less immediate prospect of the home country experiencing a direct military standoff with forces of China's military. Even as the rapid growth of China's economy in recent decades had posed economic challenges around the world, the degree of military threat was likely to be more acute for some countries than others, and Hypothesis 2 suggests that the degree of gender gap in opinions about what sort of threat China most posed would vary accordingly rather than being constant across this set of countries. The relevant variable thus interacts sex with being a resident of Japan or Malaysia.

In examining the relationship between sex and greater concern about China's military power rather than its economic competition, several control variables are worth including atop respondents' home country (which is especially crucial because the key survey questions for assessing threats ask about respondents' concern for that country specifically). Age is a foundational demographic source of foreign-policy attitudes, shaping personal experience with various international threats through knowledge of what crises one has lived through. Age can also affect exposure to economic competition. For example, pensioners' income is less likely to be directly tied to economic competition with China (Haas 2023). It is accounted for here using both a linear and a squared term to allow for the relationship's potentially varying over the life course.

Education, likewise, can provide information about international relations as well as experience estimating probabilistic threats, even as women and man in many societies both lack equal access to education and, as noted above, choose different topics of study when given the opportunity (Bayer and Rouse, 2016). Income also shows chronic gender gaps even as it directly shapes the pointedness of economic threats: higher income can provide more cushion against potential job loss (or mean job loss is particularly costly), even as China's abundance of less-skilled labor means that the country provides more acute economic competition to workers with relatively low pay (Toettoe and Turcsanyi, 2024). Both education and income pose difficulties for comparing across countries, as Pew uses categorical scales adapted to national conditions and educational systems. To standardize across these systems, the reported

measure is position in the respondent's home-country distribution, scaled from 0 to 1. For example, if a particular income category included 10% of a country's respondents, while 60% of the country's respondents were in lower-income categories, that category would be coded as an income position of 0.65: the bracket includes people from the 60th to the 70th percentile, with a median position at the 65th. Similarly, if one's education category included 20% of the country's respondents, while 15% were in less-educated categories, the education value would be coded as 0.25, the midpoint of the category's range from the 15th to the 35th percentile.

The survey also contains other attitudinal variables that may shape opinions about international threats, but raise questions of endogeneity as it is difficult to be sure which of two beliefs caused the other. In consequence, these are included in only some models, as a robustness test. One relatively fundamental belief is religiosity, which is gendered in most societies (Miller and Hoffmann, 1995) and has strong links to preferences about the international arena (Glazier, 2013; Petrikova, 2019). It is proxied in the survey with a binary variable indicating whether belief in God is necessary for morality. Another question asks about whether countries cooperate more because of their shared values or, instead, because of their shared interests in solving particular problems. Choosing the latter option suggests a more classically realist approach to international affairs. A third question asks about general favorability of attitudes towards China on a four-point scale. Finally, one question asks respondents about their position on a seven-point left-right ideological spectrum. (The United States' ideology question used a five-point scale, recoded in reported results with categories spaced evenly from 1.5 to 6.5 on other countries' 1-to-7 scale. Other rescalings give very similar results.) Responses for this left-right position are unavailable in three of the surveyed countries—Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore—so this last variable is added to models separately from the other attitudinal variables.

To first consider average sex differences across the eighteen countries, Table 1 brings these variables together in ordinary least-squares models. Across the models, women have a small but consistent tendency to express relatively greater concern about China's military power rather than its economic power than otherwise similar men do. This result is as Hypothesis 1a predicts, with a gender

gap of around 0.12 points on the seven-point scale. As a comparison, this estimated gender gap is roughly twice the size as the gap between those who express more and less realist views of international relations on the question about why countries cooperate, or half the effect of a one-point shift on the four-point scale about general favorability towards China. The predicted effects vary slightly in size with the inclusion of the other variables about foundational and foreign-policy attitudes in the models, but the addition of the control variables does not generally change the conclusions regarding women's relatively greater average concern than men about military issues.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that this effect might be moderated by residing in a country with ongoing territorial disputes with China, raising the specter of the heightened military salience that tamps down differences between women and men. As the countries without left-right ideological information include both[5] of the countries with active territorial disputes with China at the time of the survey, Table 1's third column cannot include a test for the effect of being in a country with such disputes. But in the table's other two columns, the variable interacting sex with such residence does indeed cut against the Hypothesis 1a gender gap; living in one of the countries with an active territorial dispute with China eliminates the estimated tendency for women to, more than men, describe the Chinese military threat as greater than its economic threat. In fact, women in the countries in disputes with China were relatively less, rather than more, likely to say that the military threat exceeded the economic one compared to what otherwise similar men said: the increased salience not merely neutralized the gender gap but reversed the estimated point effect, though not to the degree of attaining standard benchmarks of statistical significance. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction result graphically.

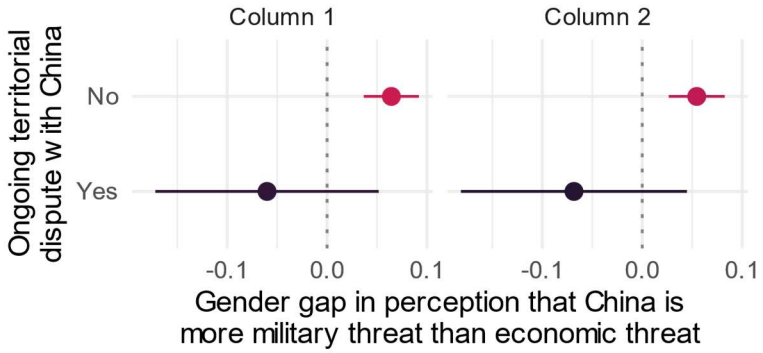
[5] South Korea, another country included Pew's sample, also had frosty relations with China over (among other issues) the hosting of United States' ballistic-missile defenses. Including it among the countries with disputes with China does not much change the results presented in Figure 1. Coding South Korea as a state with disputes with China also allows the use of all Table 1's models; the third model's estimates resemble the other two columns'. The Online Appendix's Table A1 reports this result.

Table 1. Relative importance of economic, rather than military, threat from China, 2022.

	1	2	3
Female	-0.114*	-0.105*	-0.118*
	(0.018)	(0.009)	(0.017)
Female × Ongoing disputes with China	0.173*	0.175*	
	(0.021)	(0.031)	
Age	0.002	0.002	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Age^2 (/100)	-0.005	-0.005	-0.005
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Education	0.048	0.060	0.048
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.044)
Income	0.001	0.026	0.001
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Concern about Chinese economic competition	-0.653*	-0.685*	-0.653*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Religiosity		-0.025	0.006
		(0.017)	(0.012)
Problems outweigh values in international cooperation		0.062*	-0.048*
		(0.009)	(0.010)
Unfavorable view of China		-0.182*	0.124*
		(0.015)	(0.007)
Right-leaning ideological position			0.005
			(0.004)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	18,995	18,156	14,786

Standard errors, clustered by country, in parentheses. * indicates two-tailed $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Gender gaps in relative perceptions of the degree of military and economic threat posed by China.



Points further to the right indicate that women weighed the relative military threat more than men did. Horizontal lines indicate 99% confidence interval.

Factors besides sex and territorial conflict also prove relevant for the relevant assessment of threats in Table 1. As concern about Chinese economic competition mechanically affects the potential difference with views of military competition, it is natural that people who in absolute terms express more concern about Chinese economic rivalry are less likely to express a yet-greater level of concern about China's military rise. Those who express less concern for shared values (and more concern with shared problems) between countries in international cooperation, or who are more unfavorable about China overall, tend to be relatively more concerned with the military competition. Less-educated and more right-leaning respondents also have point estimates suggesting more concern for military competition, though these are less robustly distinguishable from zero (and their predicted effect sizes are also modest, always being smaller than the predicted gender gap).

Country-level threats as perceived in the United States

As China is only one instance in which the public might weigh economic and military threats, other cases can usefully complement it to ensure gender gaps are not unique to this specific situation. The relative concern for different sorts of international threats, economic and military, are consequential for

many foreign-policy decisions and resource allocations. A country can build up its armed forces or weaponry, or direct the funding elsewhere; it can expand its efforts to create global institutions regulating various forms of economic flows. But often, policymaking—and events to which governments feel compelled to respond—involve not generic issue areas, but specific countries. As a corollary to this, people vary in their policy preferences even within a specific issue area depending on what other countries are involved; enthusiasm for trade agreements can depend on whether the partner countries are considered friendly and morally acceptable, for example (Bush and Prather, 2020; Evers and Schaaf, 2024; Spilker et al., 2016).

It seems likely that gender gaps in priorities and threat perceptions would carry over to attitudes about countries (Kleinberg and Fordham, 2010). Some countries, after all, present more threats in one realm rather than another, and even within the realm of economic or of military threats, women and men are likely to often respond to different concerns or details. Two foreign countries may for instance pose a competitive threat to an equal number of domestic jobs, but where one of the two mostly threatens domestic low-income employment while the other mostly threatens higher-income workers. With women's typically greater aversion to inequality (Kamas and Preston, 2015), they may, relative to men, be especially sensitive to the threat when it hits those who already had the lower incomes, and gender gaps in pay may also change the sexes' relative concern about such outcomes.

Thinking about countries, crucial as it is for real-world reactions to international threats, does not always present a neat divide between economic and military rivalry that the Pew questions about China distinguish. Any given country represents a mix of possible military and economic threats; the very fact that Pew's surveys asked about the perceived danger of China's military as well as its economic power exemplifies countries bundling military and economic rivalries. A country such as Iran, with a wide range of proxy armies plus a history of support for militant groups and terrorist actions abroad as well as substantial leverage over international oil markets, offers another case mixing security and economic threats. However, some countries still have a profile that gives them more potential to cause harm in security issues, while others have relatively more willingness and ability to project economic power.

These potential threats additionally vary by target: a regional power may be a military threat for its neighbors but irrelevant to those farther away, just as a country might be a complementary trade partner to most of the world but an intense economic rival of a country with a similar industrial profile.

The context where information about country-level threats is available therefore matters. In this case, analyses will draw on 2020 and 2024 iterations of the American National Election Studies (American National Election Studies 2022, 2025). The survey asked respondents about the level of threat posed by China, Iran, Japan, Mexico and Russia, plus Germany in 2020 and Israel in 2024. For each of the countries, the survey asked 'How much is [country name] a threat to the United States?' with five response options: 'Not at all,' 'A little,' 'A moderate amount,' 'A lot,' and 'A great deal.'[6]

No objective indicator establishes how large a threat these countries posed to the United States in either the military or the economic realm. As one mark of ambiguity, scholars have formulated many indices of threat (Trubowitz and Watanabe, 2021), but these are only rarely specific to target country and generally do not distinguish military and economic threat so they do not operationalize the dimensions of threat sought here. The lack of clarity about the level of threat is, after all, a key reason why perceptions vary, and threat perceptions may derive from unrelated matters such as feelings of cultural distance even where objective risks could be identified (Sulfaro and Crislip, 1997). Still, those indices provide a qualitative sense that the military threat from Japan and Germany is relatively low, even as their relatively large, export-driven economies can pose a threat of disruption to businesses and industries in the United States: the countries are mostly economic threats to the United States. Hypothesis 1a thus suggests women might see them less as threats than men do, while Hypothesis 1b would suggest women might see them as relatively threatening.

The other countries asked about, by contrast, offer a more mixed set of threats, with even a country such as Mexico posing potential security risks through its loss of control of state institutions to criminal cartels (Kan, 2012). Not only does this mark Germany and Japan as particularly economic-

[6] These choices were presented in order, so that 'A lot' was clearly intended as less than 'A great deal.'

skewing in their threats, it also suggests those two countries particularly lack salient military threats of the sort that might trigger Hypothesis 2's moderation of gender gaps. The hypothesis would tend to lead to the expectation of relatively large gender gaps regarding Germany and Japan, whether that gap is along the lines of Hypothesis 1a or Hypothesis 1b.

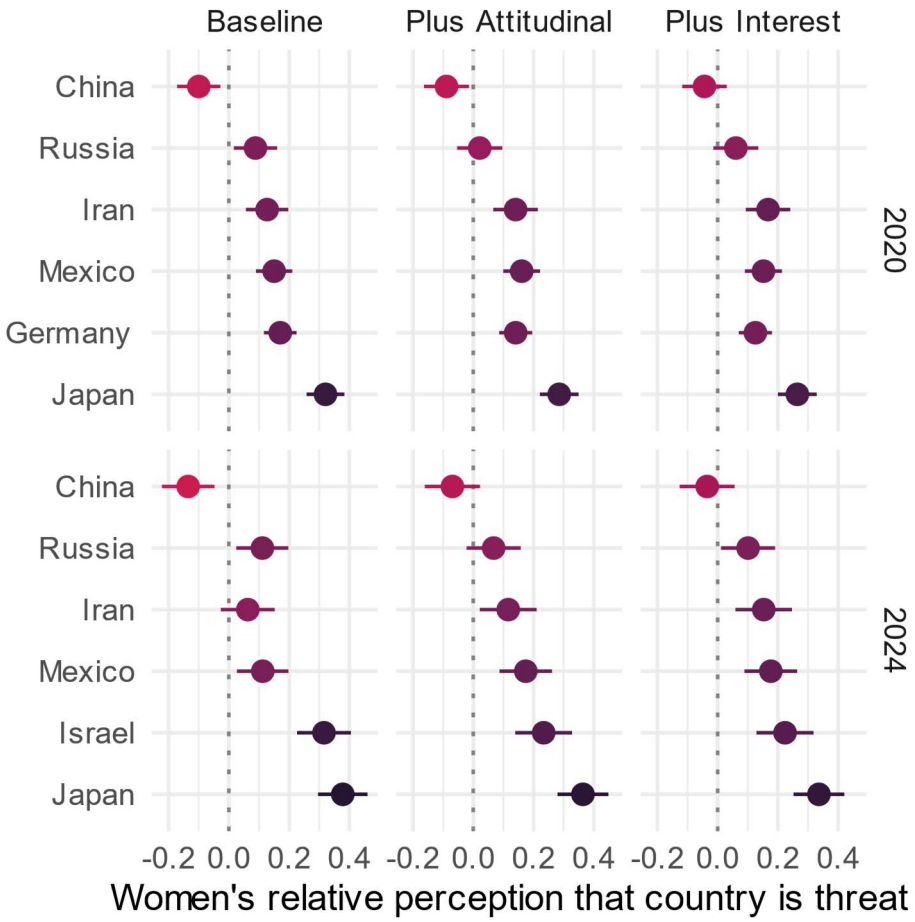
To examine gender gaps in the US respondents' perceptions of threats of the various countries, the models echo those used in Table 1. Alongside self-reported sex, the baseline models control for age in years and age squared (although the survey censors ages at 80), education (on a five-point scale), and income (on a twenty-two-point scale). A further model adds several variables relating to other political attitudes, including religiosity (on a five-point scale) and ideology (on a seven-point scale). In the context of the United States in the 2020s, political views—and perceptions of foreign threats in particular—are inextricably linked to partisanship (Myrick, 2021) and more specifically attitudes to Donald Trump (Blum and Parker, 2019), so this model additionally includes a seven-point positioning on party identification (from 'strong Democrat' to 'strong Republican'; those who identify with a minor party are placed at the middle of the scale, alongside pure independents) and a feeling thermometer about Donald Trump (on a 0-to-100 scale).

Finally, the models also add a control for stated level of interest in politics, which was not asked about in the cross-national Pew survey. Women often express lower levels of generic political interest (Ojeda et al., 2023; Verba et al., 1997), but they are at least as interested as men are when asked about many specific political issues (Ferrin et al., 2020; Kraft and Dolan, 2023; Tormos and Verge, 2022). Those who are interested in relevant questions may seek out exposure to media and personal interactions about politics, gaining information—accurate or otherwise—about how much threat that other countries pose. But this poses endogeneity risks if fear of threats is what motivates an interest in politics, so the relevant variable, a four-point scale about how interested respondents are in politics, is only added to the models as a separate robustness test.

Figure 2 summarizes the models' estimated gender gaps in perceived threat in 2020 (top panel) and 2024 (bottom panel). Points further to the right indicate women on average perceive greater threat

from the associated country than men do. The left panels of the figure only control for basic demographics, the middle adds the various attitudinal variables, and the rightmost estimates further adds the measures of interest in politics. Table A2 of the Online Appendix includes the full tables.

Figure 2. Gender gaps in perceptions of what countries pose threats to the United States, 2020 (top panel) and 2024 (bottom panel).



Horizontal lines indicate 99% confidence intervals.

Most cases do see a clear gender gap in threat perception, with women's responses usually suggesting that the country poses a greater threat than men's responses do. But this is not always the case; women do not indiscriminately report equally greater threats across the board. Most notably, the point estimates for the Chinese threat are consistently greater among men than among women, reversing the

direction of the usual gender gap, though this is not always distinguishable from zero with high levels of statistical confidence. The reversal between China and most other countries suggests gender gaps in threat perception are not merely machismo causing men to avoid admitting any feeling of threat, since the Chinese case indicates that men are willing to state relatively high threat levels. Even aside from this outright reversal, the countries vary in their gender gaps.

Strikingly, translating the hypotheses about economic rather than military threats to the country cases, suggesting that Germany and Japan had a mix of potential threat that was most economic, saw the opposite relationship between this economic emphasis and sex as did the results from the Pew survey. To the extent perceiving Germany and Japan as threats reflects particular focus on economic issues, Figure 2's result is along the lines of Hypothesis 1b rather than Hypothesis 1a as seen in Table 1. Women especially tend to characterize Japan as a greater threat than men do, with a gender gap of around a quarter to two fifths of a point on the five-point scale. Such a pattern does match the suggested implication of Hypothesis 2 that Japan might as a low-salience security threat see relatively large gender gaps.

A post hoc glance at the results suggests that factors such as the conventional wisdom about which countries are threats and rivals to the United States might matter more for the patterns in Figure 2. China was widely considered the major geopolitical rival power to the United States, especially in the 2020 survey that pre-dated Russia's 2022 intensification of its invasion of Ukraine, while Russia and Iran also were notable geopolitical and security rivals in some world regions. Thus the countries that men were especially apt to find relatively more threatening tended to be those that posed this sort of rivalry. Japan, Israel, and Germany, the countries from which women's threat perception most exceeded that of men's, more often are taken as threatening foes than as allies or partners.

This seeming negative correlation between the overall threat level and the degree to which women perceive a country as a greater threat than men do could result if women simply tended to give answers closer to the middle of the scale on all questions, perhaps because they are socialized not to express too strong of opinions or as a risk-averse hedge against any risk of being too far wrong. While

some studies have cast doubt in other issue areas on men more frequently providing bullish, extreme responses (e.g., Bachman and O'Malley, 1984, De Jong et al., 2008, Greenleaf, 1992), the pattern might nevertheless emerge in the foreign-policy context. As a simple test, consider the answers at either extreme of the scale, saying a given country was 'not at all' a threat to the United States (the lowest possible answer) or 'a great deal' of a threat (the highest). If women were relatively averse to extreme answers, we might expect a lower proportion of them than of men to select either of these choices. That is true for Mexico, Germany, and Japan and marginally so for China, but there is no such relationship for Iran—and for Russia, women are significantly more likely to give an extreme response than men are. While a tendency for women to avoid extreme answers may contribute to the pattern shown in Figure 2, it does not seem to completely drive the cross-country variation.

Despite the results' support for Hypothesis 1b rather than 1a pulling against the earlier results, the country-level outcomes do show further evidence that gender gaps in threat perception can be large and that they vary in social-scientifically interesting ways. Moreover, American National Election Studies responses do not universally argue against Hypothesis 1a. Half the participants in the 1990 survey were asked "Which would you say is a bigger threat to the national security of the United States, the military power of the Soviet Union or the economic power of Japan?" This question presents another military versus economic contrast, albeit one potentially conflated with broader perceptions of the USSR and Japan. Once again, a clear gender gap appears along the lines of Hypothesis 1a: among respondents who expressed an opinion that one threat was larger than the other, 30% of women said the Soviet threat was greater where only 19% of men did. The 99% confidence interval on that 11 percentage-point difference in opinion ranges from 4 to 19 percentage points of gender gap on the question. (The Online Appendix's Table A3 provides more information about this 1990 survey, showing that this observed gender gap is robust to the inclusion of control variables.)

Conclusion

Women and men appear to differ in how they rate the severity of threats in the international arena. Gender gaps potentially separate evaluations of military and economic threats. Often in the cases examined here, women tended to give responses suggesting a relatively greater concern for military rather than economic threats—but this divide depended on the context. Women's general tendency to see China more of a threat in the military domain than do otherwise similar men (at least in the mostly rich countries surveyed by Pew) does not, for example, appear to carry over to countries with which China has active territorial disputes. Gender gaps also appear in assessing threats from different countries, at least among respondents in the United States, though in this case the countries whose threat mix leans towards the economic are seen as relatively concerning by women rather than men.

These disparate results highlight the need for further research about gender and threat perception, both on the theory of how women and men among the public formulate their assessments of international threats and on the empirical evidence. Alternative theories might explore how having, on average, access to less information about the international economy may make women relatively less sensitive to the level of economic threat a foreign country poses, for example. And the various samples examined here concentrated on middle- and high-income countries, but the developing world is likely to have distinctive attitudes towards the international arena, including in gender gaps (Karreth and Karreth, 2025). Expanding the set of cases to other countries and eras, with their distinct patterns of gender relations and overseas threats, can help better illuminate what threats women and men are concerned about, and why they feel that way.

More broadly, such analyses, like this one, could help bring to the fore questions about gender differences in prioritizing different international issues, not just the content of preferences about those issues. Understanding what women and men interpret as most menacing in global affairs is an important step in understanding both gender's role in international relations and public attitudes about security and the world economy.

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