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Public perceptions of defence policy in times of crisis: evidence from France during the Ukraine war

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Ukraine war, a critical focusing event within the broader context of rising tensions between Russia and the West, influenced public perceptions of defence policy in France. Defence issues in France are typically characterised by a permissive consensus, with limited public scrutiny outside moments of crisis. Using three-wave survey data (July 2021, March 2022, and July 2022), we analyse shifts in public opinion on key defence dimensions, including military spending, international cooperation, and high-intensity combat operations. Employing regression and cluster analyses, we assess both the stability of defence-related concerns and the impact of issue attributes – emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness – on perceived importance over time. Our findings reveal that the Ukraine war did not fundamentally alter the structure of public opinion on defence issues. Instead, the relative influence of concreteness and obtrusiveness increased over time, suggesting a deliberative rather than a reactive public response. These results challenge the assumption that crises inherently destabilise public opinion and highlight the resilience of defence attitudes. Our study thus underscores the need for policymakers to account for longer-term public concerns rather than relying solely on crisis-driven shifts when shaping defence policy.


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KEYWORDS Public opinion; defence policy; issue attributes; focusing events; Ukraine war; crisis-driven policymaking

Introduction

Crises can dramatically shift the political landscape, forcing policymakers to navigate sudden and intense public pressure (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993;

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Birkland, 1997; Kingdon, 1984). In such moments, public opinion has the power to reshape agendas and drive policy changes, especially in areas that are typically distant from everyday concerns (Baum & Potter, 2008; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Zaller, 1992). Defence policy is one such issue. It is generally perceived as abstract, unobtrusive and low-salience, dominated by experts and largely insulated from public debate (Eichenberg, 1989; Everts & Isernia, 2003; Holsti, 2004; Mayer & Khademan, 1996). In most cases, citizens defer to elite decision-making, showing little sustained engagement with defence matters. However, this detachment is not permanent. 'Focusing events' – unexpected crises that capture the public's attention – can abruptly shift defence from a low-salience, expert-driven issue to one that dominates public and media discourse, placing new pressures on policymakers (Birkland, 1997, 2004; Kingdon, 1984).

The war in Ukraine, which began in early 2022, represents such a critical focusing event while also being part of a broader pattern of escalating tensions between Russia and the West – a trend that has been unfolding since the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. This ongoing geopolitical context has gradually shaped European security concerns, with the Ukraine war serving as a catalyst that has dramatically intensified public awareness of and media attention on defence across Europe (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022; Fernández *et al.*, 2023; Parizek, 2023). Yet, two key questions arise: First, how do external events like the war in Ukraine shape public perceptions of defence? Do defence issues become more important, concrete, or obtrusive in the public eye? Second, do these shifts in perception have lasting effects, or are they merely temporary, emotion-driven reactions to immediate crises? While existing research has shown that issue attributes such as concreteness and obtrusiveness help explain why some issues resonate more strongly with the public than others (Soroka, 2002; Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Zucker, 1978), their application to defence policy remains largely underexplored. This is because defence is often framed as an abstract and unobtrusive policy area and rarely perceived as directly relevant to citizens' everyday lives – unless a crisis occurs. Moreover, although scholars have analysed how public opinion on defence evolves following major crises (e.g., Chan & Safran, 2006; Clements, 2013; Stuchlík, 2005), most studies focus on short-term reactions or isolated aspects of defence policy, such as the use of force or military interventions, rather than examining how crises reshape public perceptions of defence as a policy area. This leaves a critical gap: Do crises fundamentally reshape public perceptions of defence, or are these shifts temporary? And if public attention increases, do these changes affect only certain aspects of defence policy, such as military spending or international cooperation, or do they signal a broader transformation?

Our study seeks to address this gap by examining how rising tensions with Russia, particularly the war in Ukraine, have influenced public perceptions of defence policy in France over time, specifically in terms of salience (importance) and issue attributes. Unlike prior research that tends to treat defence as a monolithic domain, we recognise its multidimensional nature, encompassing issues ranging from arms procurement to international military cooperation (Richter, 2022). By analysing the perceived importance of various defence topics and examining how this importance is influenced by issue attributes – such as emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness – our study offers a more nuanced understanding of how crises impact public opinion and policymaking.

France provides an ideal case for exploring these dynamics. With its emphasis on strategic autonomy and a strong military tradition, France's defence policy has typically been shaped by elite decision-making and underpinned by what is termed a 'permissive democratic constraint' (La Balme, 2000). Historically, French citizens have largely deferred to political elites on matters of national security, contributing to a stable environment where defence issues remain insulated from intense public scrutiny. However, the Ukraine war has disrupted this equilibrium, drawing new public engagement to traditionally low-salience topics. By analysing public opinion data collected before the war (July 2021), at its onset (March 2022), and four months into the conflict (July 2022), we capture how a focusing event like the Ukraine war affects perceptions across various dimensions of defence policy.

Our findings suggest that while the Ukraine war heightened emotional responses and increased public attention to defence issues, it did not fundamentally alter the structure of public opinion in France. Instead, the French public's underlying defence priorities remained remarkably stable, providing policymakers with a steady basis for decision-making, even in times of crisis. This challenges assumptions that crises necessarily destabilise public attitudes and suggests that issue attributes like concreteness and obtrusiveness do not permanently shift in response to external events. By bridging issue attribute theory with research on crisis-driven policymaking, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of how public opinion responds to geopolitical shocks. These findings suggest that policymakers should account for the relative stability of defence attitudes even in the face of crisis when shaping long-term strategic decisions.

This paper proceeds as follows: The next section reviews the literature on salience and issue attributes, highlighting how they shape defence policy perception and agenda-setting. We then present our methodology, detailing the research design, the survey methodology, and analytical techniques. The results section outlines findings from the three waves of data collection, illustrating how French public opinion on defence remained relatively stable, despite an initial surge in emotional engagement due to the Ukraine war.

Finally, the discussion examines the implications of our findings for understanding the dynamics of public opinion during crises and their potential impact on defence policymaking.

Public opinion and defence policy: the impact of crisis-induced perceptions on policymaking

Public opinion and defence policy

Defence policy encompasses a broad spectrum of issues aimed at safeguarding national security, including military recruitment, procurement, strategic operations, and international cooperation. By translating a government's foreign policy objectives into military terms, defence policy extends into numerous domains, each with varying degrees of public relevance and awareness (Richter, 2022). While this multidimensional scope might seem to invite broad public engagement, defence policy is typically perceived as an elite, specialised domain, distant from everyday concerns due to its technical complexity and limited direct relevance to daily life (Mayer & Khademian, 1996, pp. 181–182). Consequently, the field of defence policy generally falls under the category of low-salience issues, where the public tends to show minimal engagement, providing policymakers with substantial leeway in decision-making.

This tendency for public disengagement in defence matters has been framed by scholars as a permissive consensus, a concept introduced by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970). Under this consensus, the public largely defers to the expertise and authority of political and military elites, trusting that defence policies will be managed with limited direct input from the average citizen. This model creates a stable policy environment in which defence decisions can proceed with minimal public scrutiny, provided there are no immediate threats or crises. The consensus, however, is conditional; it holds only as long as defence issues are perceived as abstract or distant. When events generate a perceived direct threat, public deference to elites can shift, bringing defence issues into the public discourse and allowing them to gain significant traction (Eichenberg, 1989).

Issue attributes and public perceptions of defence

While public opinion research has long emphasised salience – the degree to which an issue is perceived as important (Soroka, 2003) – it is also shaped by issue attributes, which determine how issues resonate with the public (Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Zucker, 1978). Scholars have identified two key attributes that influence public engagement: obtrusiveness and concreteness.

Obtrusiveness refers to how directly individuals experience an issue. Zucker's (1978) obtrusiveness hypothesis argues that people rely less on media coverage for issues they experience directly, such as unemployment, and more for unobtrusive issues, like pollution. Defence is traditionally an unobtrusive policy area, as most citizens have little direct contact with military affairs. Consequently, public perceptions of defence are heavily mediated by political and media discourse.

Concreteness reflects how tangible an issue is. Research suggests that abstract issues are less susceptible to media framing than concrete issues, as the latter are easier for the public to grasp and relate to (Yagade & Dozier, 1990). Defence issues vary in their level of concreteness – some aspects, such as military doctrines, may appear highly abstract, whereas others, like direct military engagements, are more tangible, shaping how the public interacts with different dimensions of defence policy (Richter, 2022).

Despite the significance of these attributes, their role in shaping defence perceptions remains underexplored. Most studies on public opinion and defence focus on changes in the perceived importance (salience) of issues during crises (Chan & Safran, 2006; Clements, 2013) without addressing how specific characteristics of these issues influence public perceptions.

Public opinion in times of crisis: the role of emotions and media coverage

While defence policy covers a wide array of issues, research on public opinion in this field has largely focused on moments of heightened attention, such as troop deployments, wars, or other threats to national security. These critical junctures often serve as focusing events, as described by Kingdon (1984) and Birkland (1997, 2004), bringing previously low-salience issues to the forefront of public consciousness by generating high levels of media attention and exposing policy gaps. For instance, following 9/11, public opinion in the United States shifted sharply in favour of more stringent security policies, reflecting the public's heightened concern and demand for immediate action.

The Ukraine war, which began in early 2022, serves as a recent example of a focusing event that has amplified defence concerns across Europe and is part of a broader pattern of escalating tensions between Russia and the West (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022; Fernández *et al.*, 2023; Parizek, 2023). As a conflict with direct geopolitical implications for European security, it has fostered strong emotional responses and a sense of urgency, particularly in countries like France where defence issues have traditionally prompted limited public debate. In such moments, defence issues – usually distant from everyday life – become more relevant, generating heightened public support and engagement (Gramlich, 2023; Mader, 2024).

Crises not only evoke increased engagement with defence issues but also amplify emotions like fear, anger, and anxiety, which shape how people perceive and prioritise policy responses (Huddy *et al.*, 2007). Studies indicate that anxiety can make individuals more risk-averse, often heightening support for precautionary measures (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader *et al.*, 2008). For instance, research following 9/11 found that anger was associated with support for vengeful policies, while fear encouraged backing for defensive precautionary measures (Lerner *et al.*, 2003). This distinction illustrates how, during crises, different emotions channel public opinion toward particular types of policy responses (Hirsch-Hoefler *et al.*, 2016).

The media further amplifies these emotions, shaping the public's response during crises. Wood and Peake (1998), for example, demonstrate how foreign policy concerns become salient through intensified media coverage, as was evident during the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Bosnian war. Similarly, during the Gulf War, media coverage strongly influenced public opinion by framing the conflict as a pressing national issue, thereby increasing public concern and shaping opinions on policy priorities (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). This influence is evident across a range of crisis contexts (Birkland, 2004; Brouard *et al.*, 2018; Kent, 2006; Mazarr, 2007), where media channels not only provide information but also offer cues on how the public should feel, often intensifying anxiety or urgency around defence issues. The Ukraine war has followed a similar pattern, with extensive media coverage playing a key role in shaping public opinion on defence. The conflict, reflecting long-standing security concerns regarding Russian military assertiveness, has been framed as a defining geopolitical crisis, influencing public concern about military readiness, security cooperation, and broader strategic threats (de Vries & Hoffmann, 2022; Fernández *et al.*, 2023).

Bridging the gap: the need for a multidimensional approach to defence perceptions

A critical gap in the literature on public opinion and defence policy lies in the limited exploration of how crises affect issue perception. While previous research has examined how defence becomes more salient in times of war, there is little understanding of whether crises alter how defence issues are perceived – for instance, whether they become more concrete, obtrusive, or emotionally charged over time.

In addition, most existing research captures immediate public reactions to crises – typically focusing on military interventions or sudden escalations in conflict. These studies often look at peak moments of heightened concern, offering only a snapshot of sentiment. Although this approach provides valuable insights into short-term reactions, it tends to overlook how public engagement with different aspects of defence policy evolves or stabilises

over time. Furthermore, the role of emotions in shaping issue prioritisation during crises remains underexplored. While crises may amplify emotional responses initially, little is known about how such emotions influence or potentially diminish the salience of specific defence topics as the crisis unfolds.

This study seeks to address this gap by integrating issue attributes into the study of public opinion on defence. Specifically, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1: The perceived importance (salience) of defence issues is associated with their perceived concreteness, obtrusiveness, and emotional intensity.
- H2: The Ukraine war influenced the relative importance of these attributes in shaping the perceived salience of defence issues.
- H3: The Ukraine war did not alter the overall structure of attitudes toward defence issues but instead affected the perception of specific issues.

By incorporating salience theory, issue attributes, and crisis-driven public opinion research, this study provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how public attitudes toward defence evolve in response to geopolitical shocks.

Methodology

Research design: case and issue selection

Case selection

France is an ideal case study for examining public perceptions of defence policy, particularly because of the longstanding permissive consensus that characterises the French public's attitude toward defence issues. Guided by a commitment to strategic autonomy and a global military role, France's defence policy includes substantial investments in defence spending, nuclear deterrence, and international operations. The country maintains a significant military presence worldwide, engaging in counter-terrorism operations in Africa, peacekeeping, and humanitarian missions (Richter & Foucault, 2021). These robust defence commitments are met with high levels of public trust in both the government's handling of defence policy and in the armed forces, as regularly shown in opinion surveys.¹ This trust underscores a stable permissive consensus, which focusing events like the Ukraine war, however, can challenge by drawing heightened public awareness and emotional engagement with defence issues.

Issue selection

For a comprehensive analysis of defence perceptions, we included a diverse set of 20 defence-related issues, encompassing multiple dimensions of

defence policy, such as strategic planning, spending, recruitment, military operations and troop deployment, procurement, and cooperation (Richter *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, five non-defence issues from the domains of education and environmental policy were included as a control. These non-defence issues were selected to mirror some of the defence topics, allowing us to assess whether observed shifts in public opinion during the Ukraine war were unique to defence or part of broader changes in public concern (e.g., with regard to spending priorities). An overview of the issues included in our study can be found in [Table 1](#).

Survey design: measurement, sampling and data collection

Measurement

In each of the three survey waves, participants evaluated both defence and non-defence issues based on their perceived importance and three key attributes: emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness.² Obtrusiveness gauges how directly noticeable or personally relevant an issue feels in daily

Table 1. Issues included in the study.

Policy issue	Policy category
The actions of the Ministry of Defence in the field of cybersecurity	Strategic thought
The strategic interests of France in Africa	Strategic thought
Diplomatic and military relations with Russia	Strategic thought
Public spending on defence	Defence budget
The costs of procuring and maintaining the equipment of the armed forces	Defence budget
The pay and benefits of armed forces personnel	Defence budget
The financial costs of deploying troops abroad	Defence budget
The armed forces as an employer	Armed forces
The deployment conditions of the armed forces abroad	Armed forces
National military service	Armed forces
The preservation of a national defence industry	Defence equipment
Arms trade (including arms export and import)	Defence equipment
Nuclear deterrence	Defence equipment
High-intensity combat operations of the armed forces	Missions and operations of the armed forces
Low-intensity humanitarian and disaster-relief missions of the armed forces	Missions and operations of the armed forces
Civilian casualties during operations	Missions and operations of the armed forces
Military casualties during operations	Missions and operations of the armed forces
Cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)	Defence cooperation
Defence cooperation within the United Nations (UN)	Defence cooperation
European defence cooperation	Defence cooperation
Public spending on education	Education
The pay and benefits of teachers	Education
Educational inequalities	Education
Public spending on the environment	Environment
Waste management and recycling	Environment

life, concreteness reflects perceived tangibility, and emotional intensity captures the strength of feelings the issue elicits.

Participants rated each issue on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 'not at all' to 'very', for both perceived importance and each attribute. Issue order and scale presentation were randomised to minimise response bias, enabling a systematic comparison of public perceptions across defence and non-defence issues over time.

Sampling and data collection

Data for this study were collected through online surveys administered to representative samples of the French population.³ Participants were selected using the quota method to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, education level, and geographical location (Supplementary Table 1; Data and analysis scripts are accessible on https://osf.io/zrsyq/?view_only=dfb885d7570c45a0b36d4baaa40f4798).⁴ This approach allowed us to obtain samples that reflect the demographic composition of the broader French population, thereby providing robust data for analysing public perceptions.

The first wave, conducted in July 2021, served as a baseline to capture perceptions of defence and non-defence issues during a period of relative stability, despite the ongoing low-intensity conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The second wave, collected in March 2022, provided insight into the immediate public response to the Ukraine war. The third wave, conducted in July 2022, elucidated whether these shifts persisted or returned to pre-war levels. Collecting data across these three waves allowed us to assess the stability and volatility of public perceptions over time. While this timeframe of just over a year is not strictly longitudinal, it enables us to explore meaningful shifts in public perception at critical stages: before the major escalation, at its onset, and as it progressed.

Data processing and standardisation

We subset the data by wave (Wave 1: July 2021, Wave 2: March 2022, and Wave 3: July 2022) and calculated weighted means to summarise each issue's attribute ratings within each wave, applying population-weighted averages to ensure representative findings. To achieve consistent clustering across waves, we standardised the data, scaling each attribute within each wave.

Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics

We first computed descriptive statistics for each item, scale, and wave. This included the weighted average ratings, response range, standard deviations,

and the number of 'I do not know that this topic refers to' responses (Supplementary Table 1, Supplementary Figures 1–3).

Determinants of perceived issue importance

To identify factors influencing public perceptions of issue importance, we analysed how emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness predicted each issue's perceived importance across waves. Using linear mixed-effects models, we incorporated both individual and issue-specific random effects to capture variations in perceived importance over time and assess the influence of wave-specific factors and the defence-related issues.

In these models, we set perceived importance as the dependent variable and included emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness as independent variables. We added wave and issue type (defence vs. non-defence) as categorical variables to explore interactions among these factors. This setup allowed us to determine the contribution of each attribute (emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness) to perceived importance and observe whether these effects changed across waves.

By incorporating interaction effects between waves, issue type, and the three issue attributes, we aimed to capture shifts in perception over time. We accounted for individual and issue-specific variations by including random effects for both participant ID and issue, which ensures findings reflect these differences.

Cluster analyses

To understand the structure of public perceptions, we then conducted cluster analyses on the weighted average ratings for the perceived importance and the attributes of each defence issue, allowing us to identify specific patterns of association between importance and the issue attributes that may be less visible or concealed in our regression analyses.

Clustering by wave. We conducted separate cluster analyses for each wave to capture the groupings of issues based on attribute profiles. Using the elbow method⁵, we identified the optimal number of clusters and applied k-means clustering⁶ ($k=4$) to group issues based on standardised scores for importance, emotional intensity, concreteness and obtrusiveness (see Supplementary Figures 4–6).

Recoding and consistency of clusters. Once initial clusters were identified, we manually recoded them based on observed patterns in attributes to maintain consistency across waves. For instance, clusters in Wave 1 were adjusted to align with similar groupings in Waves 2 and 3. This recoding ensured that shifts in cluster membership reflected meaningful changes in public perception rather than random variation.

Shifts across waves. To examine whether attribute ratings changed significantly over time within clusters, we conducted paired t-tests. For each cluster,

we compared attributes across waves (e.g., Wave 1 vs. Wave 2, Wave 1 vs. Wave 3, and Wave 2 vs. Wave 3) to detect statistically significant shifts. These tests provided insights into whether public perception of specific clusters experienced notable changes following the onset of the Ukraine war and in subsequent months.

Longitudinal comparison of clusters. To analyse cluster stability and inter-wave changes, we merged cluster data across waves for a comprehensive temporal analysis. Calculating cluster means and standard deviations of attributes allowed us to observe patterns of stability and change, capturing both immediate and sustained responses to the war in Ukraine.

Results

Diminishing role of emotional intensity over time

To assess how emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness influenced the perceived importance of defence and non-defence issues over time, we conducted regression analyses across the three survey waves. As Table 2 shows, in Wave 1, all three attributes collectively shaped public opinion prior to the war, suggesting that, initially, people's perceptions were influenced by how emotionally engaging, tangible, and noticeable the issues were in daily life (Emotional intensity: $b = 0.2303$, $p < 2e-16$; Concreteness: $b = 0.1888$, $p < 2e-16$; Obtrusiveness: $b = 0.2267$, $p < 2e-16$). Between Waves 1 and 2, the effect of these attributes remained largely stable, as indicated by the non-significant interaction terms between each attribute and Wave 2 (all p -s $> .250$). This stability suggests that all three attributes continued to shape public opinion early in the war, just as they did before its onset.

However, by Wave 3, the role of emotional intensity had diminished significantly ($b = -0.0338$, $p = 0.00049$), indicating that the public's reliance on emotional engagement when evaluating issue importance had decreased

Table 2. Regression analysis of emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness on perceived issue importance across waves.

Coefficients	$b \pm SE$	p
(Intercept)	1.81 ± 0.05	$< 2e-16$ ***
Emotional intensity	0.23 ± 0.01	$< 2e-16$ ***
Concreteness	0.19 ± 0.01	$< 2e-16$ ***
Obtrusiveness	0.23 ± 0.01	$< 2e-16$ ***
Wave 2	0.05 ± 0.05	> 0.250
Wave 3	0.04 ± 0.05	> 0.250
Emotional intensity: Wave 2	-0.01 ± 0.01	> 0.250
Emotional intensity: Wave 3	-0.03 ± 0.01	0.001 ***
Concreteness: Wave 2	-0.01 ± 0.01	> 0.250
Concreteness: Wave 3	0.03 ± 0.01	0.009 **
Obtrusiveness: Wave 2	-0.00 ± 0.01	> 0.250
Obtrusiveness: Wave 3	-0.02 ± 0.01	0.119

as they became more accustomed to the ongoing crisis. Robustness-check analyses comparing defence and non-defence issues (education and environment-related issues) confirmed that this effect was specific to defence issues (Supplementary Table 2). This shift suggests that the public's focus became more balanced, with tangible aspects of defence issues gaining prominence alongside emotional intensity. The findings indicate that, in the context of an ongoing crisis, the public began assessing defence issues through a less emotion-guided approach, as practical implications became more relevant.

Stability in issue clustering despite crisis

Although regression analyses help explain how issue attributes relate to their perceived importance globally, they do not account for the specific organisation of these perceptions. In particular, they do not allow to distinguish between scenarios where perceived importance and issue attributes always covary (i.e., important issues are consistently rated high on all three dimensions) from those where some issues are perceived as high on one or two dimensions (e.g., importance and emotional intensity) but lower on others (e.g., concreteness and obtrusiveness), indicating that certain attributes may have specific consequences.

To understand the broader structure of public perceptions and identify underlying patterns of association between importance and emotional intensity – patterns that may not be fully captured in our regression analyses – we conducted cluster analyses on perceived importance, emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness across all survey waves. Despite the heightened public attention triggered by the Ukraine war, the clustering structure of issues remained remarkably stable, with issues consistently grouping into four main clusters across all waves: 'Very low on all dimensions' (Cluster 1), 'Low on all dimensions' (Cluster 2), 'Medium on all dimensions' (Cluster 3), and 'High on all dimensions' (Cluster 4; Supplementary Tables 3–5).

Crucially, our cluster analysis revealed a covariation between an issue's perceived importance and the three attributes (emotional intensity, concreteness and obtrusiveness). No specific cluster of issues emerged with higher ratings on some dimensions and lower ratings on others. When applied to perceptions before the onset of the Ukraine war, this finding suggests that respondents held a holistic perception of defence issues, in which emotional intensity, concreteness and obtrusiveness were strongly associated.

This result also informs us about how the war in Ukraine, as an acute crisis, impacted public perceptions. Our findings first suggest that respondents maintained a coherent perception of defence issues, with a strong covariation between perceived importance and issue attributes. More importantly, this pattern remained unchanged after the war's onset, indicating that even during a crisis, no single issue attribute (e.g., emotional intensity) was

sufficient to drive heightened perceived importance while other attributes remained low.

Evolution of issue clusters over time

To complement this global analysis, we examined how individual issues were classified within clusters from Wave 1 (July 2021, before the Ukraine war) through Wave 3 (July 2022, four months into the war), as shown in [Table 3](#). Among the 20 defence issues analysed, 14 remained in the same clusters across all three waves, suggesting that the war only had a limited impact on public perceptions of most issues.

Among the issues that shifted between clusters, 5 out of 6 showed only modest movements, (temporarily) transitioning to adjacent clusters. This suggests subtle adjustments in public focus as the conflict progressed, including increased perceived importance for NATO cooperation and nuclear deterrence. Conversely, the perceived importance of the armed forces as an employer declined. Notably, two issues – European defence cooperation and the pay and benefits of armed forces personnel – initially changed clusters after the onset of the war, becoming more and less important, respectively, before returning to their original cluster four months later.

Only one issue exhibited more substantial movements across clusters, highlighting a notable evolution in public perception: diplomatic and military

Table 3. Stability and change in defence issue clusters across wave.

Issue	Cluster Wave 1	Cluster Wave 2	Cluster Wave 3
Public spending on defence	3	3	3
The costs of procuring and maintaining the equipment for the armed forces	2	2	2
The pay and benefits of armed forces personnel	2	1	2
The financial costs of deploying troops abroad	2	2	2
Cooperation within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)	1	2	2
Defence cooperation within the United Nations (UN)	2	2	2
European defence cooperation	2	3	2
The preservation of a national defence industry	3	3	3
Arms trade (including arms export and import)	1	1	1
Nuclear deterrence	3	4	4
High-intensity combat operations of the armed forces	2	2	2
Low-intensity humanitarian missions and disaster-relief activities of the armed forces	4	4	4
Civilian casualties during operations	4	4	4
Military casualties during operations	4	4	4
The armed forces as an employer	2	1	1
The deployment conditions of the armed forces abroad	2	2	2
National military service	2	2	2
The actions of the Ministry of Defence in the field of cybersecurity	3	3	3
The strategic interests of France in Africa	1	1	1
Diplomatic and military relations with Russia	1	3	2

relations with Russia. Initially classified as ‘Very low importance’ (Cluster 1) in Wave 1, this issue rose to ‘Medium importance’ (Cluster 3) in Wave 2 before settling at ‘Low importance’ (Cluster 2) by Wave 3. This fluctuation reflects an initial surge in public concern at the onset of the war, followed by a moderated focus as the conflict became more normalised over time. These patterns suggest that citizens’ attitudes remain flexible even in crisis contexts and that they can integrate new information when reassessing the importance of such issues.

Overall, our findings reveal an intriguing balance between stability and change in public perceptions of defence issues. While most issues retained their initial clusters, some shifted moderately – and in one case, substantially – in response to the Ukraine war. This pattern suggests that the public’s core defence priorities remained largely intact, with selective shifts reflecting context-driven adjustments rather than a complete reconfiguration of public opinion. [Table 3](#) underscores this interplay between resilience and responsiveness in public attitudes, showing that crises can amplify existing sentiments without fundamentally altering foundational views.

Discussion

This study examined how the Ukraine war, a critical focusing event within the broader context of rising tensions between Russia and the West, influenced public perceptions of defence issues in France. Specifically, we investigated how issue attributes – emotional intensity, concreteness, and obtrusiveness – shaped public engagement with defence topics. Using three-wave survey data, we assessed the stability of public opinion on defence issues and the role of issue attributes in shaping perceived importance during a crisis. In doing so, we contribute to broader debates on crisis-driven policymaking and agenda-setting theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1997; Kingdon, 1984), reinforcing insights into how focusing events influence public concern. Notably, this study moves beyond prior research by considering multiple dimensions of defence policy, rather than treating defence as a monolithic domain.

Summary of key findings and contributions

Our findings provide empirical support for the hypotheses outlined in the literature review. First, confirming H1, the salience of defence issues is determined by perceptions of their emotional intensity, obtrusiveness, and concreteness. This aligns with prior research on focusing events, which suggests that crises can elevate low-salience policy areas to the forefront of public discourse (Birkland, 1997, 2004). Second, supporting H2, we observed that over time, perceived importance was no longer primarily determined by

emotional intensity but also influenced by concreteness and obtrusiveness. This complements issue attribute research, which has shown that obtrusiveness and concreteness play a central role in shaping public engagement with policy issues (Soroka, 2002; Yagade & Dozier, 1990; Zucker, 1978). Finally, consistent with H3, while public attention surged temporarily, the overall structure of public opinion remained stable, challenging assumptions that crises necessarily induce lasting shifts in defence attitudes. This finding aligns with research on the permissive consensus in defence policymaking (Eichenberg, 1989; Everts & Isernia, 2003), which suggests that public attitudes toward defence generally remain stable unless directly challenged by a major security crisis. Our results indicate that while crises can heighten attention and temporarily shift perceptions, the underlying structure of public opinion on defence remains largely intact (Fernández *et al.*, 2023; Mader & Schoen, 2022), reinforcing the idea that elite-driven defence policymaking continues to operate with broad public acceptance.

Our findings also reveal notable differences between defence and non-defence issues. While both categories initially showed strong responses to emotional factors, defence topics demonstrated unique shifts over time. By Wave 3, emotional intensity became a less significant determinant of perceived importance, a trend that was less pronounced in non-defence issues. This suggests that the public engages with defence topics differently, likely due to their direct geopolitical and security implications. This distinct pattern observed between defence and non-defence issues reinforces the idea that crises may heighten public awareness broadly but do not necessarily reshape the structure of issue prioritisation uniformly.

This study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, it demonstrates that while crises initially provoke emotionally charged reactions, the long-term determinants of issue importance become more pragmatic, aligning with broader research on agenda-setting and focusing events (Baum & Potter, 2008; Birkland, 1997; Cobb & Elder, 1983). Second, by applying issue attribute theory to defence policy, we provide new insights into how obtrusiveness, concreteness and emotional intensity influence salience in the security domain – a topic that remains underexplored (Richter, 2022; Soroka, 2003). Third, unlike many previous studies that focus on a single aspect of defence policy, this research examines multiple dimensions – from military spending to strategic cooperation – highlighting how different types of defence issues may be perceived and prioritised differently by the public (Richter *et al.*, 2024).

Implications for policymakers

The observed stability of defence-related concerns has important implications for policymakers. Given that crisis-driven fluctuations in public opinion are often temporary, policymakers should exercise caution when

interpreting short-term shifts as indicators of long-term policy support. Rather than reacting impulsively to crisis-driven spikes in salience, policymakers should prioritise structural concerns that remain relevant beyond moments of heightened attention. This aligns with research suggesting that public opinion operates as a thermostat, with issue salience fluctuating in response to perceived policy gaps (Wlezien, 1995, 1996).

Additionally, the declining role of emotional intensity over time suggests that public opinion on defence becomes more evaluative as a crisis progresses. This indicates that policies emphasising practical considerations and long-term security planning will likely resonate more effectively with the public than emotionally driven crisis responses. Policymakers should therefore aim for sustained engagement with public concerns, integrating them into long-term strategic decision-making, rather than adoption reactionary measures based on short-term shifts.

Limitations and future research

While this study focuses on France, its findings may offer insights for other national settings, especially those with similar defence policies or a permissive consensus on security. Future research could explore whether the resilience of public opinion in defence matters holds across different political and cultural environments, offering a broader perspective on how crisis contexts shape public attitudes toward security and defence.

Moreover, while this study spans three waves within a year, longer-term longitudinal research would provide deeper insights into the durability of these findings over extended periods. Further studies could examine whether issue attributes continue to shape public opinion beyond the immediate crisis or if new security challenges disrupt these patterns over time.

A further limitation of our study is that we analysed emotional intensity but did not differentiate between specific emotions or consider valence (positive or negative emotions). In psychological research, emotions are often examined along these dimensions, and future research could analyse how different emotional responses (e.g., fear vs. anger) influence issue prioritisation.

Lastly, while our study emphasises the general stability of issue clusters, future studies could probe into specific defence issues that show more fluctuations, exploring why certain topics maintain stability while others shift. This line of inquiry would further elucidate the role of emotions, issue attributes, and crisis conditions in shaping public perceptions of defence.

Concluding remarks

This study underscores the resilience of public opinion on defence policy, even in the face of a major geopolitical crisis. While crises like the Ukraine

war increase public attention to defence, our findings show that long-term public priorities remain relatively stable, with pragmatic factors such as concreteness and obtrusiveness becoming more influential over time. These results challenge the notion that crises necessarily disrupt or restructure public attitudes, instead highlighting selective shifts within an otherwise stable opinion framework. Policymakers should therefore consider the structural elements of public opinion rather than relying solely on crisis-induced fluctuations when shaping defence policy.

By integrating public opinion research, issue attribute theory, and crisis studies, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how defence perceptions evolve in response to crises. Future studies can build on these insights to explore how public engagement with security issues varies across different crises, political contexts, and time horizons.

Notes

1. Cf., for example, the Eurobarometer or the Baromètre de confiance politique, Sciences Po, Cevipof.
2. Cf., appendix 2 for an overview of the study in English.
3. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Ethics approval was not required for the studies because of local legislation and institutional requirements.
4. The pre-registration for this study can be found here: https://osf.io/2q6ek/?view_only=25f23bee6ae94057b54adf7ae93fc4c8
5. The elbow method is a technique used in clustering analyses to determine the optimal number of clusters (k) by measuring the reduction in within-cluster variance as the number of clusters increases.
6. In k-means clustering, the goal is to find clusters that minimise the sum of squared distances between each data point and its nearest cluster centre, known as within-cluster sum of squares.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are publicly available. This data can be found here: https://osf.io/zrsyq/?view_only=dfb885d7570c45a0b36d4baaa40f4798.

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