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Authors

Park, RyuGyung

Kinne, Brandon J

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When Is International Trade a Security Threat? *

RyuGyung (Rio) Park[†] Brandon J Kinne[‡]

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Abstract

Discussion of trade is increasingly dominated by security-oriented terms and concepts. We examine the tendency of individuals to perceive trade not merely as an economic issue but as a threat to national security, which we term “trade-security equivalence.” While many scholars have studied individual-level support for trade, we show that trade-security equivalence is distinct from trade preferences. We use a survey experiment of US respondents to isolate conditions that lead individuals to perceive trade as a security threat. Treatments vary aspects of hypothetical US trade relationships: military and economic gaps, partner alignment with US foreign policy, and potential macro- and micro-level economic impacts. Our analysis reveals multiple paths to trade-security equivalence, involving both economic and security influences, with the strongest effect from macro-level economic influences. When subjects are told that trade negatively affects the overall US economy, they are especially likely to view trade as a national security threat.

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[†]William and Mary. Corresponding author: rgpark@wm.edu

[‡]University of California, Davis. bkinne@ucdavis.edu

“Economic security is national security,” declared US President Donald Trump in 2018.¹ While international trade and national security have long shared a close policy connection, the recent backlash against globalization appears to be bringing trade and security closer together in people’s minds as well. The American public increasingly views trade as an issue of, and potential threat to, US national security. According to the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, between 2019 and 2021, the percentage of respondents who said that trade specifically with China “weaken[s] US national security” increased from 33% to 58% (Smeltz, Daalder, Friedhoff, Kafura, and Sullivan 2021). Such views contrast sharply with scholarly research showing that economic interdependence, especially international trade, promotes political cooperation and reduces conflict (e.g., Hegre, Oneal, and Russett 2010; Jun Xiang, Xiaohong Xu, and Keteku 2007; Oneal and Russett 1999a).

This trend toward equating trade with security has important implications for international relations. As the public adopts a more security-centric perspective on trade, they may become increasingly supportive of restrictive trade policies—thus imperiling the liberal global economy. Further, broad public acceptance of the assumption that trade is a security threat may embolden leaders to take actions that exacerbate political tensions. Weakening or severing established trade relationships may be perceived as acts of aggression by affected countries, ultimately inviting economic retaliation and increasing the risk of crisis escalation (Fetzer and Schwarz 2021; Kim and Margalit 2021; Shen and Yang 2024). In addition, security concerns can fuel populist anti-trade sentiments (Altinors and Chrysosgelos 2024). Political backlash against economic liberalism in turn creates opportunities for protectionist policies (James 2018).

While much existing research has explored the intersection of security interests and trade preferences (e.g., Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022; DiGiuseppe and Kleinberg 2019; Fordham and Kleinberg 2012; Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger 2022), the literature mainly focuses on how individuals vary their support for trade in response to security influences like military alliances or shifting power distributions. Such approaches help us understand how individuals integrate security concerns with their trade preferences, but they do not directly examine how individuals consider trade as such to be a security threat. For example, an individual may express limited support for trade restrictions to punish a hostile government while otherwise holding pro-trade views. Similarly, individuals may prefer trade with allies over non-allies not because they view non-allies as security threats, but because they perceive allies to be more politically, economically, and/or culturally similar. By contrast, we are interested in the tendency for individuals to define trade as an inherent threat to US national security. This attitude, which we term *trade-security equivalence*, reflects the hostility to trade increasingly found in public discourse and in the protectionist rhetoric of high-profile political figures. As we define it, trade-security equivalence is measured by how individuals respond to a simple question: Do you view international trade as a threat to US national security?

¹ *Washington Post*. 2018. “Trump sets out national security strategy of ‘principled realism’ and global competition.” (December 18).

To assess causes of trade-security equivalence, we use a survey experiment with a scenario involving trade between the United States and a hypothetical trade partner. The treatments vary key aspects of the partnership, including the military and economic gap between the US and the trade partner, whether the partner is aligned with US foreign-policy interests, and the potential local and macro-level economic impacts of trade. We find that although all treatments generate some degree of equivalence, macro-level economic influences have the strongest effect. That is, subjects are most likely to identify trade as an explicit national security threat when they are told that trade is harmful to the overall US economy—even though the treatment makes no mention of security. Our findings suggest that the American public’s tendency to conflate trade and security is inextricably linked to broader concerns about the economic impact of trade, and that those concerns are primarily sociotropic in nature, involving overall economic stability, and are not defined by individual-level interests.

Beyond this core finding, we uncover a number of additional insights. We find that respondents often make subtle distinctions in trade preferences, leading to varied effects across treatment groups. For example, in the micro-economic treatment (where trade only negatively affects certain individuals rather than the overall economy), respondents express support for trade reductions but do not identify trade itself as a security threat. Furthermore, we find boundaries of trade-security equivalence. While many treatments lead respondents to support tariffs, immigration restrictions, and similar policies, none of them significantly increases support for military actions. Taken as a whole, these findings contribute to our understanding of why, how, and when the public views international trade as a threat to US national security.

This study offers timely insight into an important political phenomenon. Higgott (2004) argues that a security logic has dominated economic policies since the attack of 9/11. When leaders justify tariffs or other trade restrictions, they increasingly cite national security concerns (Heath 2019). In 2018, then-President Trump invoked a “national security exception” under US trade law and enacted tariffs on steel and aluminum.² The World Trade Organization was recently forced to clarify standards on security exceptions after multiple member states—including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the US—cited security concerns to justify protectionist measures (Voon 2023). A recent White House statement describes tariffs as “a powerful, proven source of leverage for protecting the national interest,” intended to put “Americans’ safety and our national security first.”³ This research sheds light on the factors that, in the minds of the public, have contributed to blurring the lines between trade and security.

²*New York Times*. 2018. “White House to Impose Metal Tariffs on E.U., Canada and Mexico.” (May 31).

³“Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Imposes Tariffs on Imports from Canada, Mexico and China.” The White house (February 1, 2025).

1 Security and International Trade

The relationship between trade and security is a common area of study among international relations scholars, from the extensive literature on how military alliances increase trade flows (e.g., Chen 2021; Gowa 1995; Haim 2016; Long 2003; Morrow, Siverson, and Tabares 1998), to the highly developed commercial peace literature showing that trade reduces militarized conflict (e.g., Brutger and Marple 2023; Hegre, Oneal, and Russett 2010; Oneal and Russett 1999b).⁴ An emerging theme in recent literature is that the relationship between trade and security is often adversarial. For example, Farrell and Newman (2019) show that central hubs in global economic networks exploit their structural positions to coerce others; Castle (2024) finds that exclusion from preferential trade agreements worsens political relations; and Zeng and Peterson (2025) argue that export controls and sanctions are central to great-power competition. This study builds on this rich literature by further exploring how security concerns affect individual-level views of international trade.

While political economists have examined many determinants of trade preferences, the bulk of that research focuses on economic self-interest (e.g., Fordham and Kleinberg 2011; Mayda and Rodrik 2005; Rho and Tomz 2017; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Research on how security issues in particular affect individual trade preferences is more recent and still developing. Typically, scholars employ an experimental design where subjects either choose which hypothetical partner they prefer to trade with, or whether to increase/decrease trade with a partner whose attributes vary across treatments. Using a mixture of observational and experimental data, Carnegie and Gaikwad (2022) find that although negative security externalities lead subjects to oppose trade with adversaries, many respondents believe that trade can promote peace. In a conjoint experiment, DiGiuseppe and Kleinberg (2019) find that security-oriented cues affect respondents' support for signing trade agreements, and that loss aversion plays a role in shaping trade preferences. In an examination of power transitions, Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger (2022) find that rising power increases favorability toward trade liberalization, while declining power reduces support for trade. The larger implication of this work is that geopolitics play an important role in shaping individual attitudes toward trade.

Our research contributes to this burgeoning literature in three ways. First, existing work does not clearly distinguish between determinants of trade that are driven by explicit security concerns and determinants that are merely correlated with security-related influences. For example, although multiple studies find that subjects prefer trading with allies over adversaries, alliances themselves are complex phenomena that involve numerous non-security features, such as homophily (Maoz 2012), ideological affinity (Benson and Clinton 2016), similarity in regime type (Lai and Reiter 2000), and

⁴The Copenhagen School's theory of securitization is also relevant to trade-security issues (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998). However, securitization theory focuses on how elites use speech acts, embedded in political discourse, to construct an issue as an existential threat, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures beyond normal politics. By contrast, we focus on the exogenous influences that cause individuals to equate trade with security threats.

group dynamics (Li, Bradshaw, Clary, and Cranmer 2017). A preference for trade with allies may be driven not by security concerns but by ingroup bias, perceived similarity, or concordant preferences (cf. Mutz and Kim 2017). More generally, security-oriented treatments may influence trade-partner selection in ways that do not involve explicit security concerns. While some findings—for example, individuals especially oppose trade when it benefits an adversary’s military (Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022) or when their own country is declining in relative power (Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger 2022)—strongly suggest that perceived security threats do in fact play an important role in trade preferences, current experiments do not explicitly assess this possibility. Building on this research, we implement a design that allows us to distinguish between trade preferences and security threats.

Second, the current literature does not consider how security concerns may intervene between causes and outcomes that otherwise appear to be strictly economic in nature. Kim, Park, Rhee, and Yang (2023) find that a subject’s willingness to endure the economic costs of protectionism is partly conditional on the identity of trade partners, and Yen, Kay, and Chen (2021) show that trade with China is especially likely to moderate individual support for trade. Studies of ingroup/outgroup dynamics find that even when trade yields absolute economic benefits, subjects often condition their support for trade on group-oriented distributions of benefits (Mutz and Kim 2017; Yeung and Quek 2022). These sorts of findings suggest the possibility that security-oriented logics—e.g., that asymmetrically distributed benefits or negative macro-economic consequences of trade pose a threat to national security—may mediate the effect of economic treatments on trade preferences, even when the research design does not explicitly assess security influences. Our theory incorporates this potential mediating role for security concerns.

Third, and most importantly, our key outcome of interest is *the perception of trade as a security threat*. That is, rather than ask subjects whether they prefer trade with one country over another, we assume the existence of a trade relationship and then determine which influences cause subjects to view that relationship as a threat to national security. This setup means we are not forced to infer trade-based threat perception from individual trade preferences. We assess threat perception directly. And because we also assess subjects’ preference for more/less trade, we can measure trade preferences and trade-security equivalence as separate quantities.

2 Determinants of Trade-Security Equivalence

We define *trade-security equivalence* as a phenomenon in which individuals conceptualize international trade as a threat to national security, irrespective of the economic aspects. We are agnostic on the question of whether such equivalence is appropriate, rational, or “correct.” The public often lacks information on trade policy, and trade issues have remained low in salience (Guisinger 2009). In some cases, such as arms trade or trade in certain technology sectors, some degree of

trade-oriented threat perception is unsurprising (Dorussen 2006; Garcia-Alonso and Levine 2007). On the other hand, the belief that trade is primarily a security issue, ipso facto, contradicts both trade theory and prevailing models of conflict, and may constitute a category mistake (Milner 1999; Morrow 1999; Rho and Tomz 2017).

To understand the various forms that trade-security equivalence might take, we conceptually and empirically distinguish between trade-based threat perception and individual support for reduced trade. Existing work typically focuses on the latter as the main outcome of interest (e.g., Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022; DiGiuseppe and Kleinberg 2019; Schweinberger 2022). While we agree that declining support for trade is likely an important outcome of threat perception, such trade preferences may not always be caused by security logic. Individuals often favor trade restrictions for reasons unrelated to national security. Directly assessing individual threat perception gives an immediate window into trade-oriented security concerns. To our knowledge, this outcome has not yet been assessed in the literature.

We emphasize that trade-security equivalence is distinct from the realist emphasis on distributional politics. For example, Grieco (1988*a*) asserts that if a state benefits disproportionately from trade, it may be able to convert those gains to military advantage. Gowa and Mansfield (1993) argue that, due to this potential for relative gains, states prefer to trade with allies over non-allies. By contrast, trade-security equivalence is simply a question of why individuals sometimes view trade as a security threat. While our experiment includes treatments that incorporate relative-gains logic, we also examine treatments that refer only to national economic conditions or the political attributes of trade partners, with no reference to relative gains. Our results show that individuals often conflate trade with security concerns even in the absence of relative-gains logic.

We consider five potential causes of trade-security equivalence, covering a range of security and economic influences that feature prominently in the study of international relations. These treatments are by no means an exhaustive list of causes trade-oriented threat perception. Our goal is to consider, in an inductive fashion, a plausible range of trade-security influences. Accordingly, the treatments covered here represent “most likely” causes, as determined by established literatures in political economy and international security.

2.1 Nonalignment

Strategic rivalry or ideological competition between countries is a long-standing source of conflict and often spurs punitive trade policies, such as export controls and economic sanctions (Zeng and Peterson 2025). Realists argue that a state’s political alignment, as revealed by alliance memberships or defense partnerships, correlates with malign or benign intentions—and is thus a credible indicator of threat (Walt 1987). This insight is consistent with the empirical observation that the vast

majority of interstate militarized conflicts occur between enduring rivals (Goertz and Diehl 1993). Ideological alignment involves not only patterns of defense cooperation but also broad, policy-oriented indicators, such as voting patterns in the UN General Assembly (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2015). Gartzke (1998) argues that when states’ preferences align with one another, they have fewer substantive disagreements and are less willing to engage in conflict. Put differently, the threat posed by other states declines as preference similarity increases. Thus, the concept of rivalry is an overarching one that encompasses regime type, cultural proximity, and other ideological attitudes.

Because ideological conflicts and rivalries involve social-psychological influences (e.g., Thompson 2001), they may affect trade preferences. Rathbun (2009: 367) argues that rivalries are characterized by cognitive biases and other non-rational mechanisms, such that individuals come to believe that rivals are “inherently untrustworthy.” Rivalries further disrupt the standard processing of objective information in crisis situations, such that hostile actions by rivals disproportionately reinforce mistrust, and seemingly cooperative actions are dismissed as situational or driven by ulterior motives (Colaresi and Thompson 2002). These biases “distract [subjects] from their objective interests” (Rathbun 2009: 367). Confrontations between rivals are driven not by cost-benefit analysis and objective assessments of competing interests, but by entrenched attitudes and misperception. This logic is especially relevant to trade politics, as free trade, in principle, benefits all participants. In a rivalry context, these objective benefits may be subordinated to the perceived threat posed by an adversary. Accordingly, we advance the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Nonaligned Rival): *If a US trade partner’s foreign-policy interests are contrary to US interests, then trade with that partner is more likely to be considered a national security threat.*

2.2 Gaps in military or economic capabilities

An additional motivation for trade securitization is the gap in military capabilities between countries. According to the balance-of-power logic that defines traditional realist views, the degree of threat posed by another country is determined by that country’s military resources (Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). From this power-oriented perspective, a country’s preferences are irrelevant; the anarchy of international relations ensures that mistrust is constant (cf. Kydd 2005). Threat is determined solely by power. Consequently, states prioritize “relative gains,” or outcomes that yield a military advantage over other countries (Grieco, Powell, and Snidal 1993). Scholars of power-transition theory argue that periods of transition are particularly volatile. A declining power may act preemptively to meet a rising challenger, or that challenger may attempt to confront the dominant power (Organski and Kugler 1980). This potential for power shifts to presage future threats also motivates commitment problems as a cause of war, in which a rising power threatens the status-quo distribution of benefits and thus invites preemptive conflict (Powell 2006).

In an experimental setting, Tingley (2017) finds that subjects who face a relative decline in their own country’s power are more willing to support bellicose policies and are also more likely to cite concerns about “exploitation” on the part of the rising power. In an analysis that explicitly connects power transitions to trade politics, Nguyen, Sattler, and Schweinberger (2022) find that subjects are less likely to support bilateral trade with a given partner if their country is experiencing a relative decline in power. That particular analysis does not determine whether this aversion to trade is the result of trade-security equivalence, or whether it is instead driven by, for example, concerns over the distribution of global public goods, but it nonetheless points to a causal link between power differentials and trade policy. We anticipate that relative declines in power trigger trade-security equivalence in similar ways to rivalry. Absent contrary information, subjects are more likely to view a rising power as a threat to national security, which in turn increases the probability that subjects will equate trade with that country to a security threat. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2 (Military Gap): *If the military gap between the US and a rising power is decreasing, then trade with that partner is more likely to be considered a national security threat.*

While this hypothesis focuses on a declining gap in military capabilities, some international relations scholars have argued that economic resources can be readily converted into material power. For example, Grieco (1988b: 611) asserts that there exists a “long-term fungibility between economic and military capabilities.” Insofar as economic power reflects latent military power, a relative decline in economic power may trigger the same security concerns as military decline. Accordingly, we specify an additional hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (Economic Gap): *If the economic gap between the US and a rising power is decreasing, then trade with that partner is more likely to be considered a national security threat.*

2.3 Negative macro-economic effects

In addition to security influences, economic influences may also cause trade-oriented threat perception. Previous studies have found that negative economic shocks affect opinions on a variety of topics, from economic issues like immigration (Goldstein and Peters 2014) to non-economic issues like authoritarian values (Ballard-Rosa, Malik, Rickard, and Scheve 2021). Concerns about the overall economy can influence trade preferences for both altruistic and egocentric reasons (Schaffer and Spilker 2019: 1268). On one hand, numerous studies have found that “sociotropic” influences, or concerns about the national economy beyond one’s personal economic situation, predict trade preferences (e.g., Hearn 2020; Mansfield and Mutz 2009). On the other hand, individuals have self-centered reasons to be concerned about the overall economy. Macro-economic conditions affect

personal well-being in many ways, from consumer preferences to financial asset values to regional economic performance (Baker 2005; Fordham and Kleinberg 2012; Scheve and Slaughter 2001).

Whether sociotropic or egocentric, an overall economic shock is often regarded as an economic threat and reduces support for free trade (Mansfield, Mutz, and Brackbill 2019). Individuals may simply conflate economic threat of whatever variety with security threat, much as broader conceptions of security, such as “human security,” deliberately incorporate economic security as an area of concern (cf. Acharya 2001; King and Murray 2001). Individuals rely on heuristics to assess threats because the complexity and uncertainty of international relations make it difficult to distinguish the sources and true severity of threats (Stein 2013). Against this backdrop, economic conditions provide an accessible proxy to gauge a country’s trajectory. Economic threats may further encourage motivated reasoning and group-based self-interests (Lutz and Bitschnau 2023: 680). Presenting negative effects of trade at a national level heightens a sense of threat by framing international trade as a competition between countries (Mutz 2021: 88). Perceived threat further impairs cognitive capacity and promotes closed-mindedness (Thórisdóttir and Jost 2011: 790). For all these reasons, an economic shock from trade can increase perception of threat and prompt concerns about the national economy, which in turn lead to trade-security equivalence.

Hypothesis 4 (Overall Economic Impact): *If a trade relationship is associated with negative macro-economic effects, then trade with that partner is more likely to be considered a national security threat.*

2.4 Negative micro-economic effects

Material self-interest has received much attention as a potential explanation for trade preferences. Trade has uneven distributional consequences within a country, and orthodox macro-economic models (e.g., Stolper-Samuelson, Ricardo-Viner) emphasize differential outcomes between winners and losers as a determinant of support for free trade. Early work on attitudes toward immigration similarly highlights the importance of indicators that reflect economic self-interest, such as labor market competition and fiscal burdens (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Micro-level economic shocks, which narrowly impact an individual’s factor of production or industry of employment rather than the larger economy, are more likely to generate a sense of competition over scarce resources, which may in turn generate threat implications that are more realistic and acute than macro-economic shocks (Nassar 2020: 200). Moreover, economic shocks that are more targeted appear to affect political attitudes on a broad range of political issues, beyond economic concerns (Margalit 2019).

An individual’s economic well-being is a tangible, directly accessible indicator of security. Previous studies have found that public knowledge on, and salience of, trade issues tend to be low (Guisinger 2009; Rho and Tomz 2017). Therefore, a negative economic impact that more directly targets an

individual’s economic situation may yield a particularly heightened sense of threat. Along these lines, Fordham and Kleinberg (2011) find that individuals who experience negative economic consequences from trade are more likely to perceive China as a threat. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 (Micro-Economic Impact): *If a trade relationship negatively affects an individual’s personal economic situation, then trade with that partner is more likely to be considered a national security threat.*

3 Research Design

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a vignette-based survey experiment. Although experiments in international relations sometimes raise questions of external validity (Hyde 2015), our research question focuses on which types of influences lead respondents to conceptualize trade as a security issue; we are agnostic on the question of whether trade preferences affect political behavior or policy outcomes. We used Lucid Theorem to survey adult US citizens from June 17–26, 2023.⁵ 1,009 respondents consented to the survey and passed attention checks.⁶ The subjects are evenly distributed across demographic characteristics such as gender, income, and age.⁷

3.1 Experiment Design

The experiment first asks a series of demographic questions, as well as questions on foreign-policy orientation, nationalism, and xenophobia. Subjects were then randomly assigned to one of six groups: control, nonaligned rival, military gap, economic gap, micro-economic impact, and overall economic impact. All subjects were given a short, neutral paragraph with basic information on international trade, and were then asked to consider the following hypothetical trade relationship:

We would like you to consider a scenario involving trade between the United States and a trade partner. For the sake of generality, we will refer to this trade partner as Country X. In this scenario, the US exports large quantities of goods to Country X, and Country X exports large quantities of goods to the US. The US is one of Country X’s top trade partners, and Country X is a top trade partner for the US.

The control group received no additional information. Subjects in the treatment groups received

⁵See <https://luc.id/quality/>. For comparisons of Lucid to other services, see Coppock and McClellan (2019).

⁶A power analysis indicated that we require ≈ 75 subjects per treatment group. Our sample provides more than double that number.

⁷See Appendix table A2.

one of the five paragraphs below. The economic treatments make no mention of security issues, and the security treatments make no mention of economic issues. To minimize potential confounders and ensure that respondents focus on the main effects of interest, we do not provide additional information on Country X. Overly detailed vignettes may introduce “charged content” that interacts with the treatments, and/or they may reduce the ability of respondents to accurately recall the contents of the vignette; that is, additional contextual detail dampens treatment effects (Brutger, Kertzer, Renshon, Tingley, and Weiss 2023). Further, the generality of our design is intended to subsume commonly studied influences, such as democracy. For example, in an experimental study of the democratic peace, Tomz and Weeks (2013) show that the effect of democracy on individual security preferences is largely due to perceived threat. Perception of threat also features prominently in studies of military alliances (e.g., Kenwick, Vasquez, and Powers 2015). Rather than adding treatments for democracy, alliances, or numerous other related concepts, our *Nonaligned Rival* treatment manipulates threat directly.

	Treatment
Nonaligned Rival	The US and Country X often disagree with one another on political issues. They are members of opposing military alliances. In international crises, the US and Country X always support opposite sides. The US and Country X could easily become enemies.
Military Gap	The military of Country X is currently smaller and less powerful than the US military. However, the military of Country X is growing in size much more quickly than the US military. If Country X’s military continues to grow at a high rate, it will become larger and more powerful than the US military in ten to fifteen years.
Economic Gap	The economy of Country X is currently smaller than the US economy. However, the economy of Country X is growing much faster than the US economy. If Country X’s economy continues to grow at a high rate, it will become larger than the US economy in ten to fifteen years.
Micro Economic Impact	It is projected that continued trade with Country X will be harmful to US workers with [level of education]. US workers with [level of education] have a hard time competing with their counterparts in Country X. As trade between the US and Country X has increased, the average wage for US workers with [level of education] has decreased.
Overall Economic Impact	It is projected that continued trade with Country X will be harmful to the overall US economy. Trade with Country X puts pressure on US businesses to compete with businesses outside the US. As trade between the US and Country X has increased, growth of the overall US economy has slowed down.

The vignette for *Micro-Economic Impact* is unique in that the treatment language is matched to the respondent’s self-reported education level. Because we cannot directly manipulate individual income, we instead focus on socioeconomic groups with which respondents identify. This follows factor-based models of classical economic models used in previous studies (e.g. Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Rho and Tomz 2017). Although education can also affect attitudes toward trade through non-materialistic ways (e.g. Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006), we address this issue by including *Education* as a control. While our approach does not “individualize” the effects of trade—which we recognize as a limitation of the analysis—it does substantially narrow those effects beyond the national level. That is, our design restricts the effects of trade to a salient and self-identified socioeconomic group, rather than the macro-level consequences captured by the *Overall Economic Impact* treatment.

To measure trade-security equivalence, we asked respondents whether they agree or disagree, on a five-point scale, with the following statement: “*Trade with Country X is a threat to US national security.*” This outcome is our primary dependent variable, denoted *Trade Threat*, and it allows us to explicitly determine which treatments, if any, increase the individual-level perception that trade itself threatens national security. We also asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “*The US should reduce trade with Country X.*”⁸ The inclusion of this additional outcome, denoted *Reduce Trade*, accomplishes two goals. First, it allows us to separate general pessimism toward trade from the more specific concept of trade-oriented security threat. Insofar as trade-security equivalence constitutes a unique phenomenon, distinct from general opposition to trade, we should observe differences between these two outcomes. Second, this setup allows us to determine which real-world influences are most likely to trigger security concerns as such, and which influences increase pessimism toward trade without altering threat perception. As noted above, the reasons why individuals oppose trade are manifold and may have little to do with national security interests. Our research design isolates those influences that explicitly trigger national security threat concerns.

Following the two outcome questions, we asked additional post-treatment questions to assess potential mediators. Specifically, we queried subjects on their perception of Country X itself as an enemy or threat, their tendency to think in mercantilist terms, and their concerns about personal and national economic situations.⁹ The average response time to complete the survey was slightly more than 10 minutes.

We used the generic “Country X” in lieu of a real country name because subjects inevitably bring with them established beliefs and biases concerning real countries. Although use of real country names is sometimes unproblematic (Brutger et al. 2023), preexisting biases are especially consequential in low-information issue-areas like trade policy. Fictitious names are also suboptimal in this context, as they

⁸The order of these questions was randomized, and we found no evidence of ordering effects (see appendix Table A4).

⁹See Appendix for precise wording of these questions.

may contain implicit linguistic or other cues that bias responses, and/or they may unintentionally embolden subjects against fictitious targets (Majnemer and Meibauer 2023). In pilot studies, we used real country names—specifically, China and Canada—and while we found that subjects’ prior attitudes toward each country determined baseline support for trade, we also found that treated subjects viewed trade even with Canada, a close US ally, as a national security threat. (See Appendix Section F for a more detailed description of the pilot studies.) To account for the possibility that subjects were thinking of China when reading about Country X, we collected open-ended responses on whether Country X reminded subjects of any particular country. Treatment effects were not systematically different for those respondents who mentioned China (Appendix Table A5).

We also asked post-treatment policy-oriented questions to explore how trade-security equivalence might influence stated policy preferences. We asked respondents about their level of support, on a five-point scale, for the following policies directed toward Country X: military containment, imposition of tariffs, restrictions on immigration, and reductions in cultural exchanges. To be clear, we do not argue here that trade-security equivalence determines real-world policy choices. Rather, the goal of these questions is (1) to assess whether various sources of trade-oriented threat perception differ in their impact on related policy outcomes, and (2), from an internal validity perspective, to assess whether subjects’ responses to policy-related questions cohere with their attitudes toward trade. Further, subjects’ willingness to link trade-security equivalence to tariffs or military containment may shed light on such questions as whether the logic of commercial peace theory prevails over security-externality concerns (Bulman 2022; Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022).

3.2 Model Specification

We estimated treatment effects using linear regression models, with each treatment incorporated as a binary variable and the control as the baseline. The models control for several demographic characteristics that affect trade preferences, such as age, income level, education level (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006; Mansfield and Mutz 2009), gender (Guisinger 2016), and political partisanship (Friedrichs 2021; Myrick 2021). The models also control for foreign-policy orientation (FPO) along three major dimensions: militant assertiveness, cooperative internationalism, and isolationism (e.g., Holsti and Rosenau 1988; Kertzer 2021; Rathbun, Kertzer, Reifler, Goren, and Scotto 2016; Wittkopf 1986). We used a battery of seven questions to assess FPO, and we derived factors for each of these three dimensions.

Although prior research has examined the relationship between FPO and trade preferences, the effect of FPO on trade-security equivalence in particular has not yet been studied. Because FPO reflects individuals’ general dispositions toward world politics, it is likely a strong predictor of trade-oriented threat perception. For example, militant assertiveness involves a tendency to view the world through the lens of security concerns (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999), which is a disposition

that, *prima facie*, is more likely to result in trade-security equivalence. Isolationism, too, may be highly correlated with equivalence. For example, Mansfield and Mutz (2009) find that isolationism determines support for protectionism. Therefore, we expect militant assertiveness and isolationism to be positively associated with trade-oriented threat perception, while cooperative internationalism should be negatively correlated (Holsti and Rosenau 1988).

We also controlled for nationalism and xenophobia, which prior research has found to influence trade preferences (Daniels, Kapszukiewicz, and von der Ruhr 2020; Herrmann, Isernia, and Segatti 2009; Honeker 2022). Given the strong ingroup biases associated with these two orientations, we expect that both nationalism and xenophobia will increase trade-security equivalence.

While the model includes all of the above controls as standard covariates, the FPO terms in particular suggest potential moderating effects. That is, the effects of at least some of our treatments may vary according to the foreign-policy orientation of subjects. We assessed this possibility with a series of interaction terms, and we found no evidence that the FPO terms moderate the effects of the treatments (see Appendix Figure A2).

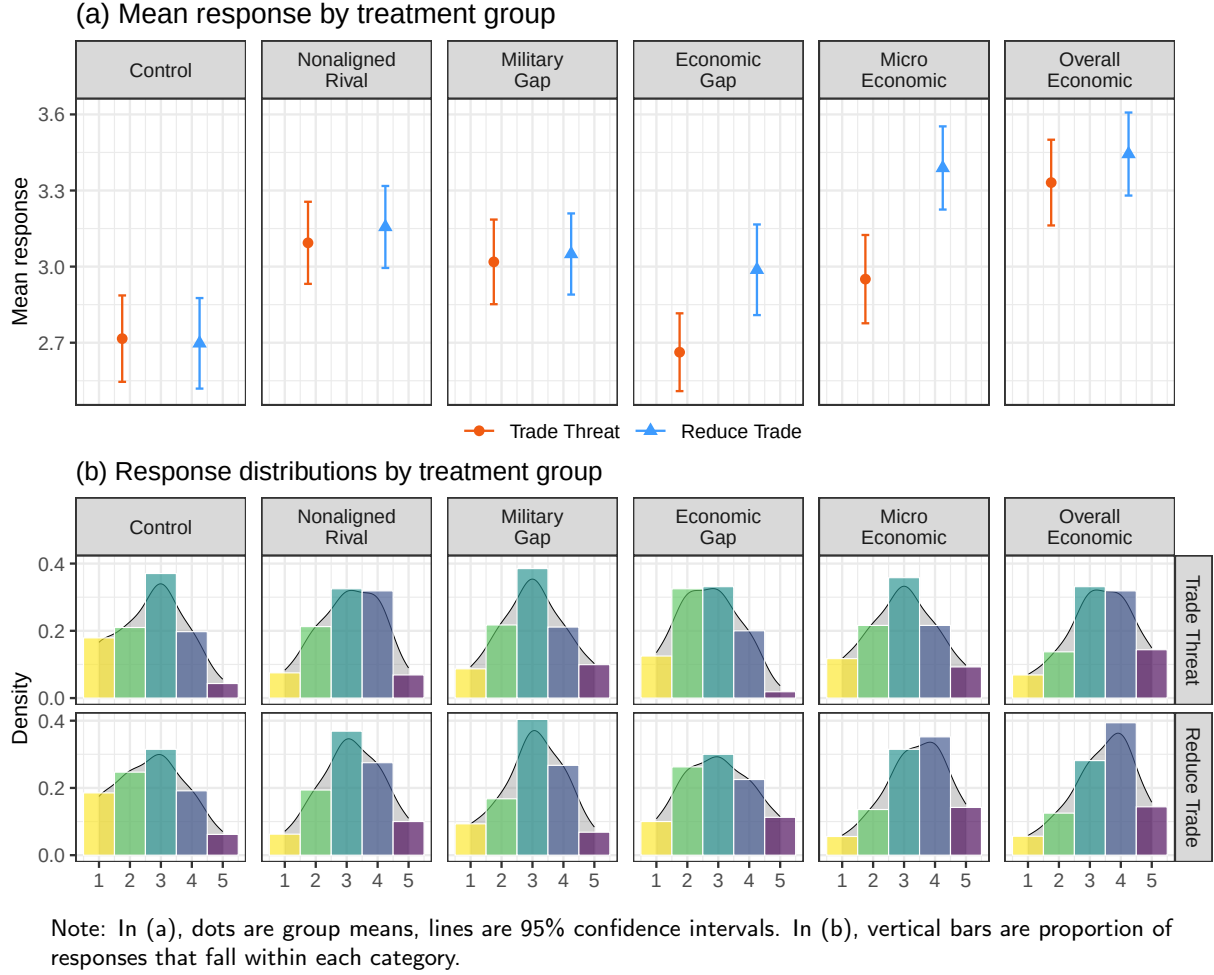
4 Results

We first examine the data descriptively. Figure 1 illustrates responses by treatment groups for each of the dependent variables. A number of insights emerge. First, we find both security and economic treatments are capable of causing trade-security equivalence in respondents. Four out of five treatment groups show a higher average of *Trade Threat* than the control group.

Second, the *Overall Economic* treatment, which envelopes sociotropic and other macro-economic concerns, has the strongest effect on trade-oriented threat perception.¹⁰ Not only does the *Overall Economic* treatment increase subjects' interest in reducing trade with Country X, but it also increases subjects' assessment that trade with Country X is a security threat. This result indicates a high level of trade-security equivalence, which is especially notable given that the *Overall Economic* treatment focuses solely on economic issues and makes no mention of security concerns. This effect is also large in magnitude. The mean level of *Trade Threat* is 23% larger in the *Overall Economic* condition than in the control condition. The importance of macro-level economic shocks aligns with research on sociotropism and trade, which shows that individuals tend to care more about widespread economic shocks than self-interest (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Our experimental design does not allow us to determine whether this effect is driven by truly other-regarding attitudes or by an expansive view of self-interest (e.g. Schaffer and Spilker 2019), but the results indicate that

¹⁰Difference-in-means tests show that the mean value of *Trade Threat* in the *Overall Economic* condition is significantly larger than its corresponding value in the other treatment conditions, including the *Military Gap* and *Nonaligned Rival* conditions, at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 1: Response Means and Distributions by Treatment Group and Outcome



large-scale economic shocks carry more weight in the minds of the public than do localized economic impacts—and this effect extends to trade-oriented threat perception.

Third, the two security-oriented treatments, *Military Gap* and *Nonaligned Rival*, also lead to trade-security equivalence. That is, both treatments not only reduce support for trade, but they also increase the perception that trade with Country X is a threat to US national security. This finding suggests that when security concerns are paramount, the individual-level preference for reduced trade with adversaries, as observed by Carnegie and Gaikwad (2022) and others, goes hand-in-hand with trade-security equivalence. Interestingly, however, the respective magnitudes of these treatment effects are significantly smaller than for the *Overall Economic* treatment. This counterintuitive finding is worth emphasizing. Explicitly security-oriented treatments are less effective at raising security concerns in trade than are macro-economic treatments. This finding is inconsistent with the distributional logic of realism—which asserts that states should be most sensitive to trade with adversaries (Grieco 1988a)—and suggests that trade-security equivalence is not merely an artifact

of relative-gains logic.

Finally, subjects often respond differently to the two outcomes, distinguishing between trade as a security threat and a preference for reduced trade. For example, both the *Economic Gap* and *Micro Economic* treatments have a stronger effect on preferences for reducing trade than on the perception of trade as a security threat. This finding reinforces one of the key motivations behind our analysis. Opposition to trade is a nuanced phenomenon, and some real-world influences may erode support for trade without necessarily implicating national-security concerns. Interestingly, despite the increased tendency of scholars and policymakers alike to frame the shrinking US-China capabilities gap as a threat to US national security, only when we describe the gap between the US and Country X in explicit military terms do subjects connect trade with Country X to national security threats. At the same time, the significantly different treatment effects for the two outcomes support the internal validity of our design. Subjects are not merely directing negative sentiment toward Country X in a nonspecific fashion; rather, they are subtly distinguishing between economic and security concerns, viewing trade as a security threat only under specific circumstances.

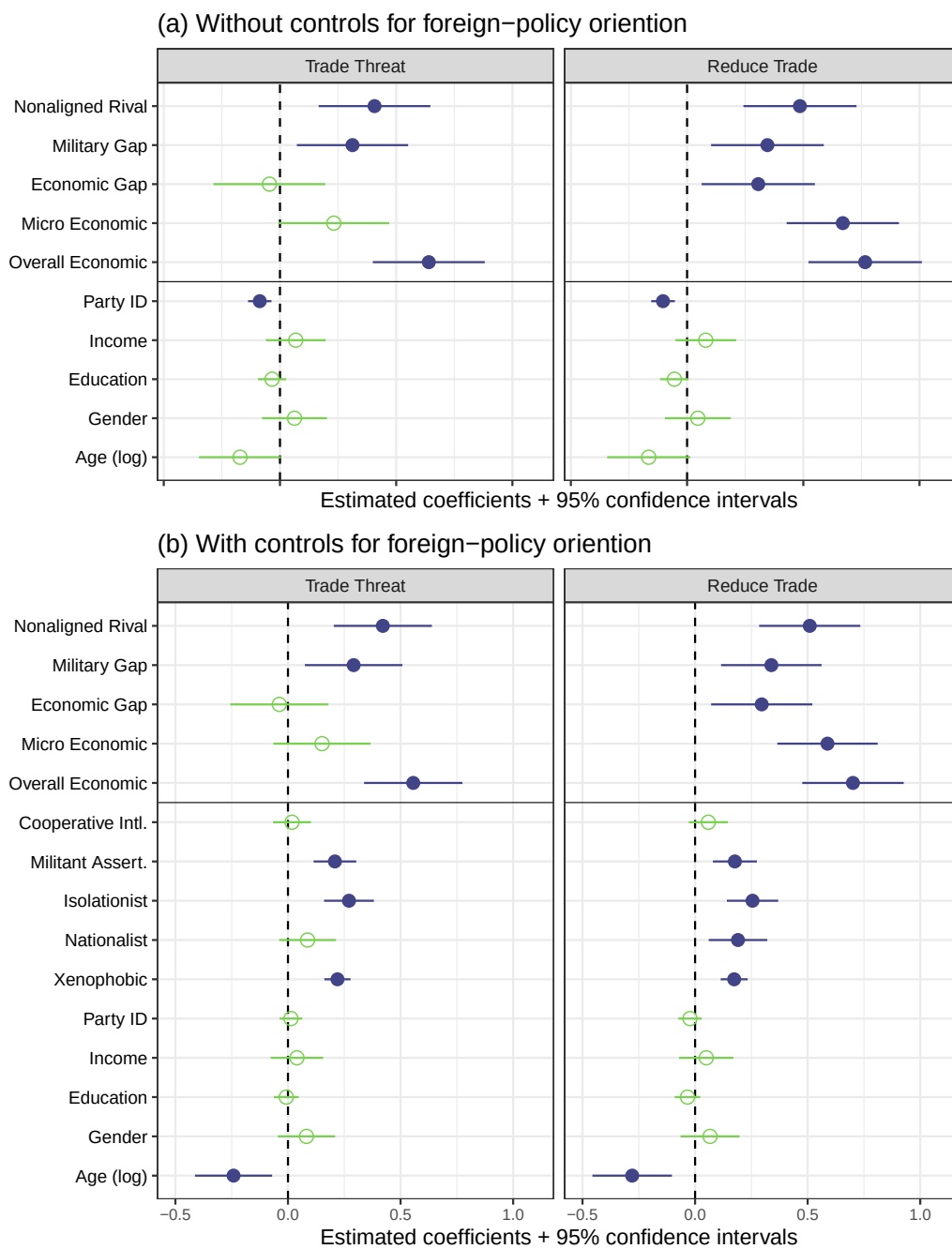
4.1 Regression Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates estimates from a series of multiple regression models, which include the control variables discussed earlier. We first estimate models with only demographic controls included, and we then incorporate measures of FPO. The FPO results are generally consistent with expectations. Militant assertiveness, isolationism, and xenophobia are all strongly associated both with viewing trade as a security threat and with supporting trade reductions. Nationalism is also associated with trade reductions, but it is not significantly correlated with trade as a security threat. Cooperative internationalism does not appear to play a significant role.

Estimates for the primary treatment effects generally mirror the descriptive results presented in Figure 1. The estimates for the two explicit security treatments, *Nonaligned Rival* and *Military Gap*, are significantly larger than zero for both outcomes. For these treatments, the perception of trade as a security threat is accompanied by support for reduced trade. By contrast, of the three economic treatments, only the *Overall Economic* treatment significantly affects both outcomes. The *Economic Gap* and *Micro Economic* treatments significantly increase support for trade reductions, but they do not increase trade-oriented threat perception. Thus, these two treatments do not trigger trade-security equivalence as we define it. On the other hand, the *Overall Economic* treatment has one of the largest effects on threat perception.¹¹ Overall, these results imply that neither a narrow economic shock nor an economic gap is enough to trigger trade-security equivalence. Subjects respond to these conditions by dampening their support for trade, but they are not inclined to view

¹¹ Based on t-tests, the overall economic treatment coefficient is statistically larger than that of the military gap ($p > 0.05$), but it is not statistically different from the coefficient for the nonaligned rival treatment.

Figure 2: Regression Estimates



trade as a security threat. Only when economic influences negatively affect the country as a whole do individuals perceive trade as a security threat.

4.2 Mediation Analysis

An important insight from this analysis is that trade-security equivalence occurs under multiple conditions, including those strictly involving economic concerns. A crucial follow-up question, then, is *why* subjects respond to these treatments in a way that reflects trade-security equivalence. What are the causal mechanisms? Are these mechanisms the same across treatment conditions, or do different treatments involve distinct mechanisms?

We considered five potential mediators that were most relevant to the logic behind the treatments. First, the treatments may lead subjects to conclude that Country X is an enemy (*Enemy perception*). Second, subjects may perceive that Country X is itself a threat to US national security, and this more general country-oriented perception of threat may in turn translate into threat perception directed specifically at trade (*Country threat perception*). Third, the treatments may compel subjects to resort to a mercantilist logic, where they believe that governments use trade primarily as a weapon to achieve self-interested goals (*Mercantilism*). Fourth, the treatments may trigger concerns about a subject’s personal economic situation, which can lead subjects to conflate trade with external threat (*Personal economic concern*). Fifth, subjects may express concerns about the state of the national economy, consistent with the logic of sociotropism (*National economic concern*).

The first two of these mediators focus solely on security logics, with no mention of trade as such, while the latter two focus solely on economic concerns, with no mention of security. The third mediator, *Mercantilism*, represents a middle ground where the logic of trade and security are indistinguishable. We conducted causal mediation analysis using the approach developed by Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010).¹² Figure 3 presents the results of the analysis in heatmap format.¹³ The results reveal a number of important findings.

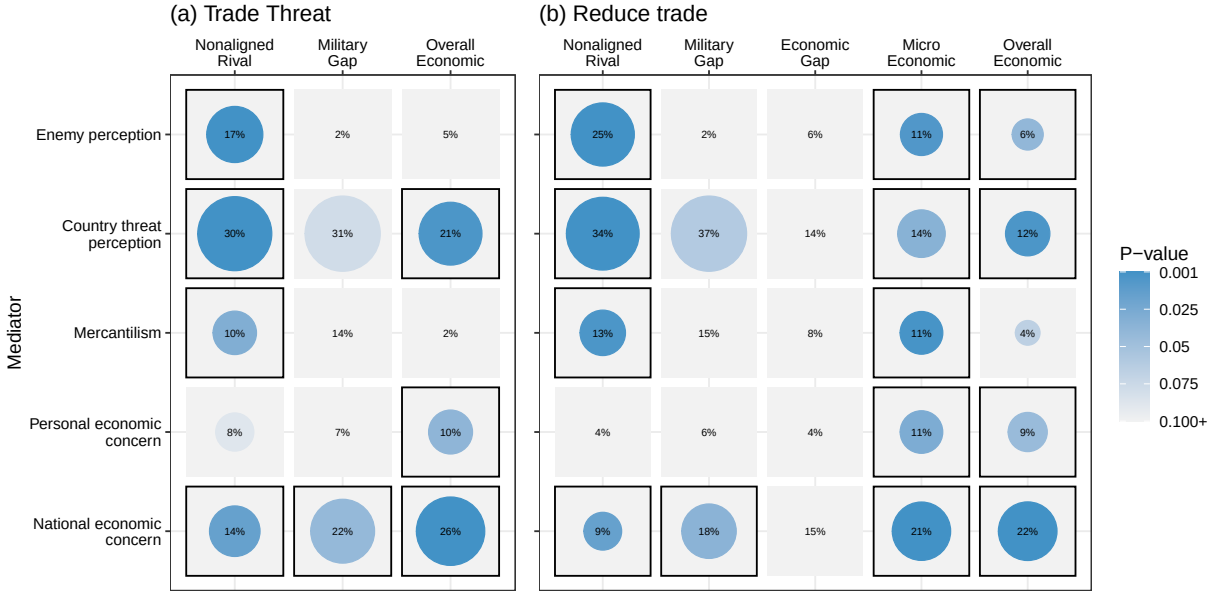
First, national economic concern is the most consistently influential mediator across treatments and outcomes. Of particular note is that for all three of the treatments that increase trade-oriented threat perception, national economic concern is a significant mediator. Country threat perception is also a powerful mediator—especially for the *Nonaligned Rival* treatment—but is not as consistently important as national economic concern. Indeed, in all but the *Nonaligned Rival* condition, national economic concern is a more powerful mediator than the perceived threat posed by Country X. Other potential mediators, such as enemy perception and personal economic concern, are only marginally influential.

Second, trade-security equivalence does not require an explicit mention of security issues in either the treatment or mediator. For example, the effect of the *Overall Economic* treatment on the *Trade*

¹²Causal mediation analysis requires the assumption of sequential ignorability, which is not directly testable (Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010; Keele 2015). The mediation results should be viewed with this caveat in mind.

¹³Note that Figure 3 does not include the *Economic Gap* and *Micro Economic* conditions for the *Trade Threat* outcome, as the treatments did not yield significant effects in those cases and the mediation models failed to converge.

Figure 3: Causal Mediation Analysis



Note: Circle size indicates magnitude of effect. Color indicates statistical significance. Black squares indicate estimates significant at $p < 0.05$.

Threat outcome is mediated by national economic concern at 26%—an entirely economic causal pathway. At the same time, the effect of *Nonaligned Rival* is weakly but significantly mediated by national economic concern (14%), and national economic concern is the only significant mediator for the effect of *Military Gap* on *Trade Threat* (22%).

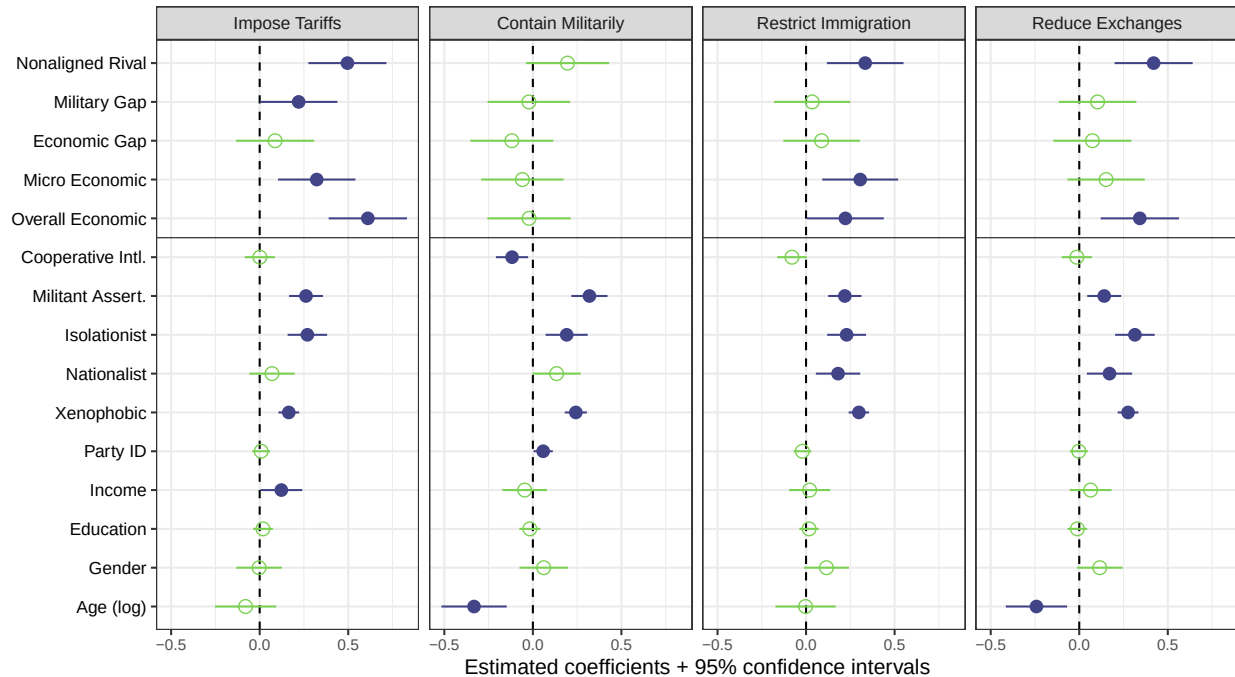
Third, security concerns frequently intervene between economic treatments and economic outcomes. For the *Reduce Trade* outcome, the effects of both the *Micro Economic* and *Overall Economic* treatments are mediated in part by threat perception. In some cases, then, economic anxieties trigger unprompted security concerns, and those concerns in turn affect individual attitudes toward trade. To be clear, the *Reduce Trade* outcome falls outside our definition of trade-security equivalence. Yet, while much research shows that national and local economic effects of trade influence individual trade preferences (e.g., Mansfield and Mutz 2009), these findings are the first, to our knowledge, to show that those effects are mediated in part by national security concerns. Overall, these results suggest that the logic of trade-security equivalence may be implicated even in individual-level trade preferences that, *prima facie*, are not overtly entangled with security concerns.

4.3 Policy Outcomes

As a final consideration, we examined subjects' responses to a variety of policy-oriented questions. Figure 4 illustrates the regression estimates for each policy-oriented question. We find that the

Nonaligned Rival and *Overall Economic* treatments increase support for all of the policy outcomes except military containment. The *Micro-economic* treatment increases support for tariffs and immigration restrictions, and the *Military Gap* treatment increases support for tariffs only.

Figure 4: Regression Estimates of Policy Outcomes



We draw two main conclusions from this analysis. First, individuals again show evidence not only of making subtle distinctions between security concerns and trade policy, but also of separating their opinions on trade from policies that may be only distantly related to trade. For example, although the *Military Gap* treatment is a strong predictor of trade-security equivalence, it does not significantly increase support for immigration restrictions or a reduction in cultural exchanges. Conversely, the *Micro Economic* treatment, which only increases support for reduction in trade (but not trade-security equivalence), does significantly increase support for immigration restrictions. At minimum, these results support the experiment's internal validity, as they show that respondents are able to distinguish between trade-security equivalence as such and potentially related policy debates. Further, these results suggest that demand for immigration restrictions may stem not from security worries or even sociotropic concerns, but from economic self-interest.

Second, none of the treatments, even those that trigger strong trade-oriented threat perception, significantly increases support for military containment. Subjects may view trade as a security threat, and they may in turn support trade reductions or other restrictive policies, but they stop short of advocating for military solutions. This finding indicates that there is a clear limit to trade-security equivalence. The nature of this limit requires further exploration. One possibility is that respondents simply do not view trade as sufficiently important to justify a military response.

Another is that a general taboo against military action works as a deterrent in contemporary international relations. Yet another, more subtle possibility is that commercial peace logic operates in the background for at least some respondents, such that the negative externalities of trade must be balanced against the pacific benefits (e.g., Bulman 2022; Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022).

5 Conclusion

This project is, to our knowledge, the first attempt at understanding why individuals sometimes view trade as a threat to national security. We show that both overt security concerns and purely economic concerns can lead to trade-security equivalence. And even when trade attitudes appear to be solely the result of economic concerns—as when macro-level economic effects increase support for trade reductions—security considerations may play a mediating role. At the same time, we find clear boundaries to trade-security equivalence. Only overall economic concerns, not micro-level concerns, increase the perception of trade as a security threat. When economic treatments are more narrowly tailored, they reduce support for trade but do not increase the perception that trade threatens national security. And in no case do the triggers that produce trade-security equivalence increase subjects’ willingness to utilize military strategies.

Our findings underscore the pivotal role of national economic concerns in the process of trade-security equivalence. The difference in effects between the micro- and macro-economic treatments indicates that for an economic shock to be considered a security issue, it must have wide repercussions that go beyond narrowly defined self-interests. We also emphasize that our macro-economic treatment does not involve any relative-gains logic. That is, we find that economic considerations trigger security concerns regardless of how other countries are doing. Similarly, only national economic concern, and not personal economic concern, acts as a mediator, which shows that respondents separate their personal well-being from the economic state of a country. In short, our results imply that “sociotropism,” or concern about society as a whole, is a key factor in individual understandings of national security. This study thus offers tentative evidence that trade-security equivalence is more the result of group-based anxieties than personal economic grievances.

We identify three promising areas for further research. First, why does a negative macro-level economic impact lead to trade-security equivalence? The mediation analysis shows that a substantial part of this effect is due to national economic concerns. But this insight only raises the additional question of why subjects reason from national economic concerns to trade as a security threat. Such an inference could be due to truly other-regarding sociotropism, but it could also be due to nuanced egocentric expectations that tie an individual’s personal economic fate to national economic conditions (Schaffer and Spilker 2019). Localized economic impacts leave open the possibility of individuals escaping the negative effects of trade by switching industries or moving geographi-

cally. Paradoxically, a macro-level impact may constitute a more powerful threat to individual-level economic security than do industry-specific impacts. Another possibility is that individuals use economic conditions as a proxy to assess their country's global status (Stein 2013). An overall economic deterioration may suggest vulnerability to the interests of other, more economically powerful countries, leading to a more general sense of insecurity. Future studies should attempt to differentiate between sociotropic and egocentric effects in trade-security equivalence, and to determine the political or other mechanisms that intervene between national economic concern and the perception of trade as a threat.

Second, how can we reconcile commercial peace theory and trade-security equivalence? Previous experimental research finds support for the belief that trade contributes to peace (e.g., Bulman 2022; Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022). A follow-up study might examine more specific overlaps and contradictions between trade-security equivalence and the commercial peace. Our results also show that treatments do not increase support for more aggressive policies, even when we find evidence of trade-security equivalence. One possibility—which is at least partly supported by our analysis—is that trade-security equivalence is distinct from *militarization*. That is, individuals may conceptually separate the perception of trade as a security threat from the prospect of using militarized force against a trade partner. Alternatively, the logic of commercial peace may be limited to specific contexts, such as trade relationships that do not involve any of the trade-security equivalence triggers identified in our analysis.

Third, what are the implications of our findings for political rhetoric and policymaking, especially in contexts where trade is likely to be discussed in terms of security-oriented language? While we find that economic concerns trigger trade-security equivalence, we do not examine the larger costs and benefits of this finding. Because increased threat perception has wide-ranging effects (Stein 2013), it is entirely possible that policymakers knowingly pursue trade-security equivalence for domestic political gains. A subsequent study might consider which political environments, and which forms of political rhetoric, are most conducive to trade-security equivalence.

Despite these limitations and the need for future research, our current findings have important policy implications. Traditionally, the field of international relations has treated national security and trade as separate issue-areas. However, our findings show that the two issue areas are closely linked in the public's mind. In particular, our results highlight the potential for macro-economic effects to fundamentally alter how individuals perceive trade, activating security concerns that would otherwise be absent. Thus, while linking trade with security may have domestic political benefits, the close connection should be treated with caution. Trade-security equivalence can lead to more aggressive policies, such as higher tariff rates. And as the public sharpens its perception of a country as a security threat, geopolitical tensions may increase. Although our findings show that the conditions that foster trade-oriented threat perception do not necessarily increase support for military actions, we only consider the immediate effects of those conditions. Our experiment

cannot account for the longer-term downstream effects of trade-security equivalence, such as elite rhetoric that persistently frames trade in terms of negative macro-economic consequences, and the pernicious policies that might result if the public comes to view trade overall as a threat to national security.

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APPENDIX

A Instruments

A.1 Foreign Policy Orientations

On a 5-point scale, please evaluate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements. Lower values mean you disagree, and higher values mean you agree.

- ***Militant Assertiveness***

- The best way to ensure world peace is through American military strength.
- The U.S. must demonstrate its resolve so that others do not take advantage of it.
- Rather than simply counter an opponent's thrusts, it is necessary to strike at the heart of an opponent's power.

- ***Cooperative Internationalism***

- It is essential for the United States to work with other countries to solve problems such as overpopulation, hunger, and pollution.
- The United States needs to cooperate more with the United Nations.
- The use or threat of force sometimes creates more problems than it solves by creating hostility or fear on the part of the opposing side.

- ***Nationalism***

- What happens to America in general will be my fate as well.
- I would rather be a citizen of America than of any other country in the world.

- ***Isolationism:*** The US government should just take care of the wellbeing of Americans and not get involved with other countries.

- ***Xenophobia:*** American culture is generally undermined by immigrants.

A.2 Treatment & Control Vignettes

Now you will be given two passages about international trade. Please read carefully and pay close attention.

(Passage 1) International trade is the movement of goods and services across borders. Products received from foreign countries are called imports, and products sent to foreign countries are called exports. All countries participate in international trade, but some countries have much higher levels of trade than others.

(Passage 2 - Control) We would like you to consider a scenario involving trade between the United States and a trade partner. For the sake of generality, we will refer to this trade partner as Country

X. In this scenario, the US exports large quantities of goods to Country X, and Country X exports large quantities of goods to the US. The US is one of Country X's top trade partners, and Country X is a top trade partner for the US.

(Treatment – Nonaligned Rival) The US and Country X often disagree with one another on political issues. They are members of opposing military alliances. In international crises, the US and Country X always support opposite sides. The US and Country X could easily become enemies.

(Treatment – Military Gap) The military of Country X is currently smaller and less powerful than the US military. However, the military of Country X is growing in size much more quickly than the US military. If Country X's military continues to grow at a high rate, it will become larger and more powerful than the US military in ten to fifteen years.

(Treatment - Economic Gap) The economy of Country X is currently smaller than the US economy, but the economy of Country X is growing much faster than the US economy. If Country X's economy continues to grow at a high rate, it will become larger than the US economy in ten to fifteen years.

(Treatment – Overall Economic) It is projected that continued trade with Country X will be harmful to the overall US economy. Trade with Country X puts pressure on US businesses to compete with businesses outside the US. As trade between the US and Country X has increased, growth of the overall US economy has slowed down.

(Treatment - Micro Economic) It is projected that continued trade with Country X will be harmful to US workers with [education level]. US workers with [education level] have a hard time competing with their counterparts in Country X. As trade between the US and Country X has increased, the average wage for US workers with [education level] has decreased.

A.3 Post-Treatment Questions

On a 5-point scale, please evaluate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements. Lower values mean you disagree, and higher values mean you agree.

- (Trade Threat) Trade with Country X is a threat to US national security.
- (Reduce Trade) The US should reduce trade with Country X.

A.4 Policy-Oriented Questions

On a 5-point scale, please evaluate whether you oppose or support the following policies toward Country X. Lower values mean you oppose, and higher values mean you support.

- (Tariffs) Impose tariffs or other trade barriers that reduce imports from Country X.
- (Military) Use military resources to keep Country X contained.
- (Immigration) Impose immigration restrictions against nationals from Country X.
- (Culture) Decrease cultural exchange with Country X.

A.5 Potential Mediator Questions & Manipulation Checks

- (Mercantilism) On a 5-point scale, please evaluate how much you disagree or agree with the following statements: Countries generally use international trade as a weapon to increase their own power at the expense of other countries.
- (Personal Economic Concern) In your opinion, how will trade with Country X affect you personally?
- (National Economic Concern) In your opinion, how will trade with Country X affect the overall US economy?
- (X is China) Did you have a specific country in mind when you read about Country X? [Open-ended]
- (Enemy Perception) Given the passage you read, which option best describes the relationship between Country X and the US? : Hostile / Friendly / Neither hostile nor friendly
- (Economic Gap) Given the passage you read, which option best describes the economies of Country X and the US? : The economy of Country X is catching up to the US economy / The economy of Country X is falling further behind the US economy / It's not clear which economy is growing faster
- (Military Gap) Given the passage you read, which option best describes the militaries of Country X and the US? : The military of Country X is catching up to the US military / The military of Country X is falling further behind the US military / It's not clear which military is growing faster
- (Country Threat Perception) Please evaluate how much of a security threat each of the following countries represent to the United States. A score of 0 means no threat at all, and a score of 10 means extremely threatening.
 - Country X, China, United Kingdom, Japan, Canada

B Descriptive Statistics

Table A1: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Pctl. 25	Pctl. 75	Max
Trade Threat	965	3	1.1	1	2	4	5
Reduce Trade	965	3.1	1.1	1	2	4	5
Militant Assert. (FA)	974	0.0013	0.85	-2.8	-0.53	0.58	1.8
Cooperative Intl. (FA)	974	0.00096	0.83	-2.8	-0.62	0.64	1.4
Isolationist (FA)	974	0.00	0.62	-2.2	-0.45	0.4	2.1
Nationalist (FA)	974	-0.00	0.64	-2.1	-0.54	0.44	0.82
Xenophobic	974	2.8	1.3	1	2	4	5
Enemy perception	824	0.24	0.43	0	0	0	1
Country threat perception	818	5.6	2.9	0	4	8	10
Mercantilism	959	3.7	0.99	1	3	4	5
Personal economic concern	832	3	0.9	1	2	3	5
National economic concern	832	3.1	1.2	1	2	4	5
Impose tariffs	963	3.1	1.1	1	2	4	5
Contain militarily	963	2.8	1.2	1	2	4	5
Restrict immigration	963	3	1.1	1	2	4	5
Reduce exchanges	963	2.9	1.1	1	2	4	5

Table A2: Balance Summary Across Treatment Groups

Covariate	Type	Max. Std. Mean Diff. (Unadjusted)
Age	Continuous	0.1120
Gender	Binary	0.0480
Income	Continuous	0.0844
Party ID	Continuous	0.2331
Education	Continuous	0.0972

C Correlation Matrix

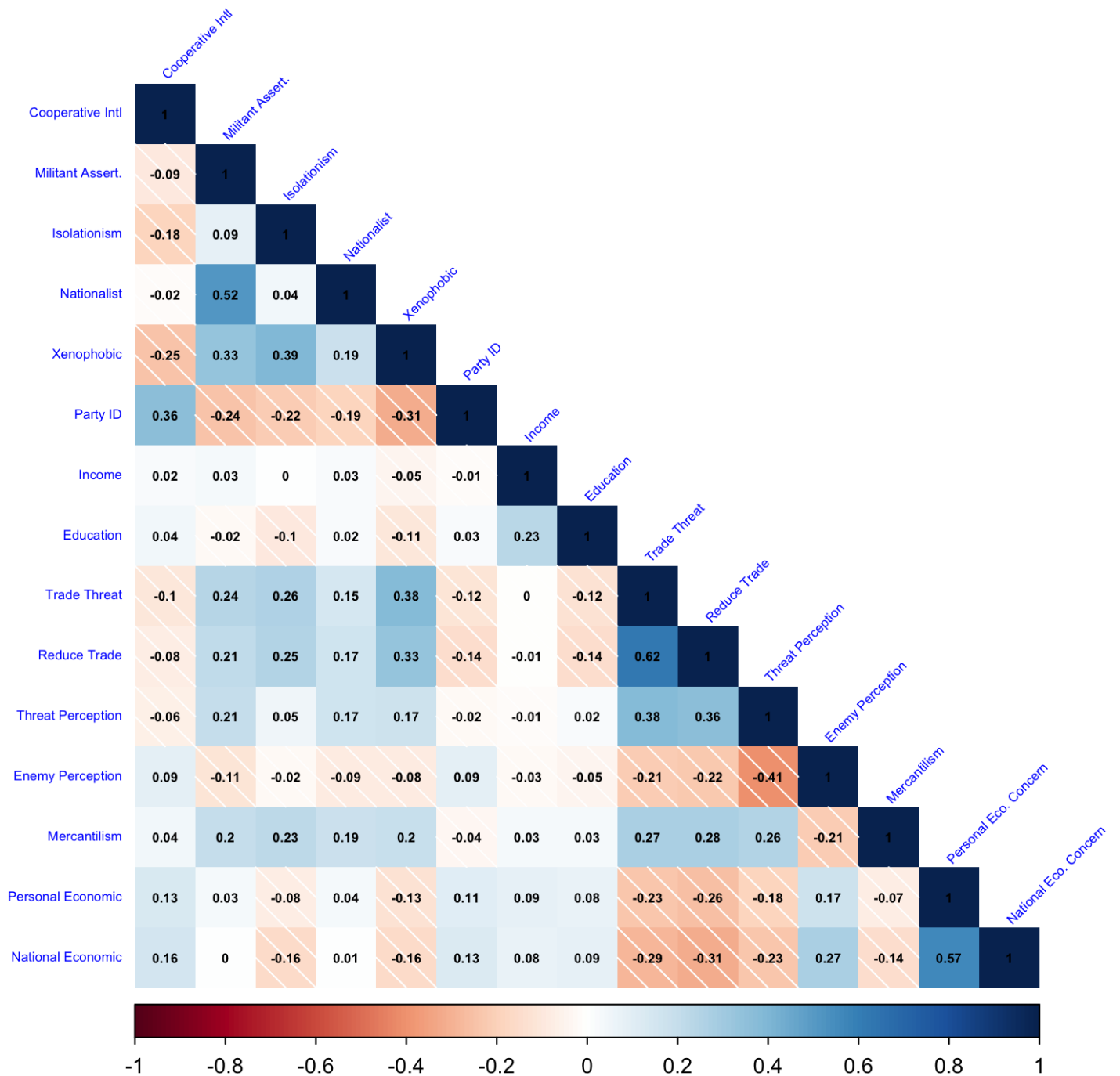


Figure A1: Correlation Matrix of Main Variables

D Robustness Checks

In addition to our main results presented in the paper, we ran several robustness checks, all of which include party identity, income, education, gender, and logged age as controls. First, we only included responses from those who passed manipulation checks – which reduces our number of observations to 587 – to re-run the main regression analysis with FPO controls (Models 1-2 in Table A3), and policy-oriented analysis (Models 3-6 in Table A3). Overall, the results remain similar to those we get from using the entire pool of subjects.

Table A3: Those who Passed Manipulation Checks

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Trade Threat (1)	Reduce Trade (2)	Tariffs (3)	Military (4)	Immig. (5)	Cultural Exch. (6)
Nonaligned Rival	0.597*** (0.147)	0.729*** (0.149)	0.574*** (0.149)	0.278* (0.157)	0.271* (0.149)	0.459*** (0.149)
Military Gap	0.210* (0.121)	0.243** (0.122)	0.150 (0.122)	-0.103 (0.129)	0.022 (0.122)	0.068 (0.122)
Economic Gap	-0.189 (0.123)	0.147 (0.125)	0.002 (0.125)	-0.312** (0.131)	-0.007 (0.124)	-0.090 (0.125)
Overall Economic	0.714*** (0.134)	0.928*** (0.136)	0.698*** (0.136)	-0.170 (0.143)	0.150 (0.136)	0.366*** (0.136)
Micro Economic	0.501*** (0.142)	0.815*** (0.144)	0.491*** (0.144)	0.187 (0.151)	0.400*** (0.144)	0.227 (0.144)
Cooperative Intl	-0.004 (0.054)	0.043 (0.055)	0.001 (0.055)	-0.169*** (0.057)	-0.087 (0.054)	0.037 (0.055)
Militant Assert	0.273*** (0.063)	0.271*** (0.064)	0.253*** (0.064)	0.316*** (0.067)	0.268*** (0.064)	0.121* (0.064)
Isolationist	0.242*** (0.071)	0.294*** (0.072)	0.326*** (0.072)	0.172** (0.076)	0.266*** (0.072)	0.336*** (0.072)
Nationalist	0.121 (0.083)	0.263*** (0.084)	0.146* (0.084)	0.174** (0.088)	0.126 (0.084)	0.160* (0.084)
Xenophobic	0.182*** (0.039)	0.135*** (0.039)	0.156*** (0.039)	0.227*** (0.041)	0.293*** (0.039)	0.306*** (0.039)
Observations	587	587	585	585	585	585
R ²	0.283	0.309	0.270	0.263	0.320	0.295
Adjusted R ²	0.264	0.290	0.250	0.244	0.302	0.276
Residual Std. Error	0.972 (df = 571)	0.983 (df = 571)	0.983 (df = 569)	1.033 (df = 569)	0.980 (df = 569)	0.983 (df = 569)
F Statistic	15.020*** (df = 15; 571)	16.995*** (df = 15; 571)	14.012*** (df = 15; 569)	13.563*** (df = 15; 569)	17.834*** (df = 15; 569)	15.845*** (df = 15; 569)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Second, we checked for an ordering effect regarding our two dependent variables (DV) measures. The mean value of *Trade Threat* for those who saw *Trade Threat* first is 2.88, while for those who saw *Reduce Trade* first is 3.05. The mean value of *Reduce Trade* for those who saw *Trade Threat* first is 3.03, while for those who saw *Reduce Trade* first is 3.21. However, the t-tests are not statistically significant at p-value of 0.01. Table A4 shows the main results with a dummy variable for the order of the DVs (*DV Order*) included as an additional control to our main model specification. The treatment effects largely remain unchanged.

Third, we controlled for those who associate Country X with China. Based on the open-ended question regarding which country, if any, the respondents thought of with respect to Country X, we created a dummy variable for those who associate China with Country X (*X Is China*). Table A5 shows our main results with the dummy variable as an additional control. Again, our treatment effects do not change significantly.

Table A4: Ordering Effects of DV Questions

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trade Threat (1)	Reduce Trade (2)
Nonaligned Rival	0.427*** (0.111)	0.514*** (0.115)
Military Gap	0.293*** (0.110)	0.340*** (0.114)
Economic Gap	-0.041 (0.111)	0.294** (0.114)
Overall Economic	0.554*** (0.111)	0.699*** (0.115)
Micro Economic	0.147 (0.110)	0.584*** (0.114)
Cooperative Intl	0.021 (0.043)	0.062 (0.044)
Militant Assert	0.204*** (0.048)	0.173*** (0.050)
Isolationist	0.267*** (0.056)	0.252*** (0.058)
Nationalist	0.084 (0.064)	0.187*** (0.066)
Xenophobic	0.222*** (0.030)	0.175*** (0.031)
DV Order	0.140** (0.064)	0.122* (0.066)
Observations	928	928
R ²	0.242	0.222
Adjusted R ²	0.229	0.208
Residual Std. Error (df = 911)	0.969	1.000
F Statistic (df = 16; 911)	18.176***	16.260***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A5: Controlling for China Association

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trade Threat (1)	Reduce Trade (2)
Nonaligned Rival	0.427*** (0.111)	0.505*** (0.115)
Military Gap	0.295*** (0.110)	0.337*** (0.114)
Economic Gap	-0.031 (0.111)	0.291** (0.115)
Overall Economic	0.576*** (0.112)	0.688*** (0.115)
Micro Economic	0.166 (0.110)	0.578*** (0.114)
Cooperative Intl	0.020 (0.043)	0.057 (0.044)
Militant Assert	0.213*** (0.048)	0.173*** (0.050)
Isolationist	0.272*** (0.056)	0.254*** (0.058)
Nationalist	0.092 (0.064)	0.187*** (0.066)
Xenophobic	0.215*** (0.030)	0.177*** (0.031)
X Is China	0.011 (0.026)	-0.021 (0.027)
Observations	928	928
R ²	0.241	0.221
Adjusted R ²	0.227	0.207
Residual Std. Error (df = 911)	0.970	1.001
F Statistic (df = 16; 911)	18.059***	16.106***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A6: China Association Test

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	X Is China (1)	Trade Threat (2)	Reduce Trade (3)	Trade Threat (4)	Reduce Trade (5)
Nonaligned Rival	0.211 (0.246)	0.428*** (0.111)	0.506*** (0.115)	0.428*** (0.111)	0.507*** (0.115)
Military Gap	0.084 (0.249)	0.295*** (0.110)	0.337*** (0.114)	0.295*** (0.110)	0.337*** (0.114)
Economic Gap	0.297 (0.244)	-0.030 (0.111)	0.293** (0.115)	-0.030 (0.111)	0.294** (0.115)
Overall Economic	0.592** (0.240)	0.579*** (0.112)	0.692*** (0.115)	0.534*** (0.131)	0.573*** (0.135)
Micro Economic	0.592** (0.240)	0.121 (0.129)	0.515*** (0.133)	0.169 (0.111)	0.584*** (0.114)
X is China * Micro Econ.		0.121 (0.176)	0.165 (0.181)		
X is China * Overall Econ.				0.106 (0.177)	0.294 (0.183)
Observations	973	928	928	928	928
R ²		0.241	0.221	0.241	0.223
Adjusted R ²		0.227	0.207	0.227	0.208
Log Likelihood	-610.649				
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,233.298				
Residual Std. Error (df = 910)		0.970	1.001	0.970	1.000
F Statistic (df = 17; 910)		17.015***	15.205***	17.006***	15.338***
<i>Note:</i>				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

In addition, we checked whether some treatments were more likely than others to prompt subjects to think of China.¹⁴ We estimated logit models with *X Is China* as the dependent variable. Model 1 in Table A6 shows the result of this logit analysis, which indicates that the respondents were slightly more likely to think of China when given the two economic treatments. However, we do not find any evidence that the treatment effects are conditional on subjects' perception that X refers to China. In Models 2–4, we interacted the *X Is China* variable with each of the two economic conditions, and we reran the main analysis.¹⁵ The estimated effects for the economic treatments are substantively the same as the estimates in the main paper, and none of the estimated interaction terms is close to statistical significance. Although this approach carries the usual risks of conditioning on post-treatment variables (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018), post-treatment bias requires that an unmeasured common cause affects both subjects' perception that Country X is China and subjects' responses on the outcomes of interest. Our analysis extensively controls for such potential common causes, including individual attributes and foreign-policy orientations.

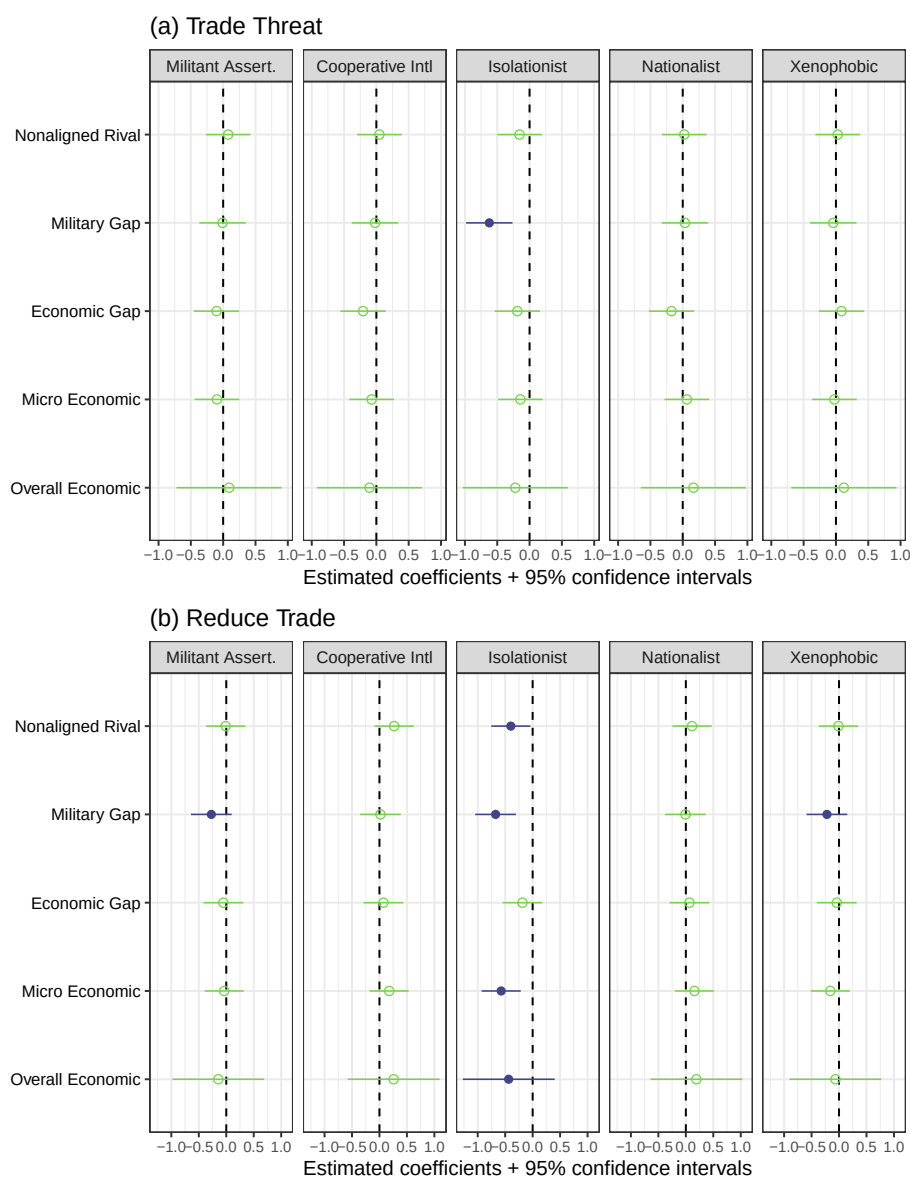
¹⁴All models in Table A6 include all the demographic and FPO controls.

¹⁵These models include the basic controls and foreign-policy orientations as covariates.

E Heterogeneous Effects

We look for heterogeneous effects on how the subjects perceive trade as a threat by their foreign policy orientations (FPO). Figure A2 shows the regression coefficients for the interaction terms with each of the treatment and FPO variables. All the models include the same control variables as our main analysis. In general, most interaction terms are statistically insignificant. The interaction between *Military Gap* and *Isolationist* is the only one that shows statistical significance for both of our DVs. Given that isolationists generally prefer disengagement from the world politics, it is not surprising to find that they are less concerned about geopolitics.

Figure A2: Interaction Terms with Treatment and FPO Variables



F Pilot Experiments

Before our main experiment, we ran two pilot studies. Both experiments took place online with student samples from a large research university. Each survey included pre-treatment questions (e.g., demographic questions, and feeling thermometer towards multiple countries), treatment vignettes formatted as an online news article, and post-treatment questions such as their threat perceptions and policy preferences.

Experiment 1 explored four potential sources of trade-security equivalence, specifically concerning the US-China relationship: (1) an *elite cue* treatment where a bipartisan group of US Senators warn of the negative impacts of increased trade with China; (2) a *policy* treatment where the US Department of Commerce launches an investigation for a national security exception; (3) a *power gap* treatment where nonspecific experts discuss the decreasing power gap between the US and China; and (4) an *economic reasoning* treatment where nonspecific experts discuss the potential negative effects of increased trade with China. The power gap treatment was most strongly associated with threat perception, which steered us toward a focus on security versus economic treatments in future iterations of the study. We also found that self-reported Republicans were more likely to perceive trade with China as a threat than self-reported Democrats, which led us to explore more thoroughly the role of foreign-policy orientation.

Experiment 2 moved beyond the US-China relationship by incorporating trade-partner effects. In addition to China, we added Canada as a comparison point. To avoid an excessive number of treatments, we simplified the sources of trade-security equivalence into binary security and economic cues, resulting in a 2×2 factorial plus a hanging control group. We also added pre-treatment questions on FPOs, xenophobia, and nationalism. This experiment was otherwise similar to the first. We found that (1) the treatments had much stronger effects with regard to Canada than China, but (2) trade with China nonetheless led to a higher level of trade-security equivalence than trade with Canada. We determined that trade with China is already overly-securitized in the US, which makes it difficult for any treatment to affect trade preferences. At the same time, we found that some treatments had an effect even with regard to an established US ally like Canada. These results reinforced the need to use an unnamed hypothetical country in the analysis, and to differentiate more finely between various sources of trade-security equivalence.