

Franco-American Security and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

April 2025

Introduction and context

The evolving geopolitical landscape, marked by shifting U.S. foreign policy priorities and increasing European concerns over strategic autonomy, has raised critical questions about the future of Franco-American security cooperation. The return of Donald Trump to the White House since January 20 further amplifies these concerns, given his prior administration's scepticism towards NATO and unpredictable transatlantic policies.

To evaluate the perspectives of French citizens on these issues, Debating Europe, the citizen engagement unit of the think tank Friends of Europe, conducted a survey from February 13 to 16, 2025, which coincided with Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 14. Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference signalled a shift in U.S. priorities in transatlantic relations with a stronger focus on supporting populist movements and accusing European leaders of suppressing free speech and censorship. His omission of direct criticism of Russia and the implied re-evaluation of NATO commitments raised concerns about America's reliability as a security partner.

This address this shift in tone and policy, a total of 400 French citizens, aged 18 to 35, with an equal gender distribution, were surveyed on their views regarding U.S. support for democratic values in Europe and America's reliability as a security partner.

Public Perceptions of U.S. Commitment to Democratic Values in Europe

The survey results indicate that **a significant portion of the French public remains sceptical of the United States' role in supporting democracy in Europe.** An overwhelming **69% of respondents believe that U.S. efforts in this regard are ineffective**, with 34% considering them "very ineffective" and 35% "rather ineffective." Many respondents argue that U.S. foreign policy prioritises national interests, particularly economic and strategic gains, rather than the promotion of democratic

ideals. “Considering the current President and his latest measures [...] it seems obvious that the democratic values of the American government are no longer in line with those of the European Union” regrets Anaïs, F, 18-24. Many other citizens like her voice their concerns over U.S. policies affecting climate change, migrants, women and abortion rights, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other vulnerable groups, both in the U.S. and outside, particularly in Ukraine and Palestine.

The **Trump administration’s disengagement from global governance structures and its perceived tolerance for authoritarian regimes have contributed to this lack of confidence.** “The United States often takes a unilateral approach, such as withdrawing from treaties like the Paris Agreement and issuing recent taxation threats. These sudden decisions demonstrate a disregard for international cooperation, which is considered one of the pillars of European democracy” says Lucía, F, 18-24.

Additionally, **some highlighted concerns over figures like Elon Musk allegedly supporting right-wing populist movements in Europe**, which further complicates transatlantic democratic cohesion. “I think that the tide has turned and that the United States is currently engaged in undermining democratic values in Europe. For example, Elon Musk, who is part of the US government, is directly siding with the AFD” worries Matthieu, M, 31-35, from France. “I see the United States as almost as threatening as Russia. Partnership with the United States is not really promising as long as its policies are far-right” adds Mathilde, F, 18-24, from France.

Furthermore, **U.S. positions on international conflicts, including Ukraine and the Middle East, are often perceived as inconsistent and self-serving**, weakening their credibility as a defender of democratic values.

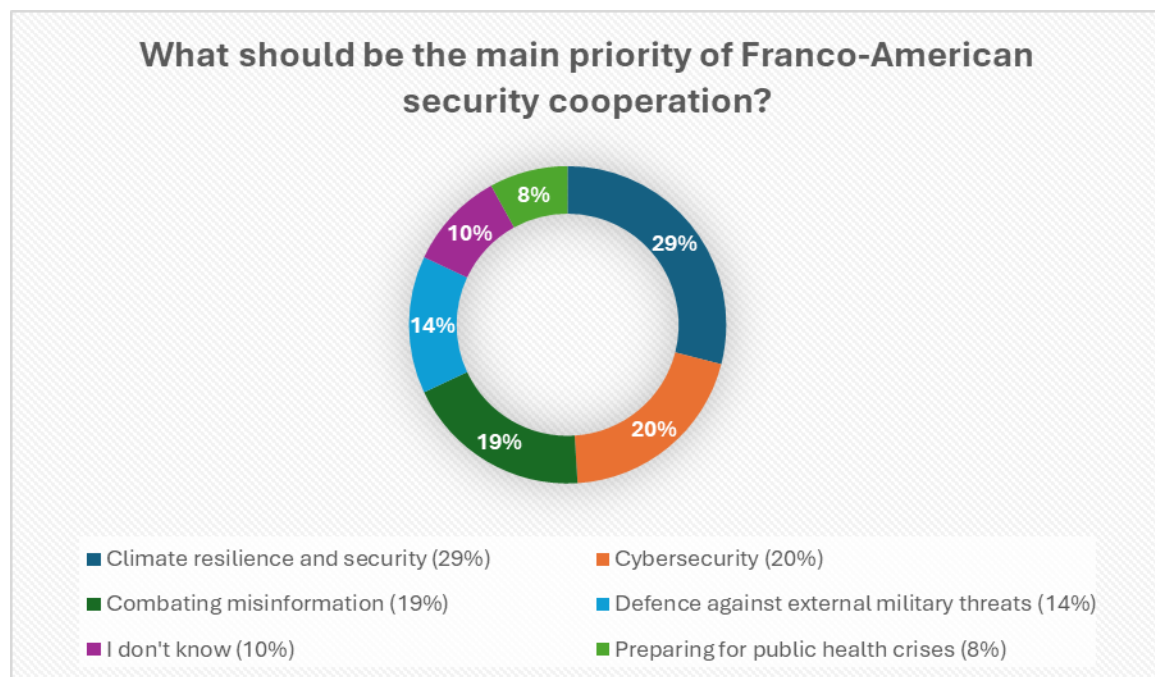
Reliability of the United States as a Security Partner

Trust in the United States as a security partner appears to be waning, with only 23% of respondents considering the U.S. "very" or "rather" reliable in ensuring European security. Meanwhile, **60% perceive the U.S. as either "rather unreliable" or "not reliable at all."** Much of this scepticism is linked to Trump’s previous threats to **withdraw from NATO and impose penalties on allies**, which raised fears of an erratic U.S. commitment to European defence. Many also point to the "America First" doctrine, which prioritises U.S. interests over allied concerns, reinforcing the perception that Washington may not act in Europe’s best interests. The possibility that the U.S. might

leverage its security commitments to extract economic or political concessions has led to **concerns that the transatlantic alliance could become transactional rather than strategic**. Additionally, respondents noted the use of trade tariffs and energy dependencies as instruments of coercion rather than as elements of partnership, adding to the overall distrust.

EU-U.S. Cooperation: Efficiency, Sovereignty, and Balance

Public opinion on the effectiveness of EU-U.S. partnerships is mixed, with clear preferences for specific areas of cooperation.



When asked about priority areas for EU-U.S. collaboration, respondents highlighted resilience and security concerns over traditional military cooperation. The most favoured area of partnership is climate resilience and security, with 29% of respondents prioritising this issue. *“In my opinion, the climate is the number 1 problem, and the United States has a lot to do in this area”* urges Marie, F, 18-24. However, **there is also scepticism about what can be achieved for climate under the Trump administration.** *“Without a planet, nothing will be possible. Today, the global context is not conducive to looking to the future, particularly in view of the U-turns decreed by Trump, which run counter to ecology and the protection of the planet”* worries Antonin,

M, 25-30. When discussing what should be the priority of the EU-U.S collaboration, Laura, F, 25-30 also replies *“The climate, because the Americans are big polluters, but given the abject politics in the United States, it's hard to imagine a collaboration that's in line with our values.”*

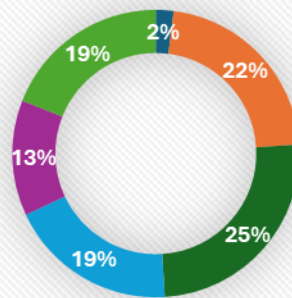
Cybersecurity follows closely, with 20% considering it a key area for cooperation. *“The main priority should be cybersecurity, given the growing threats in this area. Strong cooperation can really protect both countries”* says Christophe, M, 18-24. **Addressing disinformation is another major concern, with 19% advocating for joint efforts in countering misinformation and online threats. Traditional defence against external military threats ranks lower, with only 14% supporting this as a focus of EU-U.S. collaboration.**

Preparedness for public health crises is viewed as a lower priority (8%), while 10% of respondents remain uncertain about which areas of cooperation should be prioritised. These figures suggest that **while security remains a key concern, the nature of transatlantic cooperation is shifting toward non-traditional security threats and resilience-building measures.**

While respondents acknowledge the strategic importance of collaboration in these areas, many are critical of the imbalance in decision-making. *“In truth, all are good answers, but the main thing would be for the Americans to see us as their equals and for us to stop being followers and become leaders”* admits Julien, M, 31-35. A considerable number of respondents believe that Europe often aligns with U.S. interests at the expense of its own sovereignty. **There is a growing call for re-evaluating transatlantic agreements to ensure that European priorities are adequately represented.** While maintaining a close alliance with the U.S. remains essential, French citizens advocate for a recalibration of the relationship to establish a more equitable and mutually beneficial partnership.

Closely linked to the fact that only 14% of participants consider traditional defence against external military threats a priority in EU-U.S. collaboration, **the survey results reveal a divided perception of the effectiveness of Franco-American security partnerships in addressing authoritarian threats such as Russia.**

Do you think that Franco-American security partnerships are an adequate response to the challenges posed by authoritarian states such as Russia?



■ Strongly agree (8%) ■ Somewhat agree (22%)
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree (25%) ■ Somewhat disagree (19%)
 ■ Strongly disagree (13%) ■ Don't know (19%)

While 24% of respondents believe these alliances provide an adequate response, the majority either disagree (32%), remain neutral (25%), or are uncertain (19%). *“Franco-American security partnerships, notably through NATO and intelligence cooperation, offer a solid response to the threats posed by Russia. Military support for Ukraine, economic sanctions and the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank illustrate this effectiveness. However, dependence on the United States remains a challenge for Europe's strategic autonomy”* says Benjamin, 25-30. Lucía, F, 18-24 disagrees *“The disorganised and clumsy responses to the Russian offensive in Ukraine show that Franco-American security partnerships are not working well. Military offensives that are more reactive than preventive highlight an inability to contain a threat, but also to negotiate and engage in dialogue”*.

Concerns primarily revolve around strategic dependency on the United States, inconsistencies in diplomatic and military actions, and the perceived lack of European autonomy in defence. Criticism is particularly directed at the unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy, especially under Donald Trump, whose stance toward Russia is viewed with suspicion. *“Donald Trump shows too much confidence in Vladimir Putin, breaking France's trust”* regrets Hugo, M, 18-24.

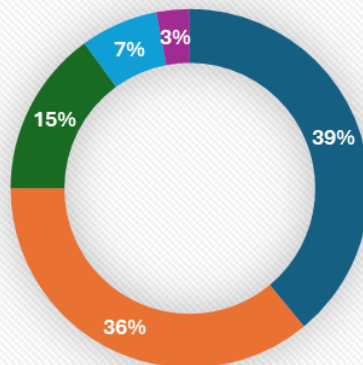
Respondents emphasise the need for stronger European defence capabilities, more rigorous enforcement of sanctions, and improved coordination. Additionally, there is strong support for enhancing cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, and ensuring that European interests are not subordinated to American strategic priorities. For Jonathan, M, 18-24 *“Franco-American cooperation does not take sufficient account of European interests and is too dependent on the strategic priorities of the United States. Europe should strengthen its autonomy in defence and cyber security.”*

These findings highlight the ongoing debate over Europe’s security strategy—whether to maintain reliance on transatlantic partnerships or move toward greater strategic autonomy in confronting authoritarian threats.

Rethinking NATO and European Security: French Perspectives on Strategic Autonomy

Along the same lines, the recent survey data indicate a **growing scepticism among French citizens regarding NATO's role as the primary guarantor of European security.** While the alliance remains a crucial pillar of transatlantic cooperation, **there is increasing support for strengthening the European Union’s own defence mechanisms to reduce dependency on the United States, especially in the current context of the war in Ukraine.** As one respondent, Coline, F, 25-30, notes *“The security partnerships between France and the United States are strong, but greater coordination with other European partners may be needed to strengthen a collective approach against threats from authoritarian states.”*

Which statement best describes how France should prioritise its security spending?



- Focus primarily on independent European defence (39%)
- Dividing funds equally between transatlantic cooperation and independent European defence (36%)
- I don't know (15%)
- Reduce overall security spending (7%)
- Focus primarily on transatlantic cooperation with the United States (and NATO) (3%)

A significant 39% of respondents believe that France should prioritise European defence autonomy, while 36% advocate for an equal balance between transatlantic cooperation and independent European defence efforts. Only 3% of respondents favoured focusing primarily on transatlantic cooperation with the United States and NATO. Concerns over NATO's effectiveness, particularly in light of shifting U.S. foreign policies, have further reinforced this perspective. For Sonia, F, 18-24: "NATO plays a key role in Europe's collective defence, but political differences between members and dependence on the United States raise questions about its long-term reliability."

At the same time, there is no clear consensus on how NATO's role should evolve, or on how an EU defence would work. "Strengthening the EU's independent role in defence would offer a number of advantages. It would provide greater strategic autonomy, reducing dependence on the United States and NATO. A strengthened European defence would also ensure greater responsiveness to crises and more effective protection of the EU's specific interests. However, this project also has its drawbacks. **It would require considerable financial investment and could create divisions between Member States over strategic priorities.**" points out Lola, F, 18-24. Thomas, M, 25-30, agrees "strengthening the EU's defence would make Europe more independent and

influential, but it could be expensive, complicated to organise and cause problems with NATO”.

A majority believe that France should play a leading role in strengthening EU defence, both through increased budget allocations and technological advancements. Respondents suggest prioritising cybersecurity, intelligence-sharing, and independent military capabilities. Some also argue that **France should reduce its reliance on American defence technologies and instead focus on European industrial partnerships to reinforce regional security.** *“It is now time for the EU to have its own alliance, its own army and a military industry at least equivalent to that of the USA”* advocates Jean-Baptiste, M, 25-30. Axel, M, 31-35 adds that *“France has every interest in creating a European defence, especially as it is a country that produces a lot of armaments.”*

Overall, these perspectives highlight the need for a long-term strategy that, while maintaining a careful balance between transatlantic cooperation and European self-sufficiency, ultimately leans toward strengthening Europe’s independent defence capabilities to ensure regional stability and strategic resilience in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

The Digital Battlefield: Disinformation, Social Media, and AI in Security

The role of digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping public opinion and security narratives is a growing concern for French citizens, with 81% of respondents being either concerned or very concerned about the spread of disinformation and hate speech on social media, especially on X (previously Twitter, acquired by Elon Musk in 2022). *“With the popularisation of AI, misinformation has the potential to multiply”* worries Juliette, F, 18-24. *“It’s misinformation that shapes the social and political climate of modern democracies and does a lot of damage which profits the fascist far right”* adds Robin, M, 31-35.

Many respondents’ express apprehension over the influence of American tech giants, particularly regarding the spread of disinformation and foreign interference in European political processes. ***“The influence of the United States on the world at the moment is rather negative, with the manipulation of social networks to promote extremist ideas, mainly because of Elon Musk and Donald Trump (which skews the European debate towards these same extremist ideas and fascism). The decline in the***

control of information, in particular, encourages the emergence of false information in public debate, and this lack of visibility is a brake on democracy” argues Eli, F, 18-34.

The presence of unregulated AI-driven content, often linked to misinformation campaigns, further complicates the landscape. Respondents call for stricter EU regulations on social media platforms and AI governance to prevent external manipulation of democratic discourse. **“Social media platforms must absolutely be required to better moderate their networks! Bots should be clearly identified on the platforms, and social networks should be held accountable (to a reasonable extent, of course) for political manipulation campaigns on their platforms and make additional efforts to counter the development of these phenomena”** argues Alexandra, F, 31-35.

“Misinformation and hate speech on social networks threaten democracy, social cohesion and security. They manipulate opinion, encourage radicalisation and allow foreign interference. To remedy this, stricter regulation, media education and accountability of platforms are essential” says Maël, M, 25-30.

The consensus is that **France and the EU must establish more robust mechanisms to counter digital threats, ensuring that emerging technologies do not undermine European security and political stability.**

Disinformation and Democracy: Russia's Influence on Europe's Stability

Survey results highlight persistent concerns about disinformation and Russia's influence on democracy in Europe. Many respondents perceive the spread of false information as a destabilisation tool used by Russia, particularly through social media and influential figures. This strategy appears to be having a tangible impact, as **39% of respondents consider Russian disinformation campaigns to be either "very significant" or "rather significant" in undermining trust in French institutions, the EU, and NATO.** *“During the 2017 French presidential elections, cyber-attacks and the dissemination of false information targeted Emmanuel Macron to influence public opinion. In 2022, Kremlin-linked media outlets such as RT and Sputnik spread biased stories about the war in Ukraine, seeking to divide European opinion and weaken support for NATO”* reminds Emma, F, 18-24. *“Members of my family living in the United States are victims of Russian*

disinformation and think that Ukraine is responsible for the war and that Putin has the right to invade Ukraine because it wants to join NATO” adds Nicole, F, 25-30.

However, **29% of respondents indicated that they were unsure, highlighting a lack of awareness regarding the impact of Russian disinformation.** Additionally, 15% responded "neither significant nor insignificant," reflecting either broader ambiguity in public perception or further uncertainty surrounding this issue.

Meanwhile, **17% perceive its influence as either insignificant or entirely negligible, often based on the belief that they are personally immune to such tactics or that Western democracies engage in similar practices.** *“I have the impression that in times of war you have to be careful about what you hear or see on all sides. I don't question everything because of what I see on TV or on the news, and I prefer to wait and try to understand the conflict before getting involved in a debate that I can't control. That said, it's possible that more ‘naive’ people may fall into the trap of disinformation”* says Mathias, M, 18-24. Arthur, M, 18-24 adds *“What about Israeli and American operations? Disinformation is the rule of the game.”*

Additionally, some respondents emphasise that while the United States plays a key role in NATO and European security, its positions can sometimes be ambivalent, tolerating authoritarian tendencies based on strategic interests. This dual dynamic fosters distrust toward major powers and underscores the need for Europe to develop stronger resilience mechanisms against disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats.

Implications for Franco-American Security Cooperation

Given these findings, it is likely that the future of Franco-American security relations will be shaped by several key factors. One of the most prominent is the **growing call for European strategic autonomy**, championed by President Emmanuel Macron, who has repeatedly urged Europe to reduce its reliance on the United States for security. **Strengthening the EU's defence capabilities could mitigate risks associated with fluctuating U.S. policies.** If the Trump administration deprioritises NATO commitments, France may be compelled to spearhead independent European security initiatives to ensure regional stability.

Additionally, **the increasing influence of U.S.-based tech figures and platforms on European politics underscores the need for enhanced regulatory coordination**

between the EU and the U.S. to combat disinformation and hybrid threats. Economic and security interdependence remains another crucial element. While the U.S. remains a dominant global power, maintaining balanced relations will require a careful mix of strategic cooperation and competition.

Conclusion

The evolving Franco-American security relationship is at a crossroads, shaped by shifting U.S. foreign policy, growing European concerns over strategic autonomy, and the impact of digital threats. The report highlights deepening scepticism among French citizens regarding the U.S. commitment to democratic values and its reliability as a security partner, particularly in light of President Trump's return and his administration's approach to NATO and transatlantic relations.

Public opinion suggests that while Franco-American cooperation remains important, there is a strong push for Europe—led by France—to build its own defence mechanisms to reduce dependency on the United States. The increasing preference for European strategic autonomy, coupled with concerns over U.S. unpredictability, underscores the need for a recalibrated partnership based on mutual respect and balance rather than reliance.

Beyond military cooperation, the report also emphasises the significance of cybersecurity, disinformation, and AI-driven threats as key areas where transatlantic coordination remains essential. However, **French citizens call for stronger EU regulatory frameworks to counter digital interference and external influence, particularly from American tech giants and Russian disinformation campaigns.**

Recent geopolitical developments, including shifts in U.S. policy toward Ukraine and renewed European defence initiatives, reinforce the urgency of rethinking transatlantic security frameworks. **France and the EU are now at a critical juncture, requiring strategic decisions to ensure both collective European security and a stable, yet independent, partnership with the United States.**

The future of Franco-American relations will likely depend on Europe's ability to assert itself as a security actor while maintaining transatlantic cooperation where beneficial. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the path forward involves a delicate



balance—one that prioritises European sovereignty without completely severing long-standing alliances.