

EUROPEANS THINK THAT THE UNITED STATES IS NOT AN ALLY BUT A ‘NECESSARY PARTNER’

Summary

Key Points

1. Nearly half of EU citizens (49%) view the US as a “necessary partner” rather than a core ally.
2. Transatlantic diplomacy has shifted toward transactional model.
3. Public perception varies geographically with Western/Northern Europe remaining highly skeptical of U.S. leadership.

With shifting geopolitical dynamics and the 2024 political landscape, the future of transatlantic relations and European security are high on the international agenda. Empirical research published by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals that 49% of EU citizens no longer view Washington as an unconditional ally, but rather as a “necessary partner” with whom cooperation must be negotiated.

This policy brief analyzes the public shift, including the political legacy of Donald Trump, and translates these empirical findings into policy recommendations, which are targeted toward EU policymakers and ministry officials in order to foster strategic self-reliance and enhance internal European cohesion.

Change in EU Citizens' Perception of the US

According to a recent study, the majority of European Union (EU) citizens no longer view the United States (USA) as a traditional ally, but rather as a “necessary partner”, reflecting a growing divergence in transatlantic relations. Nearly half of EU respondents (49%) no longer regard Washington as their primary ally, turning instead toward partners such as the United Kingdom (13%) or China (10%). This shift is reinforced by findings from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), whose data shows that even in pro-US countries like Poland, Germany and Denmark, the U.S. is increasingly viewed through a pragmatic lens as a partner rather than a true ally.

Transatlantic Relations and Cooperation with the USA

Pawel Zerka states that this fundamental change originates from political developments under former U.S. President Donald Trump, which redefined the transatlantic alliance to a transactional relationship. This structural transformation reflects a broad movement toward pragmatism and transaction-based diplomacy across The Union. For this reason, Europeans have increasingly developed a pragmatic rather than an idealistic perspective regarding the United States. The comprehensive research was conducted across eleven EU member states, including Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. Additionally, the study expanded its scope beyond EU by incorporating respondents from Ukraine, Switzerland

and the United Kingdom have been involved in the research. At the end, these findings confirm that European foreign policy preferences are increasingly grounded in strategic calculations, permanently altering expectations regarding American partnership and transatlantic cooperation in the modern geopolitical arena.

Trump's Perception in Europe

Public opinion regarding Donald Trump varies significantly across the European continent, displaying a clear geographic divide. While approval remains noticeably stronger in Southeastern Europe, resistance dominates public discourse in Western and Northern European nations. For instance, in Hungary, nearly half of the respondents (49%) express optimism, believing Trump's return to power would foster global stability and peace. A similar situation is evident in Bulgaria and Romania, where positive expectations stand at 45%. Public perception shifts dramatically in Northern and Western European nations, where opposition to his political return remains skeptical. A majority of citizens in Denmark (62%) and Germany (55%) express deep concern, arguing that his re-election would instead harm world peace. These contrasting figures demonstrate how historical, political and strategic differences shape expectations regarding future U.S. leadership and its potential impact on international peace and security.

Perceptions of Europe's Future

The research further underscores contrasting European perspectives regarding the continent's global standing. A majority group, often termed “Euro-optimists”, views the European Union as an enduring global power capable of surviving the next 20 years. This perspective is widespread in countries such as Estonia, Denmark, Ukraine, Spain and Portugal. However, 22% of the

participants adopt a “Euro-pessimist” view, argue that the EU lacks true superpower status and is destined to break apart over time. According to Pawel Zerka of the ECFR, citizens across Europe increasingly question whether the Union has the strength to compete with countries like China and the U.S., leading many to question the long-term viability of the Union.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strategic Autonomy as a Necessity. The shift in European public perception from idealism to realism necessitates a concrete policy shift toward European strategic autonomy across energy, defense and technology sectors.
- Communicating Institutional Resilience. To counter the rising tide of Euro-pessimism (currently at 22%), European institutions need to actively demonstrate the tangible economic and security benefits of Union membership.
- Revising Transatlantic Security Frameworks. Future NATO and bilateral negotiations should reflect the transactional reality of modern diplomacy, establishing clearer parameters for burden-sharing.

FOOTNOTES

- Zerka P. (2024). The Shift Toward Transactionalism: European Attitudes Toward the United States. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). <https://ecfr.eu/publication/transatlantic-twilight-european-public-opinion-and-the-long-shadow-of-trump/>
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- Zerka, P. (2023). Mapping European Fragmentation: Euro-optimism vs. Euro-pessimism in a Changing Geopolitical Order. ECFR Research Paper. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/>

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