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Despite Turbulent Period, Opinion of NATO Constant in France

Favorable Opinion of the U.S. Down Slightly

Media attention has focused recently on the French and U.S. governments' disagreements on a number of foreign policy issues over the past year, including NATO command structure, NATO enlargement decisions and policy toward Iran and Iraq. This just-completed USIA poll in France shows that while the public seems slightly more critical of the U.S., support for NATO has not eroded.

KEY FINDINGS

- Majorities in France have confidence in NATO and support their country's membership. Half say the alliance is *essential* to French security.
- Many continue to view the EU as an important component of European security. Majorities support the creation of a European defense force and believe that the EU should make the most important decisions about European security in the future.
- Eight in ten believe that strong EU leadership benefits France. Yet this emphasis on a strong role for Europe is not at the exclusion of a strong role for the U.S.: fewer (but still a plurality) say that strong U.S. leadership is desirable for French interests.

French Public Confident in NATO

Two-thirds in France support their country's membership in NATO, and half say that the alliance is *essential* to French security. This finding is fairly consistent with trends in France over the past ten years (see Table 1).

Table 1. NATO Essential
"Some people say that NATO is still essential to our country's security. Others say it is no longer essential. Which of these views is closer to your view?"

Sept. 1987	48
Oct. 1988	58
Oct. 1989	41
Feb. 1990	50
Mar. 1991	58
May 1991	55
May 1992	50
Mar. 1993	55
Aug. 1995	60
Jun. 1996	54
Jan. 1997	58
Sept. 1997	49
April 1998	50

* % saying "essential"

This report is based on face-to-face interviews with a nationwide sample of 1012 adults 18 years of age and older, representative of the population in France. Interviewing was conducted in early- to mid-April 1998. The firm Louis Harris in Paris conducted the study for USIA.

The French public expresses confidence in the alliance, not only to “deal effectively with European problems (67%) but also to make decisions that will be in the best interests of France (54%, 34% disagree). French confidence in NATO has varied somewhat over the past few years (62% in September 1997, 72% in January 1997, 67% in June 1996) but has stayed at majority levels.

French Favor Current NATO Enlargement; Reluctant to Enlarge Further

Reminded of NATO’s collective security commitment, a small majority (56%) support the enlargement of the alliance to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic and a third are opposed (consistent with findings from September 1997). Support for enlarging NATO *beyond* the three already-invited candidates is weak in France. The public is nearly evenly divided between those who favor accepting more new members into NATO in the next five years (41%) and those who oppose further enlargement “any time soon” (44%). Neither support nor opposition has increased substantially since September 1997.

To gauge support for specific candidate countries, this survey asked how people would vote if a referendum were held on the issue “tomorrow,” *keeping in mind that NATO members must defend any NATO country that comes under attack*. Despite the French government’s intensive efforts before the Madrid summit to include Romania in the first round, roughly half the public opposes its admission as well as the admission of Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine and Russia. About a third support each country’s membership. Romania has the most support (40% in favor, 45% opposed) and Russia (32% vs. 51%) and Ukraine (34% vs. 51%) have the least. French support for admitting individual countries not already named by NATO is roughly on par with findings from a year ago, before the Madrid announcement.

French Support Greater NATO Role for Europe

While two-thirds express confidence in NATO, confidence in the EU’s ability to deal with European problems is even higher (72%). Six in ten in France (61%) believe that the EU rather than NATO (27%) should make the most important decisions about the European security in the future. Seven in ten favor the development of a common European defense force under the auspices of the EU. Two-thirds of those in favor of such a force envisage one that will operate *in conjunction* with NATO. Only about one in ten of those favoring a common European force think it should operate separately from or replace NATO.

In the context of NATO itself, more (55%) support a greater role for Europe *within* NATO than favor keeping the U.S.-European security relationship the way it is now. However, when an increase in cost is emphasized (“*what if this means that west Europeans would have to spend more money on defense?*”), fewer (37%) support a greater European role and half (51%) prefer to preserve the current U.S.-European security relationship.

Public Sees NATO as Only One Piece of Security Puzzle

Given a choice of institutions, the French public is widely scattered when asked to select the institution best suited to address a particular problem in France (see Table 2). About half the French public does not name NATO as the best-suited for any of the problems listed. NATO is most often named in the area of arms control and peacekeeping, but even in these areas at least as many name the EU and the UN. Those who believe that NATO should be primarily responsible for either arms control efforts, peacekeeping missions, or supporting humanitarian missions are more likely than others to name NATO for other roles as well.

Table 2. Responsibilities of Institutions and Organizations

"Now I am going to read you a list of problems facing our country and many other countries in the world. For each that I read, please tell me which of the organizations on this card should be primarily responsible for handling this problem. First, combating international terrorism . . ."

	NATO	EU	UN	National Gov't	Other
Combating international terrorism	12%	24%	25%	30%	6%
Coordinating international arms control efforts	21	21	31	20	3
Combating organized crime	10	24	19	35	7
Controlling Illegal immigration	6	33	8	48	2
Sending peacekeeping forces to unstable regions	19	19	41	14	2
Combating international drug trafficking	10	24	20	32	10
Supporting humanitarian missions such as the evacuation of endangered civilians from combat zones or the protection of refugees	14	19	41	19	3
Working to bring down unemployment	3	24	2	67	1

Public Perceives Equal Burden-sharing but Not Equal Treatment

More believe that the U.S. and Europe are each doing "their fair share" to maintain peace in Europe (50%) than think one side is bearing more of the burden (26% say the U.S. is doing more, 14% say Europe is doing more). And most (68%) think that French ties with the U.S. are as important now as they were during the Cold War (8% say *more*, 20% say *less*). However, seven in ten (68%) think that the U.S. does *not* treat France as an equal partner in affairs that concern them both. While half (53%) believe that strong U.S. leadership in world affairs is desirable for French interests (44% disagree), the public is much more likely to believe strong EU leadership is desirable from the French perspective (83%).

In addition, the public seems to resent the influence of the U.S. Consistent with findings over the past couple of years, three-quarters (74%) say that "the United States has too much influence over our country's affairs." At the same time, nearly as many (67%) believe "U.S. leaders do not try to understand France's problems."

Resentment of U.S. influence may stem from the perception of many that the policies of the U.S. and those of France have tended to run in different directions over the course of the past year (Table 3).

Table 3. Compatibility of French and U.S. Policy

"Now I'm going to read you a list of items and ask whether over the last twelve months you think U.S. and French policies have been working in the same direction or in different directions."

	Same	Different
Bosnian peace process	52%	35%
Environmental pollution and global warming	45	45
Iraqi weapons inspections	41	46
European security	42	44
The Middle East Peace Process	39	47
Business and Trade	35	55
The political situation in Iran	35	49
The situation in Kosovo	27	35

On many key issues of international relations, four in ten or more believe that French and U.S. policies have not been complementary.

French Views Toward U.S. Stable Over Past Few Years

Nevertheless, the French public seems to differentiate between attitudes toward the U.S. government and general attitudes toward the U.S. and its people. Although favorable opinion has declined somewhat, a majority still have a favorable opinion of the U.S. Six in ten (59%) in France now say they view the U.S. favorably, down from recent measures (67% in January 1997, 70% in 1996; 69% in 1995). Three-quarters have a favorable opinion of Americans living in France.

How This Poll Was Conducted

This report is based on face-to-face interviews with a nationwide sample of 1012 adults age 18 and older representative of the population in France. Interviewing was conducted in early- to mid-April 1998. The research firm Louis Harris in Paris conducted the interviews for USIA. Survey questions were prepared by the USIA Office of Research. The questionnaire was translated and formatted by the contractor and reviewed by Office of Research staff.

In theory, 19 times out of 20, results from samples of this size will differ by no more than about 4 percentage points in either direction from what would be found if it were possible to interview every adult in France. Sampling error is larger for subgroups within the French population. In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting a survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the results.

For further information, please contact the analyst.