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Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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Dutch views on Transatlantic ties and European security cooperation in times of geopolitical rivalry



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In light of Brexit and Trump, a majority seeks more European cooperation

In May 2017, German chancellor Angela Merkel told her supporters at an [election rally](#) that “the era in which we could fully

rely on others is over to some extent.” Her comments were seen to reflect German, and wider European concerns that long-held certainties regarding the transatlantic relationship were expiring. She hinted that Europe should take care of its own security. President Donald Trump’s disparaging comments about NATO and concerns that he [might pull out of the alliance](#), his threat and use of tariffs against imports from Europe, and the unilateral withdrawal from a host of international agreements fuelled a debate about the need to develop ‘European strategic autonomy’ and intensify cooperation within Europe.

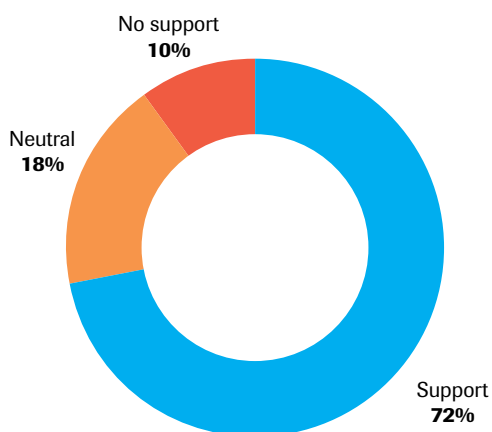
* The authors are grateful to Mark Elchardus for his contribution to the development of the questionnaire and the analysis of the results. They also thank Tom Etienne and André Krouwel of research institute Kieskompas for the data collection.

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For a number of European governments, the increasing number of threats around Europe, rising geopolitical tensions as well as Britain's decision to leave the European Union, further emphasised the need for deeper European cooperation. It resonated with Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's ambition to lead a "geopolitical Commission" and in Franco-German appeals for greater European 'sovereignty' or *Handlungsfähigkeit*. The Netherlands has traditionally shown a strong transatlantic reflex, next to close ties with its neighbours. The Dutch have always tried to balance Atlanticism and Europeanism. How does the Dutch population view today's renewed push for European states to work together more?

We asked more than 23,000 respondents¹ whether the Netherlands should cooperate more with Germany and France, now that the UK is leaving the EU and President Trump has turned the US into an unreliable ally. A large majority, 72 per cent of respondents, agreed. This can be interpreted as strong support in favour of developing deeper ties with Berlin and Paris. Only 10 per cent of respondents disagreed, while 18 per cent were neutral.

Support for more Dutch-Franco-German cooperation



1 See Objective and methodological justification of the [Clingendael Foreign Barometer](#).

Europeanists versus Sovereignists

The respondents who agree and disagree with the statement that the Netherlands should cooperate more with Germany and France do not represent a traditional left- and right-wing split. Those who disagreed were mainly supporters of Eurosceptic parties PVV and Forum for Democracy, and the Christian-right party SGP, although remarkably even among these respondent groups most agreed that there is a need for strengthening cooperation with Germany and France. Less surprisingly, large majorities among supporters of more pro-European parties such as GroenLinks, D66, PvdA, CDA and VVD are in favour of more cooperation.

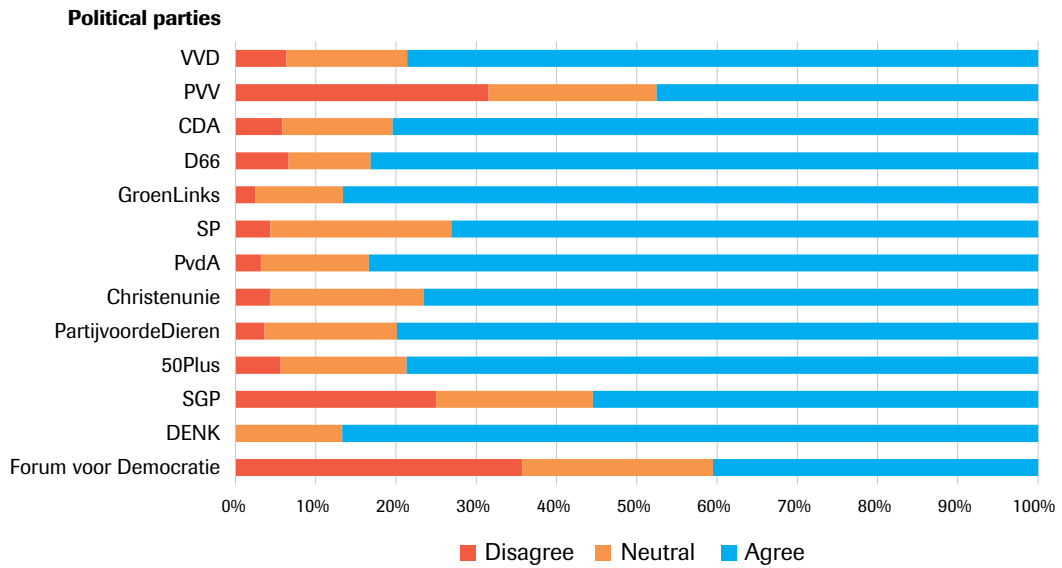
People who say that there is little need for strengthening cooperation with Germany and France also belong to the minority of Dutch respondents who prefer a military that is not dependent on other countries and does not share tasks with European neighbours. A majority of Dutch respondents, however, disagrees; large majorities among supporters of mainstream parties appear to favour a degree of European defence cooperation.

Populist attitudes² of respondents also translate into less support for cooperation with Germany and France. This corresponds with the fact that political parties in the Netherlands that have a sceptical attitude vis-à-vis 'the elite' and 'the established parties' tend to have a more Eurosceptic program. More surprisingly perhaps, women are more likely than men to favour more cooperation with Berlin and Paris. A possible explanation for this is that the voter base of Eurosceptic parties is predominantly male.

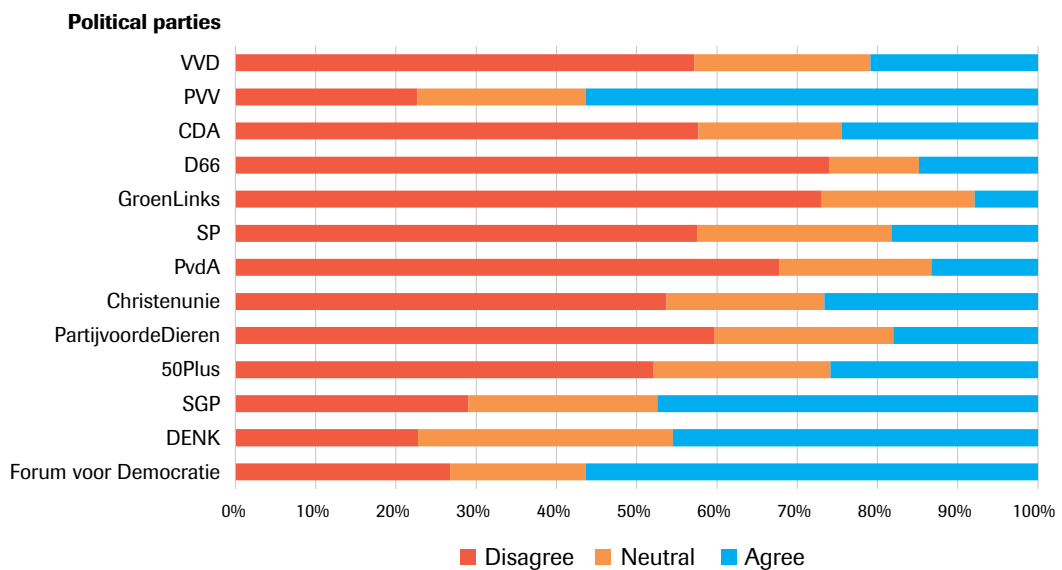
Additionally, those who have a negative attitude towards migration, also tend to say there is little need for strengthening cooperation with Germany and France. This might be related to a rejection of the

2 'Populism' is defined and operationalised in the survey as a sceptical attitude towards the 'establishment' or 'elite'.

Now that the UK is leaving the EU and President Trump has turned the US into an unreliable ally, the Netherlands should cooperate more with Germany and France



So as not to be dependent on other countries, the Netherlands should have a military that can do everything, and not share tasks with neighbouring countries

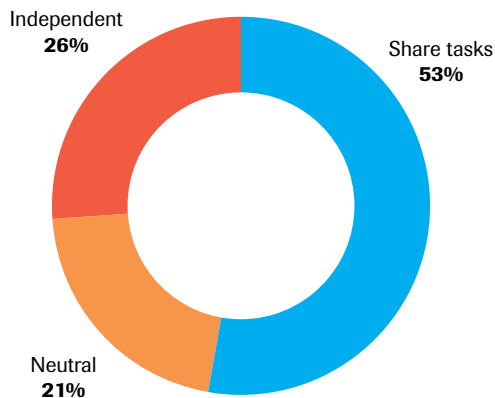


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policies of chancellor Merkel during the 2015 migration crisis, or the desire to address migration principally at the national level.

Concerning the question whether the Netherlands should cooperate more with European countries, the dominant split seems to be between ‘sovereignists’ and ‘Europeanists’, with the balance in Dutch society leaning towards the latter. Sovereignists want to retain national control over politically salient issues like security and migration and are sceptical about developing interdependencies with other European countries. Europeanists on the other hand, think that the Netherlands must cooperate with its neighbours, including militarily, to deal with the challenges it faces.

Should the Netherlands be militarily independent or share tasks with neighbouring countries?



Europeanists see the United States as a threat

Strong support for European cooperation could also be a consequence of changing views of the United States. If people are disappointed or concerned about the US role in the world, they may increasingly turn towards Europe. One way to assess this is to measure the degree to which the United States is considered to be a threat to European security.

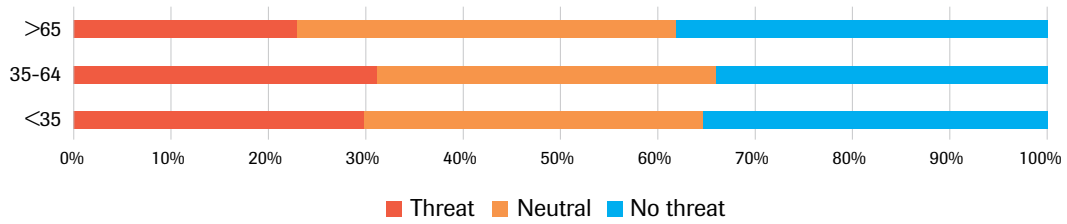
The Dutch population appears almost evenly split on the topic: 29 per cent believe that the United States poses a threat to European security, while 35 per cent do not. More than one-third of respondents (36 per cent) have a neutral stance or do not know. The results do not vary substantially among different age groups, although the older generation – perhaps because they have stronger historical memories of America’s central role in European security during the 20th century – feels less threatened by Washington: only 23 per cent of the respondents in the 65+ group see the US as a threat, compared to 31 per cent of 35-64 year olds, and 30 per cent of those under 35.

There are big differences in threat perceptions of the US between various party electorates. Supporters of the Socialist Party (SP) and DENK are most likely to see the US as a threat, while the supporters of Forum for Democracy, PVV and the Christian-right SGP are least likely to do so. The threat perceptions of the Socialist Party and DENK might coincide with more general feelings of anti-Americanism among their supporters. The fact that supporters of Forum for Democracy, PVV and the SGP see the US less as a threat, might be due to an affinity with Trump’s broader policy agenda.

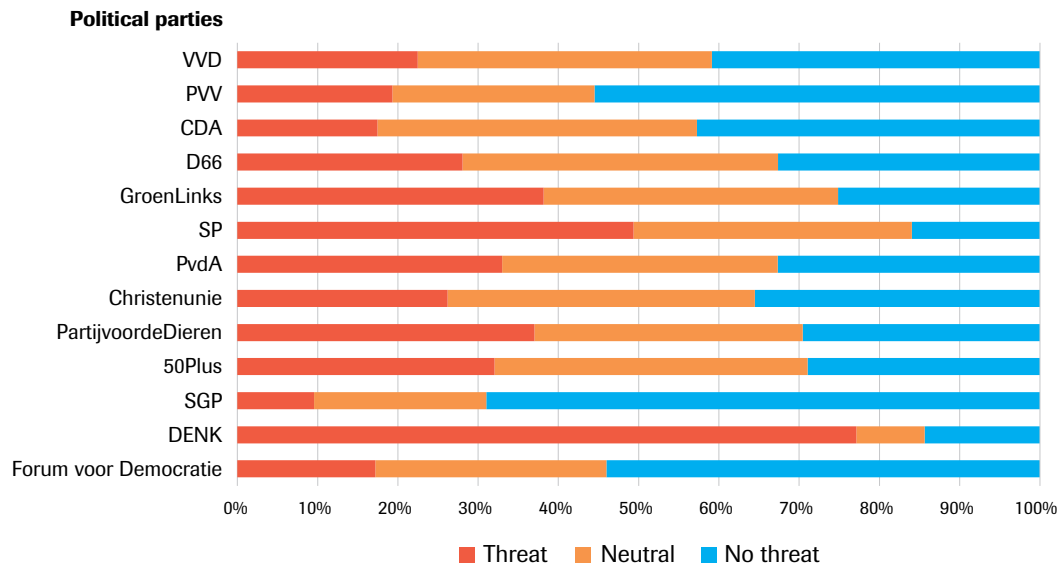
Those who have a negative attitude towards migration tend to view the United States as less of a threat. They might support the Trump administration’s tough approach to migration. Or they may hold political views that are in line with broader Trump administration policies, and thus see the US in a more favourable light.

There is a strong correlation between those who see the United States as a threat, and those who support more cooperation with France and Germany (See regression table 1). This could point to a divide between ‘Atlanticists’ and ‘Europeanists’. To offer more clarity, we also asked how likely it is that in the next 5 years the United States will reduce its protection of Europe because the US believes Europeans should take more responsibility for their own security. A very large majority, 79 per cent, think this is likely or very likely.

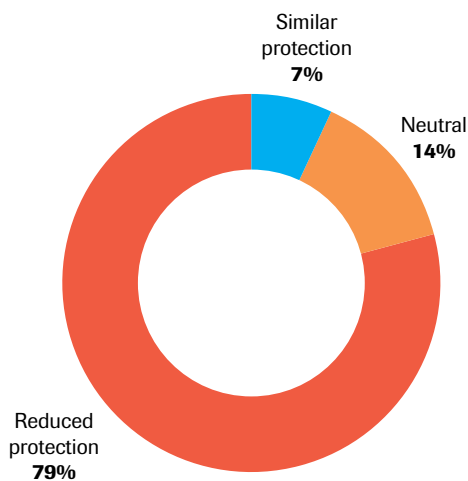
The United States is a threat to European security (by age group)



The United States is a threat to European security



Likelihood that US will reduce its protection of Europe in next 5 years



Since the end of the Cold War, Dutch security has been based on two pillars: the transatlantic security relationship and steps towards deeper European security cooperation. According to the Dutch public,

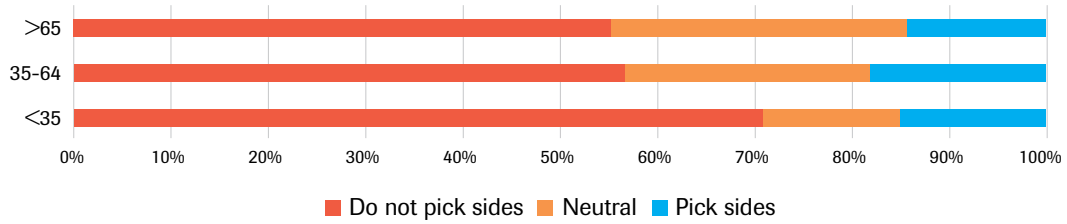
the balance between the two is shifting in the direction of the latter. The two pillars are increasingly at risk of becoming incongruous, raising the question whether the Dutch government may face growing difficulties making the public case for them. It is a conclusion that Dutch policymakers would do well to heed.

In a 'new Cold War' with China, the Netherlands will take sides with the United States, but prefers neutrality

If the United States is considered a threat, it does not necessarily follow that the Dutch public prefers one of the other great powers. Those who see Russia or China as a threat, also see the US increasingly as one, and vice versa. And respondents who see China as a threat are especially likely to view Russia as one (see regression table 3). Concerns

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New Cold War US-China: willingness to pick sides by age group

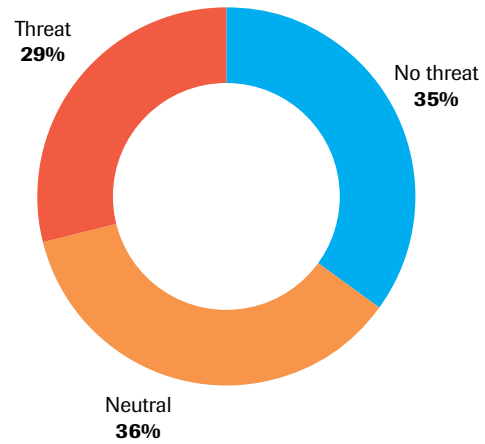


in the last century about an assertive USSR have been replaced by worries about increasing geopolitical tensions among the great powers.

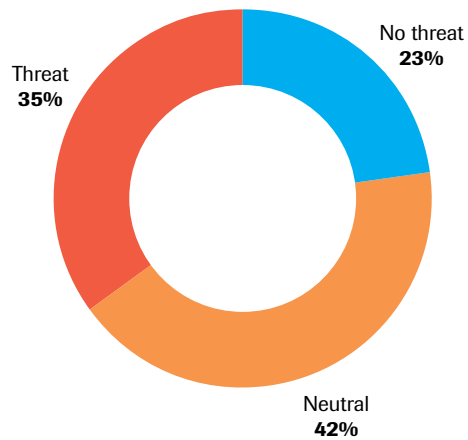
There is a strong correlation between those who see the United States as a threat, and those who see China as one. This leads to the question how the Dutch view Sino-American great power competition. In the United States, [US politicians](#), [thinktankers](#) and academics are increasingly talking about a ‘new Cold War’ with China. The US public’s perception of China is also becoming more [negative](#). This trend is likely to continue in light of the presidential election campaign. So far, in the Netherlands this rhetoric has remained absent. One reason is that Dutch threat perceptions of China and the United States differ less than one would expect based on the longstanding Dutch alliance with the latter in the framework of NATO: 36 per cent see China as a security threat, whereas 29 percent see the US as a threat. Though there are bigger differences among supporters of various political parties (see chart on ‘Threat perceptions global powers’ on following page).

But should a ‘new Cold War’ emerge, the choice of the Dutch population is clear. Currently, only 5 per cent of Dutch respondents would choose China’s side, whereas 28 per cent would side with the United States. The largest group, however, would prefer to stay neutral (60 per cent). The large group of those preferring neutrality in a ‘new Cold War’ is telling. The Netherlands wants to avoid choosing sides, if possible. While absolute majorities in all age groups prefer neutrality, the sentiment is particularly strong among the younger generation (70 per cent of those younger than 35) (see chart on ‘New Cold War US-China: willingness to pick sides by age group’ above).

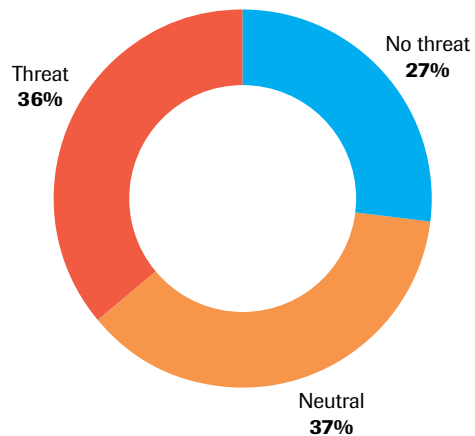
Is the United States a threat to Europe?



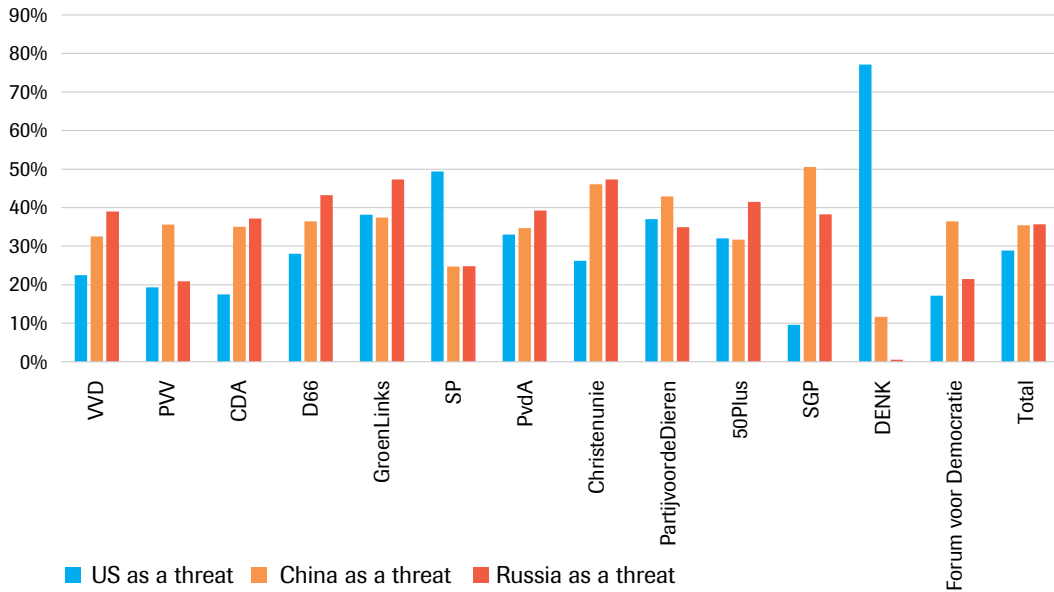
Is China a threat to Europe?



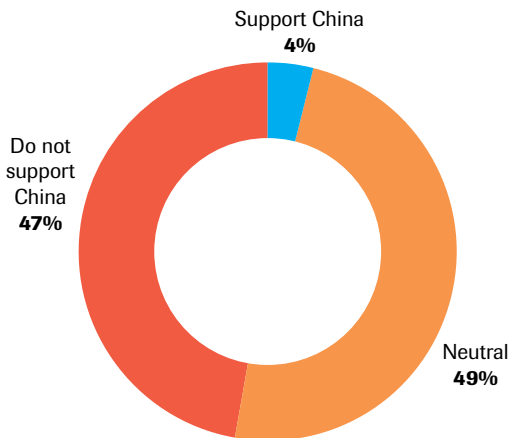
Is Russia a threat to Europe?



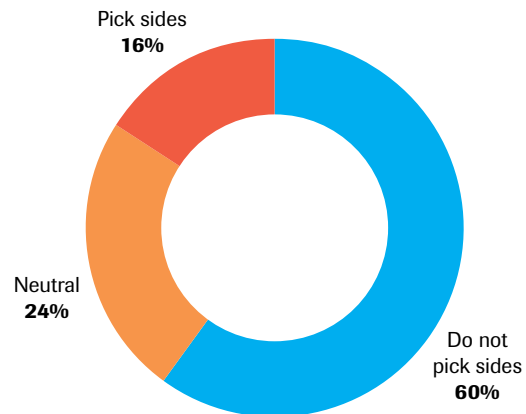
Threat perception global powers



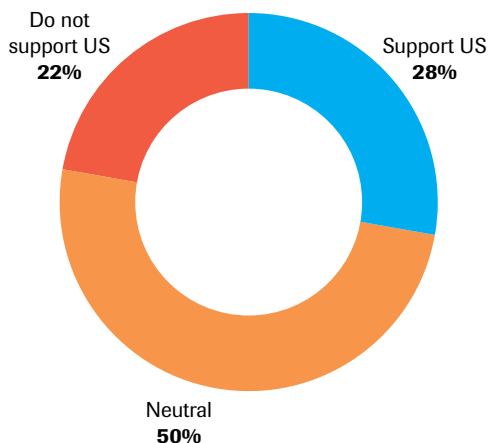
New Cold War US-China: support China



New Cold War US-China: do not pick sides



New Cold War US-China: support United States



In the spring of 2020, under the auspices of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and High Representative Josep Borrell, the US and the EU agreed to set up a dialogue on China. This initiative appears to be supported by the results of this survey. By contrast, there would seem to be no public appetite for a similar foreign policy dialogue with China about the United States.

However, choosing sides in a stand-off between great powers is not the same as attitudes regarding cooperation. We also asked whether the European Union should cooperate more with China, given President

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Trump's 'America First' unilateralism: 24 per cent agreed, whilst 41 per cent disagreed. The EU's strategic message of '[cooperation, competition, and rivalry](#)' with China - rather than choosing a simple binary narrative of rivalry or partnership - appears to reflect the nuanced views of the Dutch. In the context of growing Sino-American rivalry, the EU's preferred policy has been to promote multilateralism and navigate a third way by reaching out to like-minded countries, while working with both Washington and Beijing. The results of this survey appear to support this approach.

Traditions in Dutch foreign policy under pressure

The survey shows that traditional certainties regarding Dutch foreign policy and the transatlantic relationship are increasingly under pressure. Two observations prompt strategic consideration. First, the Dutch perception of 'the West' appears to be changing. For decades, the Netherlands has been a steadfast supporter of strong transatlantic ties, but Dutch public opinion now appears to be clearly gravitating towards 'more Europe'. Large majorities are in favour of strengthening cooperation with Germany and France. Even among supporters of Eurosceptic parties such as PVV, SGP and to a lesser extent Forum for Democracy, more people are in favour rather than against strengthening cooperation inside Europe. 'Europe', more than 'the West', seems to be the locus where the Dutch population believes foreign policy challenges should be addressed.

Second, people are concerned about increasing geopolitical rivalry and see US assertiveness as part of the problem. A large majority of the Dutch population prefers to remain neutral in the event of a 'new Cold War' between the US and China. Moreover, there is a significant age effect, in which the younger generation sees the US more as a threat to Europe and is more inclined to stay aloof in a US-China stand-off than the older generation. It is, however, difficult

to say whether or not the threat perception of the US is due to [the current occupant](#) of the White House and his approach to European allies or linked to, among other things, a hawkish US strategy towards China that might actually be more bipartisan than many in the Netherlands might presume. With presidential elections approaching in the US, a new US president may have a material effect on the Dutch public's views of transatlantic ties. Only then will we be able to assess whether this shift in Dutch public opinion is temporary or structural.

Regression table 1
Explanations for perceived US threat to Europe

Variable	β	SE
Constant	7.705***	0.194
Support more Franco-German cooperation	.135***	.011
Negative attitude migration	-.089***	.001
Chinese threat	.275***	.013
Russian threat	.056***	.011
Societal pessimism	.071***	.001
Ally US against China	-.408***	.01
Reduced protection US for Europe	.051***	.012
More cooperation NL with China	-.086***	.019
More cooperation Europe with China	-.041*	.017
Protection Dutch culture	.027*	.011
Nativism	-.015	.018
Dutch political core values	.005	.008
PVV/FvD	-.043***	.034
Populism	.096***	.009
More money for the Defence budget	-.052***	.01
Policy priority Foreign Policy	.05***	.011
NRC/VK/Trouw/FD	.0	.022

Notes: *p < .05, ** p < .005, *** p < .001
Dependent variable: Perceived threat US to Europe (scale 1-5)
Adjusted R-square: .389

Regression table 2
Explanations for support of more Dutch-Franco-German cooperation

Variable	β	SE
Constant	9.353***	0.191
Negative attitude migration	-.192***	.001
US threat	.161***	.011
Chinese threat	-.013	.013
Russian threat	.133***	.011
Ally US against China	-.081***	.011
Reduced protection US for Europe	.022*	.011
More cooperation NL with China	-.05***	.018
More cooperation Europe with China	-.102***	.017
Societal pessimism	.041***	.001
Protection Dutch culture	.008	.011
Nativism	.01	.017
Dutch political core values	.048***	.008
PVV/FvD	-.087***	.033
Populism	-.111***	.002
Autarky Defence	-.157***	.01
More money for Defence budget	.066***	.01
Policy priority Foreign Policy	.05***	.011
NRC/VK/Trouw/FD	.056***	.023
Sex (Female)	-.095***	.019
Education	-.079***	.016
Age	-.011	.001

Notes: *p < .05, ** p < .005, *** p < .001
 Dependent variable: Support for more Dutch-Franco-German cooperation (scale 1-5)
 Adjusted R-square: .347

Regression table 3
Explanations for perceived Chinese threat to Europe






Variable	β	SE
Constant	9.353***	0.191
Russian threat	.493***	.008
US threat	.243***	.009
Ally US against China	.138***	.011
Reduced protection US for Europe	.039***	.01
More cooperation NL with China	.301***	.018
More cooperation Europe with China	0	.015
More money for Defence budget	.099***	.008
Negative attitude migration	-.028*	.001
Societal pessimism	.036	.001
Protection Dutch culture	.088***	.009
Nativism	.029***	.015
Dutch political core values	-.037***	.007
PVV/FvD	.003	.029
Populism	.021	.002
NRC/VK/Trouw/FD	.013	.019

Notes: *p < .05, ** p < .005, *** p < .001
 Dependent variable: Perceived Chinese threat to Europe (scale 1-5)
 Adjusted R-square: .459

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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