Renaissance Numérique

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Franco-British Strategic Dialogue “Building Europe’s Future Together”

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Contribution from Renaissance Numérique

Contribution for working group:

"2. Facing technological competition: how can Europe reduce its strategic dependencies in digital technologies and artificial intelligence in the face of American dominance and China's rising power?".

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“European technological sovereignty”, a societal project for Europe

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A condition for political and social freedom

The digital transformation of the economy and society raises questions about states' means of production and action and their ability to assert their strategic interests as well as their values. It shapes the autonomy of decision-making, action, and projection of public authorities in fields as varied as the economy, defense, security, health, and food. Given its scale and importance, it must be regarded as a fifth strategic dimension (alongside the land, maritime, air, and space dimensions) through which the expressions of Member States' sovereignty pass and take shape.

Beyond its technological dimension, technological sovereignty must be understood as a societal project for the European continent. It aims to enable Europe not to be subject to international power dynamics, and to give itself the means to act, protecting its populations and continuing to uphold a model founded on social justice, environmental ambition, and democratic rigor. In a context of challenges to the rule of law and a proliferation of attempts at informational destabilization, Europe's ability to invest, regulate, protect, and plan in the technological field is becoming a condition of its political and social freedom.

Preserving the “power to have power”

“Technological sovereignty” should be understood as Europe's capacity to preserve its “power to have power”[1] in an environment of interdependencies.

1. CHRETIEN, J., DROUARD, E, et al. (2022). “European technological sovereignty”, Renaissance Numérique.

This does not mean proclaiming "absolute" autonomy for Europe, but rather reducing the strategic dependencies that make it beholden to an international "technological tap"[2] that could be shut off overnight for critical technologies as the Covid-19 pandemic made clear. "European technological sovereignty" is therefore Europe's capacity to control the critical layers that structure the strategic digital dimension, as well as the dimensions in which digital technology is present, that is, virtually every aspect of our society.

This means that "the policy aimed at guaranteeing technological sovereignty is a policy of capacity-building within a field of interdependencies, including the deliberate refusal or reduction of certain interdependencies in the name of a sovereignty objective".[3] In this context, "strategic autonomy is both a means and a dividend of sovereignty"[4], and the challenge lies in knowing at what threshold of dependence a political power loses control over its own choices whether with respect to third states or private companies endowed with an "infrastructural power" that encroaches on public prerogatives.[5]

↘ Thinking in technological layers

This approach calls for thinking in terms of technological layers: from raw materials and components (rare earths, semiconductors) to infrastructure (networks, data centers, cloud), software layers (operating systems, office suites, middleware), and large-scale digital services (platforms, AI, payment services). Not all of these layers require the same level of control to guarantee sovereignty, but some constitute prerequisites below which Europe no longer has a minimal strategic autonomy.

2. ibid., p.17
3. ibid., p.6
4. ibid., p.15
5. ISAAC, H. (2022). Quelle souveraineté numérique européenne ?, Revue française de gestion, 305(4), 63-77.

In this logic, it is crucial to target efforts where they produce a real leverage effect on Europe's capacity to act. Changing the office suites or operating systems used by public officials is a symbolically strong measure, but one that remains essentially cosmetic if not accompanied by an industrial strategy on the lower layers. The key is to maintain a European production capacity for critical components, infrastructure, and software building blocks, and to guarantee at least one credible European alternative for all essential services (foremost among them, payments).

↘ A necessarily European technological sovereignty

It is important to distinguish technological sovereignty from protectionism. A sovereignty policy aims to give Europe the capacity to act within a field of interdependencies, not to cut itself off from the rest of the world. The goal is to be able to choose one's dependencies rather than endure them, which requires both proprietary industrial capabilities and targeted alliances. In this context, for reasons of investment capacity, market size, and critical industrial mass, technological sovereignty can only be achieved at the Community level.

Historically, mastering complete technological chains (defense, nuclear, space) has required massive investments that a single Member State can no longer bear alone; the European Union must therefore be seen as a power lever for its members.

This orientation is in line with recent developments in the European agenda, since the Commission has made “digital sovereignty” and “technological sovereignty” explicit objectives, linking them to the “2030 Digital Compass”[6] and to the concept of “open strategic

6. 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade.

autonomy".[7] However, disagreements among Member States over the transatlantic relationship, the acceptable level of dependence, or the degree of industrial ambition show that the operational translation of these concepts still needs to be consolidated.

Staying the course on the "Brussels Effect"[8] remains essential. Indeed, the Union's ability to set global standards is one of its main assets in the technological competition. But this normative strength only has an effect if it is actually applied, which requires administrative and technical resources commensurate with the task, at both European and national level. Without strengthening the human resources of regulatory authorities, without investment in technical expertise, and without the political courage to withstand retaliatory threats from major powers and large platforms, Europe's regulatory sovereignty remains largely theoretical.

7. CAGNIN, C., MUENCH, S., SCAPOLO, F., STOERMER, E. and VESNIC ALUJEVIC, L., Shaping and securing the EÙ s Open Strategic Autonomy by 2040 and beyond, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2021, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/414963, JRC125994.

8. BRADFORD, A. (2019). The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

What a Franco-British dialogue can bring to technological sovereignty

02

European technological sovereignty can neither be reduced to an incantatory injunction nor confused with autarkic protectionism. It requires rigorous definitional work, a fine-grained analysis of dependencies across the different layers of the value chain, prioritization of investments, and a deliberate articulation between regulation, industrial policy, and democratic participation. Within this framework, the Franco-British strategic dialogue can become a lever for convergence between the European Union and the United Kingdom, from private actors to civil society, opening the way to a progressive alignment of their regulatory frameworks on critical technologies, a condition for genuine, shared European technological sovereignty. The proposals put forward in this document aim to inform this collective reflection and steer the workshop's discussions toward concrete, targeted, and operational options.

Ultimately, the goal is to make technological competition a lever for consolidating a European model that combines public power, environmental ambition, social justice, and democratic rigor, rather than letting a handful of actors and the evolution of technology decide its political and social destiny in its place. This preparatory note from Renaissance Numérique recalls that the Franco-British relationship remains a pillar of the European security architecture, despite Brexit, and a decisive lever for responding to major contemporary transformations. In the digital and technological field, this relationship can play a distinctive role for several reasons:

- → France and the United Kingdom have significant industrial and scientific capabilities in key sectors of technological sovereignty (defense, cybersecurity, telecommunications, high-performance computing, AI).
- → Both countries share a historical experience of ambitious industrial policies, including through bilateral cooperation (from the Concorde program and missiles developed under MBDA to the Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C nuclear projects), which could inspire similar approaches in the digital field.

- → The United Kingdom retains significant regulatory and diplomatic initiative capacity in international forums, which can be brought into synergy with the normative force of the European Union, championed by France.

In this context, the Franco-British strategic dialogue can help to:

- → Clarify a common language on technological sovereignty, compatible with the European notion of "open strategic autonomy".
- → Identify joint projects with high technological value (shared data infrastructure, AI research programs, cybersecurity cooperation), economic value, and democratic value, capable of drawing in the wider European ecosystem.
- → Carry a joint voice in international forums in favor of democratic governance of technologies and a reduction of power asymmetries between states, large platforms, and citizens.

For example, on Focus Area 1 below concerning critical technology layers, the Franco-British pairing has a particular role to play on high-performance computing infrastructure and quantum technology. On Focus Area 5, it can champion joint initiatives on AI for the common good.

Five focus areas and six proposals for the workshop

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The following proposals are put forward to inform the workshop discussions, combining Renaissance Numérique's analysis with the specific perspective of the Franco-British dialogue.

↘ Focus Area 1: Targeting the critical technology layers where Europe must be indispensable

The first priority is to identify, at the European level, a limited number of technological segments in which Europe must aim for indispensable-actor status in order to create a position of strength vis-à-vis the United States and China. This does not mean "redoing everything" in Europe, but concentrating political, financial, and industrial resources on the layers where Europe already has significant potential and competitive advantage, and which genuinely determine sovereignty:

- → Semiconductors and key components, building on existing initiatives (the European Chips Act) while committing budgetary effort commensurate with international competition.
- → Data and computing infrastructure (cloud, data centers, supercomputers), linking industrial capacity, security requirements, and environmental sobriety.
- → Strategic AI building blocks (foundation models, tooling, MLOps) to avoid total dependence on non-European suppliers for the highest-value-added layers.

Beyond technologies already identified as critical, a technological sovereignty policy must explicitly anticipate the next technological leaps, for example quantum computing.[9] Failing to invest now in research, industrialization, and standardization capabilities in these

9. Renaissance Numérique currently has a working group entitled "French and European strategic autonomy in quantum infrastructure".

emerging fields would mean repeating tomorrow the dependencies we are trying to correct today in cloud and AI. From a Franco-British perspective, this means bringing existing quantum working groups closer together and thinking about these investments from the outset within a European framework, to avoid fragmenting efforts.

Proposal 1: Establish, as part of a joint Franco-British initiative in coordination with the Commission, a shared mapping of critical technological dependencies and the thresholds beyond which the Union's sovereignty is compromised, in order to guide the allocation of investments and joint programs.

Proposal 2: Incorporate into the joint dependency mapping a specific analysis of breakthrough technologies, in order to coordinate upstream investment and anticipate Europe's future points of vulnerability.

↘ Focus Area 2: Building European industrial coalitions rather than multiplying "national champions"

The second priority is to move away from a "national champions" logic and instead favor the building of industrial coalitions capable of reaching the critical thresholds of investment, R&D, and market size, whether at the European level or with third countries that share an interest in reducing their dependence, such as India.

Renaissance Numérique identifies three scenarios (competition, coopetition, cooperation) that can be combined, provided they are pursued deliberately:

- → **Competition**: support, in a few targeted segments, the emergence of European champions capable of rivaling current and future leaders. This scenario requires substantial public and private investment and ecosystems organized to foster the emergence of such players. It therefore often plays out over the medium-to-long term.
- → **Coopetition**: build industrial alliances between existing European private actors, to cross the size thresholds needed for global competitiveness, including through capital mergers or shared platforms.
- → **Cooperation** : use regulation and standards to impose strong interoperability that limits the lock-in effects of major non-European players and opens up space for European offerings (the original ambition of GAIA-X illustrates this approach, despite its limitations).

Proposal 3: Make the Franco-British dialogue a laboratory for targeted industrial coalitions, bringing together businesses, research centers, public authorities, and civil society actors around a few shared value chains (semiconductors, high-performance computing, cybersecurity), with cross-financing mechanisms and governance open to other Member States.

↘ Focus Area 3: Linking regulatory power with industrial strategy

The past decade has been marked by a succession of landmark texts (GDPR, Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, Data Act, AI Act, NIS2, Cyber Resilience Act) that have produced a “Brussels Effect” in digital regulation. This normative power remains a major asset, as it allows the European Union to set global standards on data protection, competition, platform liability, and system security. However, this regulatory strength, as currently deployed, is essentially defensive and jurisdictional in nature. Although neces-

sary, it struggles to connect with an offensive industrial strategy aimed at fostering and consolidating European capabilities in critical layers (semiconductors, cloud, AI, cybersecurity), rather than leaving the market to structure these sectors around non-European players.

The third priority is therefore to better link the European regulatory arsenal with an offensive industrial policy. Today, the succession of regulations produces a fragmented landscape that complicates matters for economic actors, while not always giving European players clear comparative advantages.

Proposal 4: Develop a "strategic coherence" roadmap between regulation and technological sovereignty, identifying, for each major sectoral text (data, AI, cybersecurity, etc.), concrete levers for strengthening European industrial capabilities, as well as the human, financial, and institutional resources needed for their effective implementation. This roadmap must embrace the political challenge of giving regulatory authorities and public decision-makers the resources and mandate to enforce the rules without backing down in the face of economic or geopolitical pressure.

↘ Focus Area 4: Thinking strategically about the public/private relationship

Finally, Renaissance Numérique notes that the European Union still struggles to move beyond an administrative and mistrustful conception of the relationship between public authorities and private actors, even as other major powers closely align public policy, financing, and industrial strategy. Credible technological sovereignty requires recognizing the central role of businesses,

researchers, and regions in implementing sovereignty policies.

Proposal 5: Promote, within the Franco-British dialogue, a "partnership method" for European technological sovereignty, combining:

- → Financing tools and public procurement geared toward innovation and the upgrading of European offerings, without falling into an obligation for autarkic purchasing;
- → Risk-sharing mechanisms between states, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and private investors on projects of shared strategic interest;
- → Spaces for democratic deliberation involving civil society on the uses of AI and critical technologies, so as to anchor technological sovereignty in a shared societal project, rather than solely in a logic of competition between blocs.

↘ Focus Area 5: Putting technological progress at the service of the common good

Technological progress is today one of the main drivers of transformation in our societies, even as it largely escapes democratic control. Innovation choices are largely driven by a handful of major private actors, following short-term profitability logic, rather than a collective definition of the general interest. This situation is already resulting in new forms of dependency: the commodification of attention, information overload, the weakening of schools and families in the face of screens, and increased exposure to disinformation, among others.

A strategy of technological competition at the European level must steer innovation toward the common good (support for research

and social, environmental, and democratic innovation, and the design of technologies that serve the ecological transition, social cohesion, and democratic vitality). For this orientation to be credible and mobilizing, it must be embodied in a clear political narrative, driven by concrete, tangible objectives that resonate with citizens (improved public services, reduced access inequalities, quality of life, environmental protection, etc.). This support for innovation in the service of the common good can become this unifying narrative, by showing that technological competition is not an end in itself, but a means of making the European project fairer, more sustainable, and more democratic.

Furthermore, public debate on technological issues remains largely focused on infrastructure and regulation, leaving in the shadows citizens' actual ability to understand, critique, and master the technologies that are reshaping their rights and democratic participation. Credible technological sovereignty must therefore incorporate issues of skills (and literacy)[10], transparency of digital systems (AI and social media algorithms, data collection, information environments, etc.), and democratic governance of critical infrastructure.[11]

10. LUCAS, J.-F. (dir.) (2025). "Developing AI literacy for an inclusive and empowering society", Renaissance Numérique.

11. LUCAS, J.-F. (2025). "Digital sovereignty: the citizens' blind spot", Renaissance Numérique.

Proposal 6: Make the Franco-British dialogue the starting point for a "digital and AI for the common good" agenda, combining:

→ The large-scale development of digital and AI literacy (schools, lifelong learning, support for vulnerable groups) to enable citizens to understand, critique, and shape their own uses of technology.

→ A joint training program for decision-makers on the key issues at stake (societal, technological, political, economic, legislative, etc.), to build a shared vision and common language.

→ Structured support for ecosystems of public-interest projects (civic tech, digital commons, AI for civil society organizations) through dedicated funding, shared infrastructure, and secure access to public-interest data.

→ The widespread adoption of participatory and democratic experimentation mechanisms, so that the rules and uses of technology are co-constructed with citizens and regions, rather than left solely in the hands of large private actors.

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