

MAY 2017

CRUNCH TIME

FRANCE AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE

REPORT



DECISIONS LOOM FOR FRENCH DEFENCE AMID INCREASED DEMANDS

France has been thrust to the centre of questions over European defence, and funding constraints mean it needs to figure out how to work with key partners, panellists told a Friends of Europe debate in Brussels on 25 April. The best way forward might be for France to form bilateral defence partnerships, and back this up with an enhanced role for the European Union.

The debate focused on a new Friends of Europe report, ‘Crunch time: France and the future of European defence’. France’s economic stagnation over the last decade has reduced its political clout in Europe relative to Germany. Moreover, France has not achieved NATO’s defence spending target of two per cent of gross domestic product since 2009. But the country’s next president will have to deal with the fallout of several recent shocks, which the report called the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse”.

First, the new President of the United States, Donald Trump, wants to pursue an ‘America first’ policy. He has previously called into question the United States’ strategic guarantee for Europe, as well as America’s historic support for the EU, open trade and the multilateral order in general.

Second, Brexit means that within two years France will be the EU’s only nuclear power and only country with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It also raises uncertainty over the future of France’s most important European bilateral defence partnership, even if both sides have vowed to continue cooperation.

Third, Russian leader Vladimir Putin has shown through his annexation of Crimea that he is willing to change borders by force, something not seen in Europe since 1945. Russia is also building up its military capabilities and is suspected of using cyberattacks to undermine Western democracies.

And jihadi terrorists have launched attacks in France itself, as well as increasingly threatening French citizens and interests abroad.

In addition, Turkey, the gatekeeper to south-eastern Europe for millions of Syrian refugees, could form another half-horseman because of its growing political uncertainty.

France has become very active militarily in recent years, and it has been suggested that the “cheese-eating surrender monkeys” derided during the Iraq war have morphed into the “frogs of war”. But French military and security forces have more missions than they can handle sustainably at present, the report said. The choices France makes now will shape the European landscape for years to come.

“France faces a crunch whoever is elected president in terms of security policy,” said **Paul Taylor**, a contributing editor at POLITICO and author of the report. “The army has done an amazing job – it has intervened more than any other European army in the last five years. At the same time, they are bumping up against the limits of their capacity.”

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Contributing editor at POLITICO
and author of the report

“European defence has been underinvested and not kept up to date”

Giles Merritt

Founder and Chairman of Friends of Europe

The new focus on the French military comes after years of European underspending on defence. In 2006, NATO allies agreed a target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence. In 2016 the United States spent 3.6% and accounted for more than two-thirds of the alliance’s defence spending. But the only European allies above two per cent were Greece, Estonia, the UK and Poland. France spent 1.79%.

“European defence has been underinvested and not kept up to date,” said moderator **Giles Merritt**, Founder and Chairman of Friends of Europe. “There is a lack of clear philosophies on the sort of role the EU should play, in particular in the unstable Mediterranean basin.”

GROWING SECURITY NEEDS

In the coming decades, Europe might have to increase its military activities in Africa. The continent has traditionally not received much attention in defence terms, but it could become a major problem for Europe. It is already the scene of numerous conflicts and security crises, and its population is forecast to double over the next 30 or 35 years.

Since 2011 France has taken the lead in combat operations in Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). Each intervention achieved its initial military objectives with few (if any) casualties to French forces. In Mali, rapid French action prevented a jihadist group affiliated to al-Qaeda from taking over a state for the first time. But of these actions, only that in the Côte d’Ivoire led to a lasting conflict resolution.

“Mali is not even chapter one, but an introduction to an African book the EU might have to write,” said **Jaap de Hoop Scheffer**, President of the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs and a Trustee of Friends of Europe who was NATO secretary-general from 2004 to 2009. “With the population of Africa doubling, Europe will have to take responsibility, like it or not.” However, he added: “the projection of hard power is not in the EU’s DNA.”

The EU is becoming more aware of security threats and the kind of role it might play, said **Julia De Clerck-Sachsse**, Advisor for Strategic Planning at the European External Action Service. The December 2016 European Council concluded that, “Europeans must take greater responsibility for their security”, including additional resources and reinforced cooperation to develop required capabilities.

“The strategic environment is increasingly volatile, with conflicts closer to our borders, and security has moved from the experts’ corner to public debate,” she said. “We need to be much tougher on security and defence. There is a realisation that we cannot go on as before.”

The diversity in European attitudes to defence might be a strength, said De Clerck-Sachsse. While France is prepared to go in first in combat situations, others that are not could play useful roles in areas such as peacekeeping. “It is really important in the EU that we have these different perspectives,” she said. “There needs to be this division of labour. While we need to take hard security a lot more seriously, that alone hasn’t done the trick. So we need others who do the surrounding work.”

EUROPE'S WEAKENED CAPABILITIES

According to de Hoop Scheffer, a big part of this change is thanks to the first of the four horsemen – Trump. The US has for years been calling on Europeans to spend and do more for their defence, and this caught the attention of the European defence establishment. The EU has recently promoted initiatives such as the pooling and sharing of more military capabilities among member states. But that has not yet halted the deterioration in European countries' defence capabilities. The Netherlands would not today be capable of making the kind of commitment it did a decade ago, when it deployed troops as part of NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

"We must congratulate the first horseman for convincing Europeans to honour their commitments," said de Hoop Scheffer. "You need people not in uniform talking about defence. Many European defence forces are in a deplorable state. If there isn't anything to pool and share, then it is jargon – whistling in the dark."

France's defence spending was cut after the onset of the financial crisis, and its four top military chiefs threatened to resign in 2014 if any additional cuts were imposed. The burnout rate for key equipment, including helicopter engines and armoured vehicles, is reaching dangerous levels due to the high operational tempo. Nearly two-thirds of French military helicopters were out of action in late 2016 due to maintenance and a shortage of spare parts and trained mechanics. In Mali the military are using armoured vehicles that are up to 40 years old. "The armed forces are running on empty," said Taylor. "The French can no longer go it alone."

TIME TO CHOOSE

France has four main options, according to the report.

One, the '*Cavalier seul*' or 'Lone Ranger' option, is for France to do as much as it can on its own, militarily and industrially. This would see it retain a full-spectrum technological and industrial capacity, and would avoid the problem of a lack of partners sharing its strategic priorities and appetite for expeditionary warfare. Though this is in practice largely how France conducts defence policy today, most strategists say France cannot afford financially or militarily to go it alone in the 21st century.

Alternatively, France could choose '*Tout à l'Europe*' – a European defence union – and help to create an EU defence capability for taking action where NATO does not. This could imply Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on defence in an EU framework, with a European defence fund to finance joint procurement of weapons systems and capabilities. It would also need a joint EU headquarters to plan and command operations outside the NATO framework. A joint EU defence effort might motivate reluctant countries to raise their military budgets and spend them more efficiently. But the EU is by nature a civilian undertaking that does soft power and is uncomfortable with hard security.

A third possibility, European bilateralism, would give priority to bilateral or trilateral defence cooperation outside the EU framework with major European partners, such as the UK and Germany. This would maximise French autonomy and influence while avoiding EU bureaucracy. Bilateral military cooperation with Britain is already flourishing, with a joint

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expeditionary task force of up to 10,000 soldiers from both countries due to be declared operational soon. The prospects for bilateral defence projects with Germany have improved, because Berlin is coming to recognise that its own security is at stake in North Africa and the Sahel.

However, bilateralism in general reduces the incentive for other European countries to contribute more to defence. Many Germans are wary of their armed forces being dragged into risky expeditions in France’s former African colonies. Berlin might insist on developing cooperation within the framework of PESCO, as provided for by the Lisbon Treaty.

Lastly, France could drive the constitution of a European pillar of NATO, developing European capabilities and forces to deliver interoperability and to bind the US to European security. However, this option has hardly any supporters in France, chiefly because of the Gaullist legacy of maintaining France as an independent power.

The best of these is probably European bilateralism combined with enough EU involvement to motivate smaller countries to participate, Taylor said: “Bilateralism is probably the key way forward, but with the EU playing a best-supporting-actor role.”

THE VIEW FROM PARIS

We are at a strategic moment for European defence cooperation, and France can no longer afford to go it alone on defence: this was the key conclusion of a discussion held in Paris the following day with 25 senior security and defence stakeholders, civil society representatives and journalists.

The roundtable discussion, organised by Friends of Europe, the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS) and Contexte, heard Paul Taylor say that French voters face a tough choice in the 7 May presidential election. Centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron would most likely opt for France taking a greater role in shaping European defence policy (options two and three) whereas far-right leader Marine Le Pen is most likely to pick the first option of isolationist policies, rejection of European integration and distancing France from the Alliance. Taylor warned that if elected, Macron, who is the favorite to win, would probably face reluctance in the high command and from sections of the military-industrial complex in pursuing a significant EU role.

In his opening remarks in Paris, Taylor underlined that France’s culture of preserving its strategic autonomy is in the past, and the country can no longer afford to go it alone on defence. Taylor also questioned France’s position within NATO. He explained that France does not see NATO as a solution to dealing with its threats, but rather as “as a solar system in which the planets go around a single Sun – and France wants to be a Sun itself,” quoting one of his interviewees.

Further discussion raised questions around the level of France’s strategic autonomy, its commitment to NATO, and Franco-German cooperation. Strengthened cooperation in defence matters with smaller European countries such as Poland and the Baltic States were also mentioned.

FRANCE, NATO AND EU DEFENCE COOPERATION

General Jean-Paul Paloméros, chief of staff of the French Air Force from 2009 to 2012 and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation from 2012 to 2015, questioned France's level of engagement with NATO, its commitment to European defence, and its willingness to link security and defence. Paloméros highlighted that “the EU cannot alone do what NATO has done for European security for 60 years” and that there is a need in France to acknowledge the effectiveness of NATO, which has ensured peace since 1949. With regard to the first ‘horseman’, he added that it is essential to remember the historical links between Europe and the United States.

Paloméros drew attention to a “European moment” – a crucial window of opportunity for France and Europe to reflect and decide what to do in the field of the European defence. “We need to work on developing the European spirit of defence,” he added, concluding that European defence cannot be built on a technocratic basis and that Europeans should stop inventing new instruments. He acknowledged smaller European countries’ input in developing defence capabilities, but questioned these countries’ willingness to work with France.

General Stéphane Abrial, Paloméros’ predecessor as chief of staff of the French Air Force (2006–2009) and Allied Command Transformation (2009–2012) stressed that the question of France’s strategic autonomy is one every country is facing.

Discussing the superiority of NATO or of European defence cooperation, he reminded participants that before France’s reintegration into NATO’s command structure in 2009, the two organisations were seen as complementary. In reference to Brexit, Abrial believes that the UK’s opposition to EU defence cooperation hid similar views among smaller countries.

The Chairman of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, **Bruno Racine**, stressed that France is not homogenous and that whoever becomes the next president will face difficulties in asserting any type of defence and security policy. Racine agreed with Taylor’s remark that if elected, Macron will most likely face political constraints as he does not have a stable state apparatus behind him.

Racine shared his view that NATO in France is seen as the instrument of the US. He also strongly agreed with the position expressed by previous speakers that France and the rest of Europe should not underestimate the capabilities of smaller European countries and what they can do for France.

Pascale Andréani, Diplomatic Advisor at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, added that whereas France perceives NATO as a tool of the US, the US see NATO as essentially European. She remarked that the EU does not intervene in military affairs if NATO does, and concluded that there will be no strong European defence cooperation until we learn how to cooperate and work with other Europeans.

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Joachim Bitterlich

Former diplomatic and security policy advisor to German chancellor Helmut Kohl

“The next four years are an historic opportunity for Franco-German cooperation and Europe”

Pascal Hector

Deputy Head at the Embassy of Germany to France

2017-2021: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR FRANCO-GERMAN COOPERATION?

Joachim Bitterlich, a former diplomatic and security policy advisor to German chancellor Helmut Kohl, emphasised that we live in extraordinary times for developing Franco-German cooperation. He predicts that “Franco-German cooperation in defence matters will come before the new governments are formed”.

Bitterlich also pointed out the differences in France and Germany’s strategic cultures and lack of knowledge-sharing that complicates cooperation. He suggested holding regular meetings between French and German defence officials to develop understanding between the two countries and to work on development policy, as Berlin is finally coming to understand its own security is at stake in North Africa.

Bitterlich concluded by adding that it is time to have a true debate on the substance of European defence and to reflect on it, instead of working on the surface.

Pascal Hector, of the German Embassy in Paris, supported Bitterlich’s views and drew attention to the fact that “the next four years are an historic opportunity for Franco-German cooperation and Europe, with the next leaders being in office for at least four years together”. France and Germany should use this window of opportunity to develop a more cooperative spirit between the countries. He recalled former president Charles de Gaulle’s belief in firm and lasting reconciliation between France and Germany, and its importance to Europe. He underlined that we should address different threats at the same time and together, instead of placing one above the other.



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