

# Why Franco-German leadership on European defense is not in sight

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Emmanuel Macron, already as a presidential candidate, bet heavily on Europe and the Franco-German tandem. This choice, which required a certain amount of political capital, resulted in a number of initiatives, many of them outlined in his September 2017 Sorbonne speech. It also resulted in the bilateral Aachen Treaty Macron and Angela Merkel signed in January 2019, intended to renew the 1963 Elysée Treaty. But the pomp surrounding the signing ceremony in Aachen barely hides the fact that things are not going too well in Franco-German relations. Frustration with Berlin has reached new peaks in Paris, not least due to Germany's failure to provide an "answer" to Macron's vision for Europe. When the Christian Democrats' new president, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, wrote a debate article in March 2019,<sup>1</sup> this was widely considered too little too late – in addition to the protocol faux pas of a party president without any government position responding to a head of state. It seems clear that Germany is not willing to embark on a great journey toward "refounding Europe" together with Macron's France, although Paris and Berlin of course do cooperate on many issues.<sup>2</sup>

This general Franco-German disenchantment of course also applies to the field of defense. Rhetoric to the contrary and big projects such as the joint Future Combat Air System notwithstanding, Franco-German cooperation on defense is not living up to expectations – and in fact hardly ever has. This holds true for purely bilateral defense matters: although France and Germany are each other's most important partner in almost any policy field, both Paris and Berlin traditionally have closer defense cooperation with respective other partners<sup>3</sup>. But it also holds true for the Franco-German tandem in the wider context of European defense cooperation, notably beyond the narrower confines of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Franco-German defense cooperation is often best

explained by the political necessity to incorporate the field into the overall highly relevant bilateral relationship, rather than by actual convergence and shared defense priorities.

## **A common place, yet the heart of the problem: different strategic cultures**

The reasons why Franco-German defense cooperation never really took off lie deep, and they are certainly not new. They extend beyond disagreement over tactics or short-term policy decisions. Franco-German incompatibilities are in fact truly structural. Although it may seem like a mundane common place to state that France and Germany are not in sync in terms of strategic culture, this simply is the heart of the problem. Decades of close cooperation have not led to aligned outlooks and worldviews, and perhaps not even to greater mutual understanding. The respective other country's take on security and defense largely remains a mystery to many.

In France, there is more or less a consensus across the political spectrum that the country is an important power (if not a great power, some might argue) that should play an important role in world affairs. Foreign and security policy is the President's *domaine réservé*, with the Parliament playing a lesser role. In France, this is widely seen as a strength of the French system, guaranteeing consistency, effectiveness and reactivity – many German observers, however, are at unease with what they perceive as a lack of democracy. France's status is underpinned by attributes such as its permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council and of course the French nuclear forces. The latter is not only a source of national pride; it is also the lynchpin holding together strategic thinking revolving around French strategic autonomy – ultimately guaranteed by the nuclear deterrent, including in its industrial dimension.

That notion is spelled out in a number of White Papers, most recently the 2017 Strategic Review<sup>4</sup>, which contain long sections analyzing threats and challenges and policy priorities derived thereof. These documents provide the intellectual superstructure for the French debate, with references being frequently made.

Germany, in turn, lacks such a consensus and a unified body of ideas on the country's security and defense policy. Notably since 2014, "responsibility" has become a sort of mantra in the German discourse, yet without being filled with content that would add up to a strategy. The German debate consequently still revolves very much around the question of what German policy is and should be. Perhaps even more importantly, that debate remains largely reactive, asking to what extent Berlin should respond to U.S. or French expectations (e.g. on defense spending or military implication in Africa), rather than defining German interests or priorities. Moreover, given the Bundestag's key role – notably in deploying the Bundeswehr – security and defense policy is much more "politicized" than in France, and the general population is much more critical when it comes to defense-related matters. From a French perspective, this clearly is a weakness. As seen from Paris, Germany still does not have a mature strategic culture and is still undergoing a process of "normalization" (which, according to many, would imply Germany becoming more like France). But French hopes triggered by the change of discourse in Germany since 2014 have been deceived, leading to perhaps even greater frustration than pre-2014. That these hopes were largely unfounded from the outset matters little in this context. In any case, France is still lacking the partner it is looking for in its endeavors. It may thus seem fair to conclude that the relatively recent French approach of reaching out to new, smaller partners (e.g. within the framework of Paris' European Intervention Initiative) may at least partly have something to do with Berlin not living up to expectations. Yet, multilateralism and European integration are more of a means to an end from a French perspective, rather than an end in itself as many in Berlin would have it. Bluntly speaking therefore, if e.g. CSDP can be of use in pursuing French objectives, Paris will bet on CSDP. If not, Paris will seek other options.

In sum, France and Germany share the same security environment and are members in the same institutions. But they lack a common framework of reference in terms of logics and approaches. This not only applies to the very content of respective defense policies, it applies to how they go about thinking about security and defense in the first place.

### **Thinking ahead: No common starting points**

Today, Europe's security environment is characterized by the return of "traditional" territorial war and growing threats from the South. In addition, the United States'

willingness to serve as the guarantor of European security is increasingly uncertain. The first issue is largely "technical" in nature (what strategy? what capabilities?), and it is mostly debated in terms of the "South" vs. the "East." The second – though of course closely linked to the answers given to the first – is eminently political at the very level of Grand Strategy. But France's and Germany's different cultures strategic cultures lead to another crucial point: when it comes to reading Europe's current security context and deriving conclusions, Paris and Berlin have different starting points.

For starters, priorities have never been the same in Paris and Berlin. For France, "defense" continues to be essentially about tackling threats in the South. Somewhere in the background is moreover France's nuclear deterrent, but this is seen as a purely national affair – in any case, deterrence and in extension territorial defense is thereby covered from a French perspective. The announced initiative intended to "give more substance" <sup>5</sup> to article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty may – in the very long term – transform this French affair into a European one (also provided there is an appetite for French nuclear protection in the rest of Europe, which remains to be seen). Germany, in turn, does not really see anything as a major threat, but has reoriented its defense policies toward territorial defense with its 2018 *Konzeption der Bundeswehr*.<sup>6</sup> Berlin is thus firmly anchored in the NATO camp, where it also pursues its flagship defense cooperation project, i.e. the Framework Nations Concept (without France).<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, in a German context, the current state of the transatlantic link tends to be debated in terms of president Trump and his policies and statements. In Berlin, many consequently continue to see Trump's presidency as a parenthesis with a likely return to "normal" afterwards (in analogy with Obama following Bush II). This is not the French take: for Emmanuel Macron, the further evolution of European integration takes place against the backdrop of a "progressive and unavoidable disengagement of the United States"<sup>8</sup> and profound systemic change with far-reaching implications for Europe is underway. While the current debate on deeper European defense cooperation is thus largely about further integration from a German perspective, the French starting point is that the future of the continent is at stake. Berlin's (perceived) inability to grasp the scope of the question is among key explanatory factors for the amount of frustration felt in France – in particular since many in Paris also believe that a window of opportunity to move forward in European defense is about to be missed.

Finally, in current Franco-German debates, these differences in strategic scope are not limited to big picture Grand Strategy issues. They also manifest themselves in more technical fields. For example, arms exports are

the perhaps highest bilateral obstacle in Franco-German defense (industrial) cooperation of the moment: Paris wants to be able to export the materiel it intends to build jointly with Germany, Berlin is weary of exporting to countries like Saudi-Arabia. Many factors of course do play in, including commercial ones, protectionism and industrial policies. The matter is extremely touchy politically in Germany, where the SPD as one of the two grand coalition parties has made its opposition to less strict rules a core item on its domestic agenda. But from a French perspective, the issue is of fundamental relevance, as it is about the very future of Europe's defense industry – and hence also European strategic autonomy. Paris thus went as far as having its ambassador in Berlin write an article explaining this to the Germans.<sup>9</sup> As of May 2019, no solution to the issue has been announced. Much more than just a technicality in the context of bold industrial projects, the matter clearly has the potential to poison the overall Franco-German relationship.

### What perspectives for Franco-German leadership?

All these differences do of course not prevent Paris and Berlin from joining forces to push through a number of PSDC initiatives. They may not come from the same angles and have different reasons to pursue the objective, yet the Franco-German tandem e.g. played an instrumental role in launching PESCO. The challenges for European defense nevertheless go well beyond defining the exact modalities for the European Defense Fund or the set-up of the next round of PESCO projects. But for European defense at large, there is no Franco-German vision. Neither are there competing French and German visions. The French take is certainly more developed than the German one, yet it has little answers for all those European countries who prioritize responding to a Russian threat and conventional deterrence. On the German side, rhetoric such as on the European Defense Union or the “Army of the Europeans” has so far also failed to reach a sufficient level of concreteness.

The conclusion to be drawn from the above is that true Franco-German leadership on European defense is not in sight. The debate on European strategic autonomy is where this is most obvious. Mainly pushed by France, the idea was met with profound skepticism in a large number of European countries. Germany, too, has not officially embraced the notion. Paris, however, was unable – or unwilling – to realize that French ideas can gain little traction in a Europe essentially concerned with *conventional* deterrence in the East. Conventional deterrence is the one defense dimension that is almost completely absent from French ideas – as well as the one in which replacing the Americans is the most illusory. Likewise, Paris simply failed to explain to its allies – who tend to read anything French against the backdrop of several decades of Gaullist legacies – that the French debate on how to get rid of American implication in European defense has been definitely settled with France's

2009 return into Allied command structures. In this context, Germany, as a member of the “conventional deterrence camp”, could have played a crucial role to channel that necessary debate into a much more constructive direction – yet it didn't. Berlin's mediation could have helped to bring allies' concerns to Paris' attention and mitigate those same allies' fears of Gaullist ghosts. As a result, Europe is still left with a situation that may be summarized as follows: France wants to lead, but lacks followers. Germany has potential followers, but does not want to lead. And Europe is still not debating scenarios in which transatlantic business as usual does not return.

This overall situation is not likely to change anytime soon. In light of their deep structural differences, France and Germany developing a joint vision for European defense seems unlikely at this point. Moreover, the problem of defense is that the field is not prone to compromise. Defense requirements must be derived from outside threats and challenges rather than political preferences held in capitals. For this reason, the traditional ways of reaching Franco-German agreement hardly work in this field.

Absent Franco-German leadership on European defense, complementarity between the two seems the next best option. This, however, may have considerable implications for allies and partners. In a worst case scenario, allies will have to choose between Paris or Berlin. A much more likely scenario yet is that of a continued patchwork of initiatives and cooperation formats. For partners, there clearly is room for cooperation with Paris on more punctual matters, essentially on French terms and on the basis of a rather transactional approach such as Estonia sending troops to the Sahel, while France sends troops to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. Also Germany offers opportunities for cooperation, yet its capabilities problem is standing in the way of Berlin being perceived as a real defense leader. In any case, the sum of these formats and cooperation projects does not amount to a holistic vision for the future of European defense.

Against this backdrop, France's and Germany's European partners should intensify their bilateral relationships with both Paris and Berlin and invest in following their respective national debates rather than treating the two as a “block.” While pushing for more convergence between the two may be too hard a task, avoiding incompatibilities should be high on the agenda. Messages to be conveyed to Paris and Berlin are not the same: while France needs to acknowledge the demand for *conventional* deterrence if it wants to lead on European defense, Berlin needs to step up its overall defense efforts and develop a clearer vision for the future European defense. Their partners must actively convey these messages, rather than wait for Franco-German leadership to happen.

### Endnotes

1. See Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, « Europa jetzt richtig machen », Die Welt, 10 March 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article190037115/AKK-antwortet-Macron-Europa-richtig-machen.html>
2. For an excellent overview of European matters currently on the Franco-German agenda, see Katarina Engberg, “The Franco-German dialogue on the future of the EU,” European Policy Analysis 3, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, March 2019, <http://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2019/the-franco-german-dialogue-on-the-future-of-the-eu/>.
3. E.g. the United Kingdom or the United States for France, the Netherlands and Poland for Germany. Also, Norway is mentioned as one out of three countries with which Berlin would like to intensify its defense cooperation in the 2018 coalition agreement.
4. French Government, Defence and National Security Strategic Review, October 2017, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/politique-de-defense/revue-strategique/revue-strategique>. For an analysis, see e.g. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Florent de Saint-Victor, “Chasing Grandeur ? What you need to know about the 2017 French Strategic Review,” War on the Rocks, 27 October 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/chasing-grandeur-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-2017-french-strategic-review/>
5. See e.g. Emmanuel Macron, “Speech by President Emmanuel Macron - Ambassadors’ Conference 2018”, Paris, 27 August 2018, [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/events/ambassadors-week/ambassadors-week-edition-2018/article/speech-by-president-emmanuel-macron-ambassadors-conference-2018](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/events/ambassadors-week/ambassadors-week-edition-2018/article/speech-by-president-emmanuel-macron-ambassadors-conference-2018)
6. German Ministry of Defense, Konzeption der Bundeswehr, 20 July 2018, <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/26544/9ceddf6df2f48ca87aa0e3ce2826348d/20180731-konzeption-der-bundeswehr-data.pdf>
7. For a more detailed discussion of these matters, see Barbara Kunz, “The three dimensions of Europe’s defense debate”, Policy Brief 024, German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2018.
8. Emmanuel Macron, “Initiative pour l’Europe – Discours d’Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique, » 26 September 2017, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique/>
9. Anne-Marie Descôtes, „Vom ‚German-free‘ zum gegenseitigen Vertrauen“, Working Paper of the German Federal Academy for Security Policy (Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik) 7/2019, March 2019, <https://www.baks.bund.de/de/arbeitspapiere/2019/vom-german-free-zum-gegenseitigen-vertrauen>.

