

FRANCE AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE

CONTINUITY IN LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES, CHANGE IN STRATEGY

Pernille Rieker



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- While the overall ambition (grandeur and status-seeking) in French foreign policy has been surprisingly stable, different strategies and approaches have been adopted. The French approach over the past 15 to 20 years has been to focus on status-seeking through legitimacy, and we have seen a gradual shift towards a French foreign policy that is increasingly guided by international law and multilateralism.
- There are also elements of both continuity and change in French ambitions for European defence. While the long-term ambition is the same, the French approach towards European defence has changed from being concerned with developing the defence structures within the EU ("Europe de la defence") to becoming more concerned with the need to strengthen the European capacity to act.
- Different types of French initiatives over the past decades – within or outside the European Union – must all be seen as ways of strengthening the European defence capacity: The French return to NATO's International Military Staff in 2009, the French-British defence cooperation from 2010, the French-German initiative to set up the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the recent French initiative to launch a European Intervention Initiative (EI2).



PERNILLE RIEKER

Research Professor

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview, President Emmanuel Macron argued in favour of a European army that could protect Europe against Russia, China, and the US. Many were surprised that he included the US. And one may question whether this was a diplomatically prudent thing to do – as it is provocative for many and diverts attention away from the key message he wants to convey. But by including the US he probably wanted to emphasize the urgency of the current security situation, that with the election of President Donald Trump we are witnessing the return of an American isolationism that is dangerous, and that Europe needs to wake up to and take the necessary steps to prepare to defend itself, if not against the US, then against the consequences of American foreign policy.

To this end, the questions that will be addressed in this Briefing Paper are: What does this mean? What do France and Macron want to achieve? Does the approach represent a break or continuity with traditional French politics? And what kind of support does he need to succeed?

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2016 will most likely be referred to as a turning point in modern French political history, but the change is not first and foremost to be found in the area of foreign policy. While Macron has introduced a change in French domestic politics, and also in political style, the change is less obvious with regard to the content of French foreign policy.

French foreign policy in general, and the French approach to the development of European defence in particular, cannot be understood properly without taking into account the fact that the key driver of French foreign policy has been, and still is, status-seeking and “grandeur”. This was a major concern in the immediate post-war period and during the Cold War and perhaps also most obvious under the leadership of President Charles de Gaulle, and it remains

a key factor in explaining the current French foreign policy. While different strategies and approaches have been chosen by different French political leaders, the overall ambition has been surprisingly stable.¹

Even though the overall ambition has remained unchanged, it is interesting to study the different strategies that have been adopted. In my recent work, I have applied insights from Social Theory to distinguish between three different strategies of status-seeking in French foreign policy since the Second World War: strategies of social mobility, of social competition, and of social creativity.² I argue that the immediate post-war period can easily be characterized by “social mobility” as it is marked by efforts by the French political leadership to be part of the club of key global players such as the UN Security Council in spite of its weakness at the time. On the other hand, the French approach during most of the Cold War period can be described as one of “social competition”, where France first fought for the development of a balanced transatlantic Alliance between the US and a strong and united Europe and then, when this was not possible to achieve, for the building of a national and independent French military (including nuclear) capacity. While the end of the Cold War heralded a new optimism for possibilities of creating a real Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for the European Union (EU), disappointment about the slow progress, conflicting interests and lack of French influence has left the French somewhat disillusioned as to what to expect of the EU in this area. This period can explain the more recent strategy whereby the French political leadership, by means of a form of creative thinking, has adopted a new strategy characterized by a combination of normative concerns and pragmatism when it comes to finding ways to strengthen European security and defence.

1 Rieker, P. (2017). *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World. Practicing Grandeur*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Rieker, P. (2018). ‘French status seeking in a changing world. Taking on the role as the guardian of the liberal order’. *French Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-018-0078-5>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

2 Larson, D. W. and Shevchenko, A. (2003). ‘Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy’. *International Organization* 57 (Winter): 7.

“FRANCE IS BACK” – TAKING ON THE ROLE AS THE GUARDIAN OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

Since the beginning of the millennium, French status, power and influence has been challenged at all levels. Nationally, the French political leadership was faced with economic stagnation, unemployment, internal security issues and the rise of populism. Regionally, it was challenged by German economic leadership in an enlarged and more Atlantic-oriented EU. Globally, it was challenged by emerging powers and the beginning of a more permanent global power shift. In spite of having a certain military strength, and still being a key military power in Europe, economic weakness and the lack of capacity to take political leadership in Europe had made France less credible as a serious European leader.

While this led to what has been referred to as a “national depression” in France,³ it also gave rise to some interesting changes – changes that also came to influence French foreign policy.⁴ A study of French foreign policy discourse in this period shows that it was gradually being more explicitly guided by normative concerns, such as respect for international law, which had not been an obvious characteristic of the policy up until then. This is not to say that France has become a normative actor, but rather that the strategy pursued by the French political leadership was to present a new narrative. The first real sign of this shift becoming a reality was the debate in the UN Security Council preceding the Iraq War in 2003, where France took on the role of the main opponent of the US-led intervention due to the lack of a UN mandate. This is interesting inasmuch as a UN mandate has not been something that France has been particularly preoccupied with in the past. Moreover, under Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency, it was interesting to note that promoting France as a normative power was a deliberate and carefully chosen strategy. This is particularly evident when studying Sarkozy’s eagerness to assume the role of peacemaker during the Georgian War in 2008, but also his initiative to intervene in Libya in 2011 to protect the Libyan people against potential genocide.

While this policy change seemed to be a clear strategic choice under Sarkozy, it became more profound,

and perhaps also sincere, under François Hollande’s presidency. For instance, it was under his presidency that we first saw a real change in the French Africa policy, where efforts were made to make a break with many of the bad practices of the past, often referred to as *Françafrique*. With Macron, these changes have been confirmed and become even more visible and evident.⁵

The foreign policy pursued by Macron is therefore very much in line with the approach introduced by President Hollande. If there is a difference compared to Hollande, it has more to do with political style, level of energy and willingness to take the lead rather than actual content. It can be argued that, under Macron, the French foreign policy approach introduced by his predecessors, and in particular by Hollande, has become both more explicit and more ambitious. This can be partly explained by Macron’s personality and his level of ambition, but also by the radical changes in both the international and regional context.

With the Brexit vote and the election of President Trump, the transatlantic relations have changed in character. This has occurred at a time when the internal and external security challenges confronting Europe are more pressing than ever with migration concerns, terrorism, and a more aggressive Russia.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR EUROPEAN DEFENCE?

While the French political leadership has become more concerned with the normative foundations of its foreign policy, it has also become more pragmatic when it comes to finding political solutions that work.⁶ For many years the French political leadership was concerned with US dominance in NATO and the importance of developing a more autonomous European defence. However, as progress within the EU slowed down and changed in character and the US started to orient itself more towards Asia, paving the way for increased European influence, French scepticism towards NATO diminished. The most evident example of this change was the French decision to return to the integrated military structure in NATO in 2009.⁷

Interestingly, this shift in French foreign policy orientation has been crucial for the development towards

3 Bavarez, N. (2003). *La France qui tombe*. Paris: Perrin; Boniface, P. (1998). *La France est-elle encore une grande puissance?* Paris: Presses de Sciences Po; Drake, H. (2011). *Contemporary France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Fenby, J. (2014). *France on the Brink: A Great Civilization in the New Century*. New York: Arcade.

4 Rieker, P. (2017); Rieker, P. (2018).

5 Rieker, P. (2018): ch. 3.

6 Ostermann, F. (2018). *Security, Defense Discourse and Identity in NATO and Europe: How France Changed Foreign Policy*. NY: Routledge.

7 Ostermann, F. (2018); Pesme, F. (2010). ‘France’s “return” to NATO: Implications for its defence policy’. *European Security* 19(1): 45–60; Rieker, P. (2013). ‘The French return to NATO: reintegration in practice, not in principle’, *European Security* 22(3), 376–94.

a European security and defence policy as it made French ideas about the latter less controversial for the member states that have traditionally feared that this might undermine NATO. There is also another side to the increased French pragmatism, namely the eagerness to find new ways to make European defence work. With this as the ultimate aim, French political leaders have also gradually become less concerned with the need to develop this capacity exclusively within the EU. While this continues to be an important objective, there are also other ways to boost the European defence capacity, such as through more or less formal bilateral and multilateral cooperation formats.

In the first decade after the end of the Cold War, the development towards a Common Security and Defence Policy within the EU was set out by the French political leadership and the EU as such as a clear priority. Important progress was duly made: an institutional framework was put in place and a series of (civilian and military) headline goals was agreed upon, and at least partly achieved. In 2003 the CSDP was declared operational and the first EU missions were launched. In spite of this progress, the process has been slower and more cumbersome than the French political leadership would have liked. The EU has undertaken a number of military and civilian missions, but they have all been relatively small and far less ambitious than the French had anticipated. In the end the EU as such still lacks a real capacity and political will to act rapidly in response to crises.

The current state of affairs in international politics and a more uncertain security context – both in Europe and globally – combined with a shift in American foreign policy, not to mention Brexit, has made the need to boost the development of a capable and credible European defence policy more important than ever before. The activation of Article 42.7 (the Mutual Assistance Clause) after the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 clearly shows the continued French commitment to the processes within the EU. Added to this, more recently, France – together with Germany – took the initiative to set up the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) established by the Lisbon Treaty as they recognize the importance of having greater momentum in European capacity building. While this initiative indicates a revival of the German–French engine in the EU, it also reveals the differences between the two. While Germany managed to gain support for a step-by-step, inclusive process, France would have preferred a smaller and more ambitious group of countries taking

the lead. In the end, a sense of urgency due to the current security context, combined with frustration over the Union’s current lack of capacity and willingness to act rapidly in response to crises, has made France somewhat sceptical about relying exclusively on the processes that take place within the EU.

The decision made by the French political leadership to return to the integrated military structure in NATO in 2009 must be understood in this context.⁸ When the French decided to take the lead in the military operation in Libya against the Gadhafi regime in 2011, they chose NATO. Other initiatives, such as the French–British defence cooperation from 2010 (that continues in spite of Brexit) as well as the recent European Intervention Initiative (EI2) that likewise includes Britain, must also be understood in this perspective. These aim at fostering the ability to build less bureaucratic but permanent coalitions of the willing, and the ability to be called upon when there is a need to respond rapidly to a crisis. The EI2 is also a direct consequence of the recent French experience in Mali, as well as in Syria, where the French political leadership feel that they have taken the responsibility for a crisis that could threaten not only France, but also Europe as such.

The thinking behind this new French approach is that with a more insecure international environment, and with France being particularly exposed to some of the new threats, it is important to have European security and defence cooperation that is ready to respond to a crisis that may occur at any time, and not only plan for the capacity to act in a somewhat more distant future. These concerns have made it important for the French political leadership to balance between progress within and outside the EU. To this end, let’s take a closer look at the French approach to two recent initiatives, namely PESCO and the EI2.

BUILDING A STRONGER AND MORE CAPABLE CSDP THROUGH PESCO

The idea of establishing the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – an opportunity for some countries to make enhanced commitments and better coordinate themselves to strengthen European defence capabilities – in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 42.6) was launched in June 2017. As soon as December 2017 a new

8 Ostermann, F. (2018); Pesme, F. (2010); Rieker, P. (2013).

European defence package came into being – a package that included, in addition to PESCO, a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, a European Defence Fund, and a Military Planning and Conduct Capability.

PESCO is designed to contribute to making European defence more efficient and to deliver increased output. The ambition is to be able to do so “by providing enhanced coordination and collaboration in the areas of investment, capability development and operational readiness”.⁹ The hope is that the cooperation will lead to a decrease in the number of different weapon systems, thereby strengthening the operational cooperation among member states, connecting their forces through increased interoperability, and enhancing industrial competitiveness.

In practice, PESCO will consist of a number of projects that together – and in the long term – aim at covering both the harmonization of requirements and pooling of resources in fields related to defence equipment acquisition, research, funding and utilization, as well as an improvement in the capacity to supply targeted combat units (either at the national level or as a component of multinational force groups) with the necessary support elements, including transport (airlift and sealift) and logistics within a period of five to thirty days.¹⁰ The ambition is that these efforts will, in the end, make the participating countries capable of carrying out joint military operations of different kinds – from conflict prevention to crisis response and post-conflict stabilization.

The first 17 PESCO projects adopted by the Council in March 2018 were mostly about the harmonization of requirements and the pooling of resources in fields related to defence equipment acquisition, research, funding and utilization.¹¹ While all of these are important, and will improve European defence capacity significantly over time, other projects, such as the creation of multinational military units with a combat

purpose, will be needed to enhance the European capacity for rapid reaction. In November, an additional 17 projects were adopted to, at least partly, compensate for this. These include training, capability development and operational readiness on land, at sea and in the air, as well as cyber-defence.¹²

When PESCO was included in the Lisbon Treaty, this was seen as an opportunity for those member states who wanted to move forward in the area of defence to do so. As 25 member states (out of 28) have now decided to participate in this cooperation,¹³ it has made the cooperation mechanism far more inclusive than was the initial intention. While there are positive sides to this inclusiveness, there is also a fear that it may be less ambitious and that the development of a real capacity for crisis response will take time. This concern has been most explicitly expressed by the French political leadership, as France feels particularly exposed to many of the current security threats. This explains why President Macron, only a few months after PESCO was agreed upon, presented his intention to establish a European Intervention Initiative (EI2).

THE EI2 AND NEED FOR A MORE FLEXIBLE STRUCTURE FOR CRISIS RESPONSE

The instability in Europe’s southern neighbourhood is seen as posing the most significant threat to European and French national security. Hence, France has been engaged in the Sahel for some time but is now in need of support from other European countries to be able to continue to handle these challenges. Thus far, the EU structures have proved to be of little help in terms of the kind of interventions that are needed. While the EU has deployed the CSDP mission – EUTM – in Mali, it is a training mission with no mandate to participate in combat against Islamist groups, like the French Serval and Berkane missions are doing. As of yet, the EU does not have the capacity and political will to respond rapidly to this kind of crisis.¹⁴

The French experience in the Sahel, and the need for active support from other European countries,

9 European External Action Service (2018). ‘Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO. Deepening Defence Cooperation among EU Member States’. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/pesco_factsheet_05-03-2018.pdf. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

10 The idea is that deployment could take place in particular in response to requests from the UN, and that it could be sustained for an initial period of 30 days and extended up to at least 120 days.

11 Six projects aim to facilitate and deepen cooperation in military education, training, logistics, and expeditionary missions, mainly through the standardization of procedures, regulations, manuals, data exchange systems, and so forth. A further five projects focus on the development of new defence technologies: unmanned, maritime countermine vehicles, maritime surveillance systems, innovative energy sources for forward-deployed bases, harbour and littoral infrastructure-protection systems, and secure, digital military radios. The next two projects involve the development of new weapon platforms: armoured infantry vehicles and artillery, including ammunition. New multinational capabilities – medical support and a disaster-relief force package (2 projects) – and increased cooperation in cybersecurity by establishing a platform for exchanging information on threats in cyberspace and rapid-response teams of cyber experts (2 projects) round off the list.

12 General Secretariat of the Council (2018). ‘Defence cooperation: Council launches 17 new PESCO projects’. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/11/19/defence-cooperation-council-launches-17-new-pesco-projects/>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

13 The countries that do not participate are the obvious ones: Denmark, which has an opt-out from the CSDP, the United Kingdom due to Brexit, as well as Malta.

14 EGMONT Royal Institute for International Relations (2018). ‘Why joining France’s European Intervention Initiative is the right decision for Germany’. <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/why-joining-frances-european-intervention-initiative-is-the-right-decision-for-germany/>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

explains why the French decided to take an additional initiative outside the institutional structures of the EU – an initiative that also makes it possible to include the UK. Consequently, the EI2 has to be understood as a complementary initiative taken to advance more rapidly towards a joint European capacity to act. It can be compared to other sub-regional initiatives, such as Germany's Framework Nation initiative, UK led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the Nordic defence co-operation (NORDEF), even though the operational ambition of the EI2 is made somewhat more explicit. According to Macron, the aim is that the initiative will lead to a common intervention force with a common strategic culture among the participating states.¹⁵

It is too soon to say with any certainty what the concrete result of this initiative will be, but the idea is that it may serve both NATO and the EU, and work independently of the two through a coalition of the willing. In June 2018, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark, Estonia, and the United Kingdom signed a Letter of Intent¹⁶ accepting the invitation to participate. In August, Finland also agreed to join, and Sweden and Norway are currently considering the possibility of doing the same.

To date, the EI2 seems to be a rather modest and flexible structure with no quantifiable deliverables. Some have even referred to it as a military workshop or an Erasmus for soldiers.¹⁷ Still, the initiative has the potential to complement PESCO with what Europe needs – namely a light structure for rapid decisions and ad hoc coalitions, thereby increasing the European capacity to respond rapidly to a crisis.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR MACRON TO SUCCEED?

Macron has an ambitious agenda, and in order to succeed, he needs support both domestically and in the EU. Judging by the opinion polls, he is currently at a historic low point with only 24% of the French population still arguing that they have confidence in his political leadership. While this is dramatic, it is not

surprising given the many unpopular reforms he has initiated. Interestingly, this lack of confidence has less to do with his ambitious plans for European defence. As this has been a long-term ambition for France, it is built on a rather large political consensus. And in spite of the growing Euroscepticism, French citizens are not so sceptical about integration in this area. Looking at the Eurobarometer data from 2014–2018,¹⁸ it is clear that French citizens are generally rather supportive of greater EU engagement in both foreign, security and defence policy, including anti-terrorism policy as well as a common migration policy and joint protection of the external borders. While there is growing Euroscepticism, populism and nationalism also in France, it has been oriented towards this policy area only to a very limited extent.

Interestingly, just like the current French political leadership, French citizens seem to be pragmatic when it comes to how to achieve this goal and the majority also think that the development of a European defence capacity comes through common participation in external operations. Concern that the EU will become too militaristic is negligible or even non-existent. The concern is rather that the EU will develop in the wrong direction – focusing on the softer parts of European security, such as Europeanization through enlargement and neighbourhood policy rather than building up a real defence capacity. This probably also explains why only 32% think that Brexit is a bad thing, as the UK has traditionally supported a different approach from that of the French, giving priority in the EU context to softer security tools.

But support at home will not suffice. Macron will also need support from the other member states, and from the European NATO members in particular. In order to achieve this, he needs to convince them that his ideas on European defence – and even a European army – are not going to compete with, but rather be complementary to NATO. While this has been a challenge for France in the past, it might be easier today as the country is fully reintegrated into the NATO structures and there is a more pressing need for Europe to take greater responsibility for its own defence, given both the current security context and the priorities of the incumbent US President.

15 Ouest France (2017). 'Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron – Full text / English version'. <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

16 Bundesministerium der Verteidigung (2018). Letter of intent concerning the development of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/25706/099f1956962441156817d7f35d08bc50/20180625-letter-of-intent-zu-der-europaeischen-interventionsinitiative-data.pdf>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

17 Witney, N. (2018). 'Macron and the European Intervention Initiative: Erasmus for soldiers?', ECFR Commentary May 22. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macron_and_the_european_intervention_initiative_erasmus_for_sold. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

18 European Commission: Public opinion. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm>. Last accessed 7 December 2018.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The current French approach to European defence can only be understood through an understanding of the drivers of French foreign policy as such. French status-seeking has been a key element in French foreign policy since the Second World War, but the strategy pursued by the changing French political leadership has varied. Recently, it has become increasingly legitimized by normative concerns – as this is the only way for France as a middle power to punch above its weight. A continuity in the French approach, however, has been the ambition to build a strong and more autonomous European defence capacity. Three elements have led to a slight change in the traditional French approach. First, the sense of urgency due to a more uncertain security context. Second, a change in the US approach – and the consequent opportunity for increased European and French influence. Third, disappointment with the progress made thus far within the EU. Taken together, these factors have led to increased French pragmatism – or perhaps innovation – that has resulted in a shift in focus towards results and the capacity to act, rather than process. The decision to reintegrate into the Integrated Military Structures in NATO in 2009, the French-British defence agreements from 2010 as well as the more recent initiative to finally launch PESCO as well as establish a European Intervention Initiative must all be understood as a way of strengthening the European defence capacity. PESCO will stimulate the necessary capacity-building overseen by the EU, but this will take time. The intention is for the EI2 to complement PESCO as it aims at building a common European strategic culture through practice, thereby increasing the European capacity to act and respond rapidly to crisis situations.