

# THE PROGRESSION TOWARDS AN AUTONOMOUS EUROPE UNDER FRANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, France has been an extremely militarily proactive state on the global stage. With the collapse of the bipolar world system of the Cold War and the emergence of a new multipolar system, France has consistently made a concerted effort to remain legitimate and relevant. Notably, the role of France as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council has created a need to justify its privileged place on the world stage, leading decision-makers to take advantage of its supreme military capability in comparison to like-sized 'medium states' (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019: 901). Furthermore, with the rise of a more complex and advanced operational environment, France is committed to a revamping of its military capabilities to maintain a more concrete sense of national autonomy in order to sustain its global image in a world system that creates extreme uncertainty and unpredictability. France seeks to avoid dependency in any military sense; however due to budgetary constraints, France is making a move to incorporate 'minilateral partnerships' (i.e. partnerships outside of the structural confines of traditional strategic institutions such as NATO and the EU) with willing and able European countries complemented by continued bilateral relations with the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States in order to drive a shared strategic culture through a stand-alone, autonomous Europe.

## A HISTORY OF MILITARY CAPABILITY

Early French military operations revolved around the concept of "missionary interventions" highly reminiscent of its colonial heritage (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019: 899). To better understand current French strategic culture, it is beneficial to explore the historical French strategy of military engagement post-Cold War. From this, one can see a reinforcement of France's primary strategy, "namely its willingness to use force independently, especially in zones of traditional French interest" (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019: 900). Expanding on its ambition to participate in wars of choice, France has played a noteworthy role in many NATO-led coalitions outside of the traditional zone of French influence, noticeably in Afghanistan and the military campaign in Libya (Pannier and Schmitt 2019). An important point here is that whether or not involvement in both of these conflicts was triggered by implicit or explicit national security concerns, such involvement is illustrative of France's willingness and exceptional responsiveness to participate in wars of choice based on a collective goal, and in this case, combatting the war on terror. While France has enjoyed a high level of military capability in recent years, it is important to understand that despite their capability and willingness, France has historically relied heavily on its allies in both independent and joint military campaigns. This is most notable in its military operations in the Sahel and the Central African Republic (CAR) through *Opération Serval* in Mali (intervention at the request of local

government), *Opération Sangaris* (humanitarian intervention in an attempt to prevent genocide in CAR), and *Opération Barkhane* (an extension of Serval focused more specifically on counterterrorism in the dispersal of jihadist groups in response to Operation Serval) (Pannier and Schmitt 2019: 916). In all of these operations, France relied heavily on the logistical support of multiple fellow European countries, specifically the UK, Denmark and Belgium, and most importantly the United States in intelligence gathering. This involvement, on top of the fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, is illustrative of a movement by French leadership towards a more pragmatic approach, downplaying its historical missionary intervention policies following a brutal wave of terrorist attacks in 2015-2016. This new approach is evidence of an ideological shift in French decision-making to account for the link in external instability and internal stability by complementing military engagement with structural and economic development (Lasconjarias and De Saint-Victor, 2017).

Therefore, in this context, the response to jihadist terrorism has primarily been focused on the military dimension in the form of deployment both abroad, and more importantly, domestically. Immediately following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks, France launched its largest domestic military deployment operation (*Opération Sentinelle*) since the Algerian War, with approximately 10,000 troops to protect points of interest within French borders. However, in the overarching context of the French 360-degree outlook on global security, one can begin to notice that its military engagements in the MENA (Middle East and Northern Africa) region as well as its exhaustive fight against terrorism, added on to its commitments to NATO and its

renewed deterrence and defense policy on the Eastern Flank, are beginning to take a toll and potentially constrain explicit French strategic plans.

## STRONGER CAPABILITIES IN THE SHADOW OF BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS

The 2017 White Paper begins by depicting the world as a volatile strategic environment that poses both challenges and opportunities to the French and European strategic cultures (Lasconjarias and de Saint-Victor, 2017). Furthermore, France sees the spread of modern and conventional equipment to a number of both state and non-state actors as effectively challenging the maintained military and technological superiority of the West. Consequently, it is not surprising that France outlines its plan to maintain and even further its own strategic autonomy.

France, in the context of its privileged post-Brexit position as the European Union's sole nuclear power and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, sees itself as an exceptional state with a sense of legitimacy and relevance on the global stage. Therefore, in the wake of Brexit, France sees itself as the new emerging leader of Europe, directly impacting its own strategic vision: "France must have two objectives: preserving its strategic autonomy and helping to build a stronger Europe to address the growing number of common challenges" (Ministère des Armées, 2017).

Firstly, as stated above, France is an extremely proactive state when it comes to military engagement around the globe. However, the strategic document sets out to both maintain and expand its military capabilities to "the model of a full-spectrum and balanced military" (Ministère des Armées 2017: 3) in an attempt to

secure its freedom of action and national autonomy. This is in direct response to a more demanding environment of operation. As seen first hand in the jihadist terrorist attacks, as well as its engagement with jihadist terrorist groups in the MENA region, France recognizes that new asymmetrical actors are now capable of more advanced operations allowing them to “level the force ratio” (Lasconjarias and de Saint-Victor, 2017). The proliferation of new and advanced weapon systems and the ability to seize and hold territorial gains are a lethal combination creating a strategic environment of instability and unpredictability.

With this in mind, France seeks to enhance its ability to obtain knowledge directed towards anticipation efforts through a strengthening of its intelligence apparatus. Such a focus is not new, but rather a continuation of the strategy laid out in the 2013 White Paper. However, the threat and need for a consolidation of its anticipation efforts are much more dire due to the fact that the perceived threats elucidated in the 2013 White Paper have materialized more rapidly than expected. Therefore, the 2017 document attempts to better align the continued six strategic functions: “deterrence, prevention, protection, intervention, knowledge and anticipation in a move to consolidate their strategic autonomy” (Ministère des Armées, 2017). Lastly, France outlines its plan to upgrade its nuclear deterrent on land, air, and sea in an effort to assist in their armed force’s capability to exercise autonomous action.

However, the strategic review is incredibly ambitious considering that France is recovering from a minor economic crisis as well as pre-existing budgetary constraints. The document was produced in a record three months, a direct

representation of Emmanuel Macron’s presidential pledge to incrementally increase defense spending in order to reach its two per cent GDP goal by 2025. The political means by which the strategy was created follows a “strategy first, budget later” sequence (Arteaga, 2017). In this specific case, the strategic plan directly informs the budget rather than adjusting strategies and structures to meet the budget available. This poses a massive constraint to the French strategic plan due to the expected cost of the nuclear deterrent upgrade, as well as the domestic fight against terrorism to consume a rather large portion of the defense budget (Taucas, 2017). This investment would be in the form of raising the defense spending from 32 billion Euros to 50 billion Euros in the span of seven years, justified by growing insecurity and the positive industrial impact the generation will have (Artaega, 2017). Consequently, the overextension of French global involvement has forced France to challenge its own idea of independent autonomy through its aggressive push for European Autonomy.

## AN AUTONOMOUS (FRENCH) EUROPEAN STRATEGIC VISION

The main complexity that arises from the French strategic plan is its balancing act. France asserts that it must maintain complete autonomy for certain preconditioned national operational engagements while simultaneously pursuing European ambitions where cooperative and state-level partnerships will directly enhance military capabilities within France’s full-spectrum approach.

French President Emmanuel Macron has introduced a recasting of the role of allies in French and European strategic culture (2017). Even in the withdrawal of the US and UK from European affairs, Macron still finds salience in

the central role that those two countries play. Furthermore, France sees importance, though in a limited nature, of regional security institutions such as NATO; however, an emphasis is placed heavily on engaging European partners outside of the NATO structure in order to create a more efficient and shared strategic culture based on 'minilateralism' (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019: 907).

With the instability and unpredictability that has arisen in the wake of Brexit and the US election of Donald Trump's 'America First' policy, France believes that Europe can no longer count on traditional allies in this current political atmosphere, which is stated explicitly in the foreword of the strategic document: "We can no longer be certain to count, everywhere and always, on our traditional partners" (Ministère des Armées, 2017). This is a clear jab at the United States and the United Kingdom, opening the door to an approach that correlates with France's disdain for the inefficiency of NATO and the lack of a shared strategic culture in the EU.

After Macron's seminal speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017 (Macron, 2017) where he defined a new strategy that would create a framework for Europe to participate in military engagements outside of the confines of NATO, he explained that Europe should have a common strategic culture under shared budgetary policies and doctrine in order to achieve a strategic European autonomy. The European Intervention Initiative (EI2) was proposed in order to "avoid replicating the misunderstandings, European reluctances and eventual French strategic isolation that characterized the operations in Mali and CAR" (Pannier and Schmitt, 2019: 909). In the aforementioned military engagements, European cooperativeness was crucial to the

ultimate French success. However, there was a massive lag in response time as well as the sharing of burdens in the eyes of the French, which has been seen again in the interim period of the Libyan conflict where the US and France had to take charge of bombings as NATO could not immediately take over.

France sees the minilateral relationships with other willing and able European powers as a way to further implement its own national autonomy at a time that French resources are spread thin. France relies a great deal on its assertion that autonomy must be achieved. However, autonomy does not mean that France has to do this on their own, but rather they must be able to do this through charting their own course of action.

## CONCLUSION

France is confronted by many strategic challenges in a new multipolar world order. Uncertainty and unpredictability in the international system drive and influence French strategy at a time when French military capabilities are spread thin. President Macron sees the movement by traditional global players towards a more isolationist approach to foreign policy as an opening for France to emerge as the new 'leader' of Europe in the security sector. However, France must obtain a more cohesive form of national autonomy in order to cement itself as the new head of Europe. Consequently, the question must be asked: Is France able to rise to the challenge? While France has enjoyed a privileged position on the global stage as a nuclear power and a permanent member on the UN Security Council, France has always suffered from an identity and confidence problem. It constantly seeks to assert itself over similarly sized medium powers through its privileged position, oftentimes

spreading itself too thin with its resources. Consequently, the budgetary constraints and the practice of semi-dependency (which French strategy paradoxically rejects) poses a very problematic hurdle for France to overcome in their ascent to dominance in Europe, even in the reclusiveness actions of the United States and the United Kingdom.

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