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Paris and Berlin: still no strategic convergence, while the big questions return

Barbara Kunz
Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy
University of Hamburg

BARBARA KUNZ is a senior researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH). She primarily works on European security and defense affairs. Prior to joining IFSH, she spent over four years as a research fellow at the Institut français des relations internationales in Paris, mainly focusing on European and Franco-German defense cooperation. Previous stations of her career include Genshagen Foundation close to Berlin, Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies in Stockholm.

She studied political science and international relations at the Institut d'études politiques (Sciences Po) in Paris. She also holds a PhD from Stockholm University, awarded for a dissertation on US foreign policies toward Poland, Ukraine and Belarus after the end of the cold war. In the context of her doctoral studies, she was a visiting fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations (SAIS/Johns Hopkins University) in Washington DC.

Barbara Kunz analyses how Europeans together can respond to 21 century security challenges. The debate on European strategic autonomy and its possible declinations is currently at the heart of her interest, not least against the backdrop of a changing transatlantic relationship. In this context, she mainly focuses on the various national approaches – in particular in Germany, France and Northern Europe – and developments in relevant organizations, notably the European Union and NATO.

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INTRODUCTION

While France and Germany famously have the closest bilateral relationship in the world, they never really managed to become each other's most relevant partner in the defense field. That French and German strategic cultures are hardly compatible has been an almost platitudinous observation for decades. The two countries' political and military cultures are very different, as well as their political systems and administrative structures. The French and German general public's attitudes toward matters of security and defense are hardly comparable.[1] Recent attempts at overcoming differences and a renewed ambition to cooperate, expressed in the 2019 Aachen Treaty, have had little impact on the prospects of Franco-German defense cooperation and did not lead to true strategic convergence. Defense consequently remains the neglected child of the otherwise so successful Franco-German tandem and has, despite oftentimes high-flying rhetoric, never quite worked in a way that satisfies both Paris and Berlin.

Joint Franco-German initiatives intended to advance European security therefore continue to be rare. And proposals from one side do not necessarily convince the other. The most recent French suggestions on European defense were more or less quietly rejected or ignored by Germany. Paris and Berlin disagreed on a variety of issues, such as Libya or sanctions against Turkey. The burden-sharing issues between the two countries persist, in particular with France perceiving a lack of support in the Sahel on its key partner's part. Germany also refrained from contributing much to the debate on European strategic autonomy, while Paris considered itself the "engine" of that debate. The German EU presidency flagship project, the Strategic Compass, in turn, was not met with great enthusiasm in Paris, although the endeavor will be finalized under the French EU presidency during the first half of 2022. Moreover, President Macron's unilateralist leanings often cause raised eyebrows in Berlin. On both sides, it is clear that the respective priorities in security and defense are not shared by the respective partner country.

Projects where Paris and Berlin truly see eye to eye are consequently more the exception than the rule. The most ambitious cooperation takes place in the industrial field – which is certainly relevant, but which does not necessarily illustrate shared strategic visions for the future of the continent's security. Yet, developing such visions, both at national levels and bilaterally, would be needed in times of increasing uncertainty regarding U.S. engagement in European security and American security guarantees. The election of Joe Biden as U.S. president may seemingly have reduced the urgency in these questions. Most indicators, both international and American domestic, nevertheless point toward diminished U.S. engagement in European security. Franco-German cooperation and dialogue consequently should encompass three levels: bilateral projects,

1 For a more detailed discussion of these structural incompatibilities, see e.g., Barbara Kunz, "Why Franco-German leadership on European defense is not in sight", NUPI Policy Brief n°10, 2019.

the advancement of existing formats of European defense cooperation and CSDP in particular, as well as developing more concrete visions for European security in times of a changing transatlantic link. Needless to say, notably the latter two categories cannot and must not be considered a purely bilateral task, but need to involve all European capitals.

Against this backdrop, this paper intends to provide an overview of major Franco-German differences that currently impact bilateral cooperation and the development of joint visions for European security in the decades ahead. It seeks to identify the causes of these differences, and, on this basis, assess the potential for strategic convergence.

THE AACHEN TREATY IS NO GAME CHANGER

Already throughout his 2017 Presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron bet heavily on the Franco-German tandem. This stands in contrast with his predecessors, who generally needed some time in office before considering Berlin their European key partner. Once elected president, Macron *inter alia* offered to renew the 1963 Elysée Treaty during his September 2017 speech. The speech, "An Initiative for Europe", held at the Sorbonne[2], was strategically timed to take place only days after the German federal elections. The result is the Aachen Treaty[3], signed on 22 January 2019, i.e. exactly 56 years after the original Elysée Treaty. In this treaty, France and Germany *inter alia* pledge to deepen and intensify their cooperation in the fields of foreign and security policy and European integration. Yet, the new treaty hardly resulted in much truly new impetus for bilateral cooperation. Progress is of course being achieved, notably when it comes to cooperation in regions next to borders and at the institutional level. Following the Parliamentary agreement concluded in the Treaty's wake, parliamentarians meet more often in the framework of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly[4], thus creating greater awareness for ways of thinking in the respective other country– which remains as necessary as ever.

In the defense area, however, little concrete progress was made. In this field in particular, the Aachen Treaty can hardly be considered a blueprint for action[5], despite a few new items being added to the agenda (most notably so bilateral

2 Emmanuel Macron, "Initiative pour l'Europe – Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe unie, souveraine et démocratique", Paris, 26 September 2017, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique.

3 An English translation of the text is available at the French Foreign Ministry's website, see https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/france-and-germany/franco-german-treaty-of-aachen/

4 See e.g. https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/frankreich-node/franco-german-parliamentary-assembly/2203500

5 See Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, "The Treaty of Aachen: New Impetus for Franco-German Defense Cooperation?", *Actuelles de l'Ifri*, 22 January 2019, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/edito_kempin_kunz_aachen_treaty_jan_2019.pdf

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron during the signing ceremony of the Aachen Treaty. Photo: Bundesregierung / Bergmann

security guarantees[6], which are nevertheless mostly symbolic in nature). Hopes that the Franco-German Defense and Security Council, created in 1988 in order to consult "on all matters pertaining to the security of Europe," would become a tool allowing for strategic foresight have so far not materialized – as e.g. confirmed by its latest biannual meeting in February 2021.[7] Nor do Paris and Berlin dialogue elsewhere in a structured manner on the big strategic challenges European security is facing and the conclusions to be drawn thereof. In this sense, the (grand) strategic dimension is still largely missing from Franco-German defense cooperation.

INDUSTRIAL COOPERATION AS THE FLAGSHIP ACTIVITY, BUT STUMBLING BLOCKS ABOUND

In the absence of more strategic initiatives, the current flagship projects of Franco-German defense cooperation are located at the industrial level. The most important of these is the so-called Future Combat Air System (FCAS), of which the Next Generation Fighter jet is one element. Other examples include a tank – labelled Main Ground Combat System – or a drone. This is not to say that none of these projects has strategic implications – yet, they are clearly not the result of a joint Franco-German strategic vision on European security. From a French perspective, these projects are still (potential) contributions to European strategic autonomy in that they consolidate technological independence. The

6 These notably raised concerns in Poland regarding the "bilateralization" of security guarantees in Europe. Moreover, some saw it as a first step toward nuclear cooperation between France and Germany.

7 See e.g. German Federal Foreign Office, "Germany and France for European sovereignty", 5 February 2021, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/franco-german-defence-council-1851544

German approach, on the other hand, is largely one of industrial policy.

FCAS was officially announced in July 2017 at the Franco-German Ministerial Council in Paris – Macron's first as French president. The project is intended to be finalized by 2040. In 2018, Paris and Berlin *inter alia* determined that French Dassault Aviation would take the lead in what may be considered the project's core, the Next Generation Fighter, i.e. the actual airplane in this "system of systems." In February 2019, Spain officially joined, making FCAS a trilateral project where work packages would have to be split into one third for each country involved. Things have not always been running smoothly between the partners, both between companies and between companies and governments. While difficulties have long been known (and expected, also based on previous Franco-German experiences)[8], disagreements reached the mainstream press in the spring 2021. They primarily pertain to the division of labor between the involved companies – most importantly so French Dassault, as well as Airbus for Germany and Spain – as well as intellectual property rights and technology transfer.[9] While some of these difficulties may be considered normal in any project of this scope, it should be remembered that French contractor Dassault was reluctant to work with the Germans in the first place. Essentially the company was forced into the Franco-German endeavor by Macron, who had decided to bet on Germany.[10] While initially favoring Franco-British cooperation, Dassault's CEO, Eric Trappier, recently suggested there might be other "Plan B" options for France to build a next generation fighter jet.[11] Some already argue that France could go it alone in the face of Germany's alleged lack of reliability – just as the *Rafale* became a national endeavor after France in the 1980s pulled out of the European fighter jet program that later resulted in the *Eurofighter Typhoon*.[12]

While the FCAS faces problems, France and Germany nevertheless managed to resolve another key stumbling block for industrial cooperation in the wake of the Aachen Treaty, namely the question of armament exports.[13] With

8 Dominic Vogel, "Future Combat Air System: Too Big to Fail", SWP Comment 2021/C 02, January 2021, https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C02/

9 See Jean-Pierre Maulny, "SCAF: Il faut que Français et Allemands trouvent un compromis et évitent l'irréparable," Tribune, Iris, 16 February 2021, https://www.iris-france.org/154362-scaf-il-faut-que-francais-et-allemands-trouvent-un-compromis-et-evitent-lirreparable/

10 His hearing in front of the French Senate's defense committee is enlightening in this regard. See Commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées, Audition de M. Eric Trappier, Président-Directeur Général de Dassault Aviation, 10 March 2021, http://videos.senat.fr/video.2158775_6048bcc15eeb3.audition-de-mtrappier-president-directeur-general-de-dassault-aviation

11 Christina Mackenzie, "Dassault boss Trappier floats 'Plan B' considerations for the troubled FCAS warplane," DefenseNews, 5 March 2021, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/03/05/dassault-boss-trappier-floats-plan-b-considerations-for-the-troubled-fcas-warplane/

12 Mars reflexion group, "SCAF, faut-il persévérer dans l'erreur ? ", *La Tribune*, 1 March 2021, https://www.latribune.fr/opinions/scaf-faut-il-perseverer-dans-l-erreur-878756.html

13 See the document adopted at the September 2019 Franco-German Defense and Security Council in Toulouse: "France-Germany industrial cooperation in the defence field. Common understandings of principles applicable to transfers and exports", e.g. available at https://download.taz.de/CommonUnderstandingArmsExports.pdf

Germany's stricter take, the matter had been high on the agenda the past years, and at times seriously poisoning the relationship.[14] To what extent the agreement reached truly solves all issues, nevertheless remains to be seen. After all, with the so-called Schmidt-Debré agreement, France and Germany, had already signed an agreement on exporting the products of joint armament projects in the 1970s that somehow fell into oblivion, making a new approach necessary.

Further down the road, more obstacles likely await. It is indeed to be expected that differences in strategic outlook will become more apparent. As FCAS from a German point of view is seen as mostly an industrial project, Paris views it as the industrial cornerstone of European strategic autonomy.[15] What is more, given its condition *sine qua non* (as seen from France) role in nuclear deterrence – which implies the fighter jet's nuclear capability as well as its ability to land on France's aircraft carrier(s) – the NGF is also a key pillar of French national strategic autonomy. Yet, the nuclear dimension may cause problems down the road, notably if Germany sees the NGF as the successor of the Tornado, currently serving the role of delivery system for U.S. B61 bombs within the framework of NATO nuclear sharing. This is one of the questions where intellectual property rights issues play a crucial role in case the NGF, based on Dassault-owned technology, needs to be certified by the United States to carry U.S. nuclear weapons. On the other hand, if Germany opts for a U.S. jet as the Tornado replacement, this will in Paris be seen as undermining the FCAS and European strategic autonomy. The current governing coalition in Berlin yet postponed the decision on the Tornado's successor until after the September 2021 federal elections.

THE FRANCO-GERMAN BURDEN-SHARING ISSUE

Beyond the industrial field, France and Germany currently hardly play the role of an "engine" for European defense integration. There is currently no truly Franco-German initiative underway intended to deepen European defense cooperation. Suggestions emanating from one country generally do not cause enthusiasm in the other. Accordingly, notably France is focusing on its key projects, either with partners other than Germany or with Germany as just one partner among others.

Germany's reactions to France's recent flagship undertaking, Macron's European Intervention Initiative (EII) were indeed less than lukewarm. Although Germany eventually joined, the debate surrounding it confirmed key differences

14 See for example the opinion piece published by the French ambassador at the German Federal Academy for Security Policy: Anne-Marie Descôtes, "Vom German-free zum gegenseitigen Vertrauen", Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik 7/2019, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, 2019, https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier_sicherheitspolitik_2019_7.pdf

15 For that reason, in France, the planned development of a competing system in Tempest is also considered a major blow to ambitions for European defense industrial consolidation and thus European strategic autonomy.

between the two countries. On the French side, it thus illustrates that the focus is on military interventions (although, ironically and despite its name, the EII did not end up being about concrete operations[16]). Germany, in turn, looked at it less through the defense lens but through the European integration lens: Berlin was concerned about the exclusive character of the project, in which only selected countries would be invited to participate. In line with its long-standing ambition to keep Europe together, Germany has been (and continues to be) skeptical of the approach, notably because Poland is not part of it. Moreover, Germany is generally not keen on military interventions – which obviously makes it harder to sell an initiative that contains the word "intervention" among German politicians. Likewise, Berlin did not actively support French ambitions to fill article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty – the mutual assistance clause – with more substance. Germany again feared such a step risked dividing Europeans, in light of many countries' unequivocal preference for NATO.

Constantly lingering in the background of matters such as the European Intervention Initiative is the bilateral Franco-German burden sharing issue. This first and foremost pertains to France's military engagement in the Sahel region (since 2014 in operation *Barkhane*), and Germany's – this is at least the French take – lack of support for its most important ally. Germany has indeed not sent troops to *Barkhane*, contrary to several other European countries such as Estonia and Denmark. Instead, Germany is engaged in the United Nation's MINUSMA, with a maximum of German troops set at 1,100 by the German parliament when it renewed its mandate for the Bundeswehr in May 2020.[17] Moreover, Germany sends up to 350 soldiers to Mali to participate in the EU's EUTM Mali.[18] None of the two missions has a fighting mandate. More recently, France also initiated the special forces operation *Takuba*, which it also leads, as an additional instrument in the anti-terrorist toolbox. *Takuba* was launched in 2020, yet without German soldiers participating while Berlin supports the task force "politically."[19] Against the backdrop of 55 French military casualties in Mali since the beginning of *Barkhane*'s predecessor mission *Serval* in 2013, and as seen from Paris, Berlin hence refuses to "go where it hurts," i.e. into actively combating terrorism. Mali thus greatly contributes to the general sense in Paris that its German partner fails to adequately support France.

In addition to the French armed forces' overstretch, deep disenchantment with Germany may thus be considered a key factor in Paris' increasingly reaching out to other partners among European countries. This concerns the

16 See French Ministry of the Armed Forces, "European intervention initiative", https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/international-action/l-iei/l-initiative-europeenne-d-intervention, accessed 14 April 2021.

17 German Bundestag, "Minusma-Einsatz der Bundeswehr in Mali wird fortgesetzt," 29 May 2020, https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw22-de-bundeswehr-mali-minusma-696112.

18 See German Armed Forces, "Mali: EUTM Mali," https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/mali-einsaetze/eutm-bundeswehr-eu-einsatz-mali, accessed 14 April 2021.

19 It is consequently not uncommon to hear comments in Paris such as "we risk our lives in the Sahel, and when we ask the Germans for help, they send us a gender equality advisor."

French soldiers of the 126th Infantry Regiment and Malian soldiers, March 17, 2016.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Nordic countries in particular, but also the Baltics and to some extent Poland[20]. Although the military added-value of, for instance, Estonia contributing to operation *Barkhane* may seem debatable, Paris considers the involvement of more European nations of great political importance and regularly underlines that its African engagement is by no means a unilateral endeavor.[21]

DIVERGENCES ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

The above described divergences at the bilateral level naturally also stand in the way when it comes to Franco-German cooperation in a European context. This in particular applies to moving multilateral defense cooperation forward at the conceptual level in light of the changing security environment. France and Germany indeed continue to struggle in developing a joint vision for European and transatlantic security and defense cooperation. The reasons for these difficulties are to be found at the fundamental level, as they go way beyond mere disagreements on technical issues as for instance PESCO (which once again pitted ambitious France against inclusiveness-seeking Germany[22]).

20 Bilateral relations between France and Poland had nevertheless reached a low point after Poland decided in 2016 (thus still under French president Hollande) to finally not buy Caracal helicopters from Airbus. This is, however, just one factor that leads to complicated relations between Paris and Warsaw. For a more detailed analysis, see e.g. Olivier-Rémy Bel, "France and Poland: Helicopters, forks, and reconnections", Atlantic Council Blog, 14 February 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/france-and-poland-helicopters-forks-and-reconnections/

21 As just one example, see Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly's hourlong radio interview in January 2021: "Florence Parly: 'La France est toujours engagée et considère que Daech est toujours present'," *Questions politiques* on FranceInter, 10 January 2021, https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/questions-politiques/questions-politiques-10-janvier-2021.

22 See e.g. Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, "Can France and Germany make PESCO work as a process Toward European Defense?", German Marshall Fund of the United States, October 6 2017, https://www.gmfus.org/publications/can-france-and-germany-make-pesco-work-process-toward-eu-defense

In recent years, this has been most obvious in the debate on European strategic autonomy, which ensued after the 2016 adoption of the European Union's Global Strategy. While President Macron declared France to be the "engine" of European strategic autonomy, the term hardly ever made it into official German language. Germany indeed saw many reasons to be skeptical. Not only is Germany firmly anchored in the Atlanticist camp when it comes to European security, and hence with a limited appetite for a stronger CSDP, which it mainly perceives as "European integration" rather than actual "defense." Berlin moreover knew that such a notion, largely viewed as "French" across the continent, would hardly fly in many European quarters. Divergences culminated in late 2020 just ahead of Election Day in the United States, when German defense minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer ("AKK") and Macron openly clashed. In an editorial for *Politico*, AKK declared that "Illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider."[23] She thereby sided with the most conservative camp in the debate, arguing against decoupling European security from that of the United States – which, however, is not part of the French visions anyway. In that sense, much of the European debate on strategic autonomy of the past years was in fact about fighting strawmen, somewhat reminiscent of the Cold War times: while the notion's opponents positioned themselves against decoupling, its proponents sought to convince their partners of making the EU a more capable actor within the confines of CSDP as defined in article 42 of the Lisbon treaty, thus excluding territorial defense. The fact that the debate's protagonists (inadvertently or on purpose) talked past each other prevented it from making much progress. Germany could potentially have played an important role in calming down the, at times, toxic exchanges, given its more "mainstream" European attitudes and its longstanding willingness to foster compromise among EU members. France indeed faced obstacles from the outset, simply by pushing for the concept and overlooking the fact that proposals emanating from Paris are oftentimes met with principled skepticism in light of several decades of Gaullist legacies and alleged French Anti-Americanism. As seen from Paris, Germany's silence in the debate thus looked like refusing support in tackling issues crucial for Europe's security.

What is more apparent than ever under current circumstances is France's much diminished interest in CSDP. Paris seeks to advance its agenda in less cumbersome formats, such as the EII. Germany, in turn, continues to approach CSDP from a European integration perspective, with a greater emphasis on EU cohesion than on the Union's ability to act. With France increasingly looking for cooperation outside of CSDP, Paris and Berlin thus also increasingly think in terms of different formats and institutions for European defense cooperation.

23 Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, "Europe still needs America," *Politico*, 2 November 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/

With Germany continuing to see its role as a promoter of European integration and a broker of compromise, Berlin is indeed highly skeptical of any initiative located outside of any existing institutions. Effectiveness is not its key preoccupation; the focus remains on unity and inclusiveness.

DIFFERENT "CAMPS" ON EUROPEAN SECURITY, BASED ON THREAT PERCEPTION

At the most general level and even beyond the Franco-German duo, one factor is essential in how countries position themselves in current debates on European security and defense: threat perception and their assessment of likely future trajectories of transatlantic security relations. When it comes to these two factors, France and Germany are not on the same page. By and large, European countries can indeed be divided in two categories when it comes to threat perception: those who primarily see threats from the East, i.e. Russia, and those who primarily see threats from the South, i.e. terrorism and all the factors linked to it.[24] In this somewhat simplistic but still accurate categorization, France and Germany are not part of the same groups. It is thus well known that France's primary preoccupation is terrorism, in particular in the Sahel region. Germany, in turn, is officially back in the "Russia camp", as e.g. illustrated by its 2018 *Conception of the Bundeswehr*. Differences between French and German threat perceptions, however, are not limited to geographic scope. They also pertain to intensity: defense issues play a much larger role in France, where the threat is considered very real across the political spectrum. In Germany, however, defense is hardly a priority in the political debate (irrespective of Corona), and fear of military confrontation with Russia is not very widespread. In a European context, what is relevant and follows from these different threat perceptions is that Europeans mean rather different things when talking about "defense". Being primarily preoccupied by terrorism translates into a focus on expeditionary operations. Concerns about Russia, in turn, translate into an emphasis on collective defense and deterrence.

Assuming that threat perception is the single most important factor in explaining countries' positioning on defense matters, the preconditions for strategic Franco-German convergence are hardly good. The same obviously applies for Europe at large, where disagreements over threat perception and the conclusions to be drawn thereof have in essence shaped the debates over the past years. Europeans themselves have increasingly become aware of the extent to which their diverging threat perceptions divide them. It is for this reason the Strategic Compass process set out with the first ever threat analysis at EU level, based on confidential intelligence products rather than more "politicized,"

24 For a more detailed discussion, see e.g. Barbara Kunz, "The Evolving Transatlantic Link: What European Response? Disentangling the European Security Debate", pp. 33-51 in Maud Quessard, Frédéric Heurtebize, Frédérick Gagnon (eds.) *Alliances and Power Politics in the Trump Era*, Palgrave Macmillan.

public takes emanating from foreign or defense ministries. That exercise will nevertheless hardly solve the underlying problem. The challenge is indeed not agreeing on a list of everything that poses a risk or a challenge to European security. Rather, the challenge consists of translating threat assessments into defense planning with all the prioritizations and allocation of scarce resources this requires. This also explains why so-called transversal threats illustrating a widened notion of security, such as climate change or future pandemics, are relatively uncontroversial: as they do not require translation into defense planning, military resources need not be allocated.

DIFFERENT TAKES ON THE TRANSATLANTIC LINK

Due to these different emphases on defense, diverging threat perceptions also lead to different approaches to the United States and transatlantic security relations. As argued above, a second aspect that follows from threat perception is the focus on either expeditionary operations or territorial defense and deterrence. Depending on what constitutes a country's defense priority, however, its degree of dependence on the United States varies, as well as derived thereof, preferences for NATO, CSDP or other contexts. It is in this sense that Europe's defense debate is all about America.[25] For most Europeans, continuing to ensure the continent's defense by means of U.S. security guarantees clearly is plan A. European strategic autonomy and increased defense cooperation in this sense is plan B.

Assessments on whether Plan A will continue to be available vary across Europe. Once again, France is on one end of the spectrum: President Macron has long argued that there will be a "progressive and unavoidable disengagement of the United States" from European security, not least due to the rise of China.[26] French arguments such sound almost like they are derived of (realist) theory of international relations, and a often presented as some sort of universal, objective truth. What is more, Paris follows U.S. domestic developments very closely and sees little reasons to believe in less constrained room for maneuver for U.S. administrations in the foreign policy realm in light of volatile national politics. In Germany, statements by chancellor Angela Merkel (who famously claimed that Europe had to "take its fate into its own hands") remained without concrete defense political consequences so far, and have hardly entered the standard German discourse in the defense field.[27] To the extent Germany has picked up on

25 Barbara Kunz, "Europe's defense debate is all about America," *War on the Rocks*, 4 March 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/europes-defense-debate-is-all-about-america/

26 Emmanuel Macron, "Initiative pour l'Europe. Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique, " 26 September 2017, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique.

27 Philip Olterman, "'Europe's fate is in our hands': "Angela Merkel's defiant reply to Trump," The Guardian, 16 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/16/europes-fate-is-in-our-hands-angela-merkels-defiant-reply-to-trump.

the idea that Europe needs to be less dependent, Berlin rather focuses on "digital and technological sovereignty," a key focus during its 2020 EU presidency. Overall, it thus seems fair to argue that France has a more pessimistic – but also more detailed and potentially realistic – assessment of where the United States is headed, and hence what is to be expected for U.S. engagement in European security. This also explains the urgency with which France, and president Macron in particular, is pushing for more European strategic autonomy – albeit covering aspects of defense, i.e. expeditionary operations and the fight against terrorism, that are only the priority of a minority of European countries.

Needless to say, all European countries are in one way or another reliant on U.S. security engagement. This also includes France. Thus, even though France may not focus on collective defense, it is still interested in – and dependent on – close cooperation with the United States. This cooperation is yet primarily bilateral and concerns the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region, where the United States provides essential reconnaissance and surveillance to operation *Barkhane*.[28] After the election of Joe Biden, it is therefore not surprising that French officials voiced their hopes that the United States would continue its engagement in the region (after Trump had earlier announced withdrawal, making lobbying for enduring support in Washington a key task of French diplomacy during his presidency).[29] Again illustrating pan-European differences, in much of the rest of the continent, Biden's election was accompanied by hopes of renewed U.S. commitment to the Atlantic Alliance and U.S. security guarantees for its European allies.

BEYOND AMERICA: DIVERGENCES ON OTHER ACTORS

The United States is not the only actor on the international scene on which France and Germany are not really on the same page. Other examples include the Western Balkans, Libya, the so-called "Indo-Pacific," Turkey, as well as and Russia. Divergences in French and German approaches are not necessarily unsurmountable, yet they stand in the way of the two countries adopting common stances beyond rhetoric. What makes these cases interesting is both the situation at hand and what they stand for, as they in fact illustrate deeper-going attitudes vis-à-vis international relations and the strategic environment. Some of them will be discussed in greater detail below.

To the extent EU enlargement is currently on the agenda at all, the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro,

28 Maya Kandel, "Hand in Hand and Eye to Eye? US–French Counterterrorism Cooperation in the Sahel in the Trump-Macron Era," pp. 121-136 in Maud Quessard, Frédéric Heurtebize, Frédérick Gagnon (eds.) Alliances and Power Politics in the Trump Era, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

29 See e.g. the remarks by French defense minister Florence Parly at a hearing at the National Assembly, "Discours de Florence Parly, ministre des Armées, lors de son audition devant la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées de l'Assemblée Nationale, " 12 January 2021, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-lors-de-son-audition-devant-la-commission-de-la-defense-nationale-et-des-forces-armees-de-l-assemblee-nationale-le-12-janvier-2021

North Macedonia and Serbia – are theoretically next in line. Albania and North Macedonia have come furthest in their rapprochement with the European Union. German policy has been to support these processes, albeit not without recognizing that considerable obstacles need to be overcome. France, in turn, is extremely skeptical toward EU enlargement. Although Albania and North Macedonia had fulfilled all requirements, President Macron said no to the start of accession negotiations in late 2019. This veto is largely considered to be motivated by domestic considerations, EU enlargement being very unpopular among Frenchmen. At a more fundamental level, different takes to the Western Balkans consequently reveal different takes on EU enlargement and hence European integration, linked to the old debate on whether the EU should first deepen integration before enlarging or not. It moreover reveals different takes on the EU's classic approach of "conditionality," i.e. the assumption that a perspective of EU accession will convince countries to engage in reforms toward democratic consolidation, the rule of law and a free market economy.

Regarding Turkey, Paris and Berlin also have different takes. Both clearly view domestic developments as well as its foreign and security policy very critically. Relations with Turkey have lately been complicated well beyond various bilateral contexts. Ankara's involvement in the Syrian war, its decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile-defence system (which prompted the United States to exclude the country from the F35 program), the rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean – all these events and developments are part of what prompted Emmanuel Macron to qualify NATO as "brain dead" in his 2019 interview with the Economist.[30] It thus seems warranted to consider Turkey's foreign policy behavior a problem for the alliance at large.

Germany is arguably more dependent on Turkey than France is. This is not only linked to the large group of Turkish immigrants and their descendants living in Germany. As critics argue, Berlin has effectively allowed Ankara to blackmail Europe and Germany with the so-called March 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal.[31] If president Erdogan ceases to cooperate, hundreds of thousands of refugees may come to the European Union within a short amount of time, while Germany is still processing the consequences of the 2015 "refugee crisis." At least partially, these events notably contributed to the rise of the right-wing populist party, *Alternative für Deutschland,* represented in the Bundestag since 2017.

But France has also recently had complicated bilateral relations with Turkey. Ankara and Paris have clashed on several occasions over religion and values.[32]

30 Emmanuel Macron, "Emmanuel Macron in his own words (English)," *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english

31 See European Council, "EU-Turkey Statement", 18 March 2016, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/

32 See e.g. Piotr Smolar, "La France contre la Turquie, aux racines de l'affrontement, " *Le Monde*, 10 July 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/07/10/la-france-contre-la-turquie-aux-racines-de-l-affrontement_6045775_3210.html

President of the United States of America, Joe Biden. Photo: Lisa Fernando / Flickr

Moreover, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean had direct military implications for France. Its frigate *Courbet*, part of NATO's maritime security operation *Sea Guardian*, was illuminated by Turkish targeting radar when approaching a cargo ship suspected of breaching the arms embargo in Libya, escorted by the Turkish navy. As France did not obtain the desired support among other NATO allies, it temporarily withdrew from *Sea Guardian*.[33] Paris' divergent positioning on Libya, where it unofficially sided with General Haftar, is widely considered to have contributed to its relative isolation. Yet, France's (and others', for instance Austria's) calls for a tougher stance vis-à-vis Turkey also face skepticism in an EU context, including from Germany. Berlin rejected the adoption of sanctions.

Russia, finally, is undoubtedly the most important actor for European and Euro-Atlantic security in the 21st century. And again, France and Germany traditionally embrace different positions based on different traditions and motivations. Both Paris and Berlin of course condemned the annexation of Crimea and cooperate in the Normandy format in order to solve the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. They both also sustain the EU sanction regime that has been in place since 2014.

It is on the way forward in Western-Russian relations that they hold different views or at least choose different approaches. Soon after Macron's election, Vladimir Putin visited Versailles. During the same year, Macron caused a stir throughout Europe (as well as in his own foreign policy apparatus outside of the narrow circles of the Elysée palace) when he argued for a "review of the European defence and security architecture" in his annual speech to French ambassadors.[34]

33 See e.g. "Libya crisis: France suspends Nato mission role amid Turkey row," BBC News, 2 July 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53262725

34 Emmanuel Macron, "Speech by President Emmanuel Macron – Ambassadors' Conference 2018," 27 August 2018, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/news/ambassadors-week/ambassadors-week-edition-2018/article/speech-by-president-emmanuel-macron-ambassadors-conference-2018.

In 2019, Macron invited Vladimir Putin to a working visit at his summer residence in Brégançon just days before the G7 Summit in Biarritz. Macron subsequently launched a – purely bilateral – "strategic dialogue" with Russia. It notably includes meetings in a 2+2 format, i.e. between the respective foreign and defense ministers. French ambitions in this context are bold: among the key motivations cited is that Russia must not be left with China as its key international partner in the overall context of emerging multipolarity. Moreover, the West is said to need Russia on, among other dossiers, the Iranian nuclear issue. A transatlantic dimension also plays in. An Elysée aide is quoted in *Le Monde* saying that "We want do get out of the alignment effect and underline a difference. This is the mission of French diplomacy, also mentioning that there is "a certain Gaullist return", even though the context is very different [author's translation].[35] So far, however, the Franco-Russian strategic dialogue has not yielded tangible results or even a concrete agenda – as even French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly admitted in July 2020.[36] The 2+2 meeting planned for September 2020 was cancelled in the wake of the poisoning of Alexej Navalny and has so far not been rescheduled.

Notably the fact that this dialogue initiative is widely perceived as being insufficiently explained among European allies, makes Berlin uneasy. It clearly contributed to suspicions regarding French ambitions of "decoupling" or "equi-distance" from Washington and Moscow. Political Berlin has increasingly accepted that Russian foreign policy behavior is not simply the result of a lack of dialogue, and beliefs in partnership with Moscow are less and less frequent. At the same, it also seems clear to many that no dialogue with Russia can hardly be the solution. In the face of the French initiative, however, Germany, staying true to its ambitions of preserving unity among Europeans, knows about the potentially toxic effects of reaching out to Russia. It has therefore watched Paris' endeavors from afar, staying cautious.

STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE IS NOT IN SIGHT, BUT ELECTIONS ARE ON THE HORIZON

In sum, and across the long list of security and defense issues on current agendas, strategic convergence between France and Germany is not in sight. National differences are to be found at various levels, from the purely bilateral to the Euro-Atlantic context at large. These differences pertain to substance and interests, as well as to style. They also pertain to scope, in the sense that France tends to see

35 Marc Semo, "Entre Macron et Poutine, l'amorce d'un réchauffement," *Le Monde*, 17 August 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/08/17/entre-macron-et-poutine-l-amorce-d-un-rechauffement_5500249_3210.html

36 Ministère des Armées, "Propos liminaires de Florence Parly, ministre des Armées, devant la sous-commission défense et sécurité du Parlement européen le 2 juillet 2020," 2 July 2020, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/fre/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/propos-liminaires-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-devant-la-sous-commission-defense-et-securite-du-parlement-europeen-le-2-juillet-2020.

things in a much wider context than Germany does, as again becomes apparent in the February 2021 update of France's Strategic Review.[37]

That said, the above-described areas are not necessarily subject to open Franco-German disagreement, yet they at least show incongruence. This first and foremost illustrates one point: what is lacking is a joint vision for the future of European security. France's key focus on threats emanating from the South remains unchanged, just as Germany's seeing its key role in keeping Europeans together through fostering consensus and compromise. Berlin's priorities are consequently not only at odds with Paris', Berlin also does not appreciate Macron's predilection for "disruptive" action and wake-up calls. Against this backdrop, the prospects for true convergence of French and German strategic visions for European security remain dim.

Upcoming national elections in both countries – on 26 September 2021 in Germany, in April, May and June 2022 in France – are unlikely to change this assessment. Rather, their results may complicate Franco-German understanding even more. The corona crisis' impact on voters' inclination is hard to predict, but even without the pandemic, it seems not entirely excluded that right-wing nationalist Marine Le Pen could prevail in 2022 after again making it to the second round of the presidential election in 2017. Should she become president, relations between Paris and Berlin are likely to deteriorate considerably.

In Germany, it seems highly likely that the Green party will be part of the new governing coalition, maybe even with a green Chancellor. The party's electoral program contains several aspects that would be controversial in Paris. Not only does it want to introduce stricter export control policies, but it also argues in favor of joint EU armament export control policies, that France rejects. Moreover, the Green party's Bundestag fraction wishes to end Germany's participation in nuclear sharing. To what extent these positions are translatable into a coalition agreement, for example with the Christian Democrats, obviously remains to be seen. Moreover, the party made Anna-Lena Baerbock its candidate for the chancellery in April 2020. She represents the "realist" strand and has for example argued for strengthening the armed forces.

Regardless of election results, Franco-German differences over European security and defense will likely become more pronounced in years to come. This has to do with the "big issues" increasingly imposing themselves on the agenda. Threats and security challenges are becoming more numerous and more intense. Matters some consider as belonging to the past, such as deterrence or strategic arms control, require addressing. Yet, as the debate surrounding European strategic autonomy has revealed, European thinking about the continent's security is often characterized by laziness and driven by incomplete analyses. Europeans will need to do some hard thinking on how to ensure their security in the 21st century. In so doing, France and Germany clearly have a key role to play.

37 See Ministère des Armées, *Actualisation stratégique 2021*, 10 February 2021, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/presentation/evenements/actualisation-strategique-2021.

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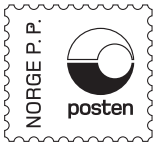

Returadresse:
Den Norske Atlanterhavskomié
Fridtjof Nansens plass 8, N-0160 Oslo

The Norwegian Atlantic Committee

Tel: 22 40 36 00
Fax: 22 40 36 10
post@atlanterhavskomiteen.no