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France's Intent at the December Defence Council: Opportunities for Poland

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Faced with an overstretched defence budget and renewed focus on Africa, France views the December European Council as an opportunity to push forward defence coordination under the European framework. Yet, France's pragmatic and instrumental idea of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) may not be the best means of protecting its "strategic autonomy," the concept at the heart of its new strategy. As it stands, therefore, France's bottom-up approach constitutes an opportunity for Poland to frame the development of its own defence industry within CSDP; however, Warsaw should also be prepared to set out a more political vision of cooperation.

An Emphasis on Strategic Autonomy. April's "White Book on Defence and National Security" and the follow-up "Military Programming Law 2014–2019" (LPM) from December, provide French defence and security policy with a new direction in the run up to the European summit—what might be termed "cut-rate autonomy."

Despite an inevitable focus on Africa and the ongoing withdrawal from Afghanistan in both documents, France's desire for "strategic autonomy" is the guiding principle. This autonomy rests on the expansion of three freedoms—assessment, decision and action—which in turn require three matching sets of capabilities: deterrence, intelligence and power projection. Thus, deterrence based on marine and aerial components remains at the heart of French defence policy and will be shielded from cuts. Meanwhile, intelligence, such as cyber-defence, and special forces are supposed to benefit the most from increased financial, human and technological resources, not least due to the connection between external threats and internal security. But when it comes to power projection, the French armed-forces model will *de facto* have to be geared towards smaller-scale operations; even in the case of "major coercive operations" abroad, capacities will be scaled down from today's 30,000 deployable land troops to just 15,000.

This is an illustration of how French policy has become a balancing act between autonomy and austerity.¹ France intends to spend only about €190 billion on its defence and national security in the period 2014–2019. Frozen at €29.61 billion per year until 2016 (excluding pensions), there will be a progressive increase in the annual budget of up to €32.36 billion by 2019. Besides the expectation of €6bn in additional "exceptional incomes" as a result not least of the sale of public shares of national defence champions (Dassault, DCNS) and arms-export deals, this low-cost autonomy is supposed to be achieved above all by two means. Greater *differentiation* would see the better adaptation of military resources to different types of tasks, be this deterrence, protection, crisis management, coercion or war operations. And the *pooling and sharing* of scarce and critical capabilities, not least with European partners, is supposed to promote a better allocation of resources and allow for the development of strategic enablers that surpass national capacity.

France's Bottom-up Approach to the December Council. Discussion of defence issues at the highest political level in the EU for the first time in five years is considered an accomplishment in Paris. The summit is an exercise that ought to be repeated annually, or every two years at least, and France's renewed national strategy is a boon to the discussion rather than an obstacle. However, the discussion should be practical, and France has no appetite for

¹ See P. Elman, M. Terlikowski, "Balancing Austerity with Ambitions: The (Close) Future of French Defence Policy," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 9 (462), 25 January 2013.

another European Security Strategy review of the kind held under its 2008 presidency. France's fatigue towards a *Europe de la défense*, reinforced by the EU's lack of support during its recent external operations (Libya, Mali, Central African Republic), requires public success in the form of concrete measures towards, say, a mutualisation of essential military capabilities and reinforced civilian-military synergies.

Even during the 2011 Libyan war, France and the UK acknowledged once again major shortfalls in areas such as drone observation and operation headquarters, which left them reliant upon U.S. help. That episode has proved to be one of the driving forces behind the launch of European thematic projects aiming at developing key capabilities under the aegis of the European Defence Agency (air-to-air refuelling, satellite communications, Remotely-Piloted Aircraft Systems, cyberdefence). Among these projects, the air-to-air refuelling and remotely-piloted aircraft systems are of particular importance for France, which prefers to secure a European supplier of these technologies in the medium-term rather than to continue to buy them from America.

The same pragmatic thinking has been applied to the December Summit. Its practical, three-pronged agenda—increasing the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP; enhancing the coordinated development of defence capabilities; strengthening Europe's defence industry—recalls the French vision of a structured, bottom-up method as the only way forward to address CSDP's inadequacies in external operations. In the long run, this is also supposed to provide comprehensive answers to current security challenges that are of particular strategic importance to France (e.g., counter-terrorism in the Sahel, maritime security, integrated border management with third countries, reconstruction in Libya).

Dilemmas. France's efforts to balance strategic autonomy with cost-cutting are already in question, not least when it comes to *differentiation*. Today there are 9,000 French troops deployed in Africa, rather than the 7,000 initially foreseen. Moreover, this year's bill for "external operations" has already reached €1.25 billion, far beyond the projected €450 million in the new LPM even before the launch of the operation in the Central African Republic. It is now accepted in Paris that the new LPM is likely to undergo several revisions over the course of implementation, the first review being expected in 2015.

As Paris gears up for the EU December defence summit, similar dilemmas can be expected in the field of *pooling and sharing*. Paris views pooling-and-sharing initiatives, whether at the EU, NATO or bilateral levels, as a means to offset national cuts, but they cannot interfere with France's own three freedoms of assessment, decision and action. And whilst France is committed to an autonomous CSDP, this cannot be allowed to undermine the fundamentals of its own strategic autonomy. Just as it is hard to see how austerity can work without some curtailment of autonomy, therefore, the same is true of European cooperation.

Prospects for Franco-Polish Alignment. Poland and France have adopted their own bottom-up approach to European defence cooperation. On 29 November, the pair signed a general cooperation programme in the framework of the 2008 French-Polish strategic partnership, which promotes joint security and defence actions wherever possible. This includes the possibility for joint participation in EU pooling and sharing, the development of interoperable combat capabilities, concerted efforts between their respective headquarters, as well as a partnership in defence-sector R&D. Following the signature of letters of intent, French defence companies now benefit from a political framework allowing for more structured talks on Polish defence tenders—an encouraging signal given the difficulties faced by French companies in Poland in recent years and their low, 6% market share.

In December, therefore, Polish-French efforts could usefully focus on two aspects. Despite the low probability of far-reaching conclusions on the third prong (strengthening industry), the pair could support tasking the European Commission with settling on a concrete financial scheme to support SMEs, notably through the "Horizon 2020" programme promoting R&T on dual-use technologies. This might appease those calling for the creation of a European defence market (i.e., France and the UK) and those worried about the negative impact of liberalisation on their defence industry (i.e., Poland and the V4). France and Poland could also jointly support a modular approach to the EU Battlegroups. By showing a commitment towards greater EU co-financing of operational costs (i.e., by reviewing thoroughly the Athena mechanism) and formats differentiated according to crisis-scenarios, the current stalemate in the use of this format could be finally, albeit not instantaneously, overcome.

For the time being then, France's bottom-up approach constitutes an opportunity for Poland to frame the development of its defence industry within CSDP. However, Poland must also have a clear notion of its own political vision of CSDP. After all, France will not properly be able to reach its goals without setting out a more political idea of cooperation: only a more coherent and integrated CSDP will permit Paris to rebalance away from its traditional focus on Africa. France will also find that it needs to lock itself into European strategic choices rather than allowing external events to push it into national action. Already, concrete actions of high symbolic value have taken place on both the French and Polish sides. Poland sent around €3 million worth of military material and 19 military trainers to Mali, whilst France sent 1,200 troops to participate in NATO's Steadfast Jazz exercise that took place in Poland and the Baltic States. Warsaw should build on this.