



The Future of France's Defence Policy

Łukasz Jurczyszyn, Marcin Terlikowski

During his first months in office, President Emmanuel Macron has been stressing that France's main goal is to deepen military integration within the EU by establishing an exclusive defence core. Yet, contrary to the French position, the new PESCO cooperation initiative began for 25 EU Member States. Because of that, and due to French strategic ambitions, the need to maintain a large military presence outside the country and sustained economic problems, France will now approach defence cooperation at the EU level selectively. Macron's priority is likely to be stronger bilateral cooperation with United Kingdom and Germany.

New Review, Old Ambitions and Needs. The Strategic Review of Defence and National Security, published in October 2017, is Macron's first document on this subject. It updates the 2013 White Paper. France's primary goal is to sustain its strategic autonomy, understood as an independent nuclear deterrent and operational freedom as regards military interventions. Invariably, France reveals an ambition to engage militarily in addressing security crises around the world. In Europe, Africa and the Middle East, considered regions of French responsibility, France wants to play a leading role.

The Review departs from a traditional French priority of strengthening and deepening the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). France still wants to reinforce European defence, but this goal no longer translates to closer military integration. Instead, such reinforcement should be approached pragmatically, within NATO (which France believes to be the best format for guaranteeing the defence of Europe's Eastern and Southern flanks), through selected PESCO projects, and via bilateral cooperation. France is disappointed by the modest effects of 15 years of CSDP in terms of new military capabilities, and the failure of its own vision for the development of PESCO. Instead of an exclusive defence cooperation mechanism, involving a handful of top EU military powers, Member States decided on a broad and seemingly unambitious format to which 25 eventually acceded. Macron is therefore turning to narrower cooperation formats, expecting them to be instrumental in maintaining French military engagement abroad.

In 2017, France's involvement in military operations was the highest among EU countries and reached a level that exhausted French financial and human resources. Around 26,000 soldiers were deployed in missions, operations and bases in overseas territories. The largest were the anti-terrorist operations *Barkhane* in the Sahel (4,000), *Chamal* in Syria and Iraq (1,200) and, above all, *Sentinelle*, ensuring security in the largest French cities (7,000). The Review highlights terrorism, uncontrolled migration, organised crime and pandemics as priority threats to France's security, stemming from instability in Africa and the Middle East. It underlines the growing threats of cyberattacks, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and challenges emanating from Moscow, such as the steady development of Russia's military capabilities, Russian policy of creating areas of privileged interests in Europe, and attempts to break EU and NATO unity.

The scale of French military ambitions is best illustrated by Macron's announcement that the country will develop a "second army of the free world." This envisions French armed forces conducting a full spectrum of operations, even in extreme environments (desert, jungle, etc.), and to this end deploying key capabilities such as command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, strategic

transport, satellite communication/imaging, etc. Within NATO, France is to be capable of the autonomous command of a small joint operation (about 10,000 soldiers).

Economic Hardships. The structural crisis that has plagued France since 2008 is a chief obstacle to the country's strategic ambitions. Within the last five years, it has been a challenge for France merely to maintain defence spending at a barely constant level of around €31–32 billion (1.7–1.8% of GDP). In 2017, the economy grew slowly (1.3%), while high unemployment (9.4%), public debt (98.4% of GDP) and the budget deficit (3.4% of GDP) continued. Seeking budget savings, Macron unexpectedly reduced defence expenditure by €850 million. The result was a dispute with the chief of general staff, General Pierre de Villiers, who finally resigned. However, France plans an increase in defence spending of 5% (€1.8 billion) to €34.2 billion in total (about 1.82% of GDP). Planned for mid-2018, the law that will present a long-term framework for French defence expenditure (2019–2025) is expected to guarantee an annual increase of €1.7 billion (until 2022), so that French defence spending will reach the NATO target of 2% of GDP by 2025. Moreover, the budget for military operations abroad is expected to increase from €450 million in 2017 to €650 million this year, up to €1.1 billion by 2022.

Pragmatic Military Cooperation. Facing unfavourable conditions, France is seeking to implement its strategic ambition through pragmatic military cooperation focused on a step by step deepening of defence integration at the EU level but with initiatives that are more narrowly defined and thus could provide rapid military capabilities and practical support for operations, both of which are urgently needed by France. As a highly visible participant in NATO operations (for example, through involvement in multinational battle groups on the Eastern Flank), France wants to mobilise partners to engage more in operations in its priority regions of Africa and the Middle East. Within PESCO, France participates only in few projects, and it is most interested in an initiative to develop a catalogue of national force elements, which would represent a coherent full spectrum force package, ready to engage in the most demanding executive operations (the European Union Force Crisis Response Operation Core project, EUFOR CROC, with the participation of, among others, Germany, Spain and Italy).

In the EU, Germany remains a key partner for France, but is reluctant to engage in operations, especially executive ones. The Franco-German Brigade, since 1989 a symbol of close cooperation between these countries, has been stripped mostly for this very reason. However, Germany is ready to provide logistical and training support for missions; there are currently 875 German soldiers in the UN MINUSMA training mission in Mali. In line with Berlin's preference for non-executive operational engagement, France and Germany have confirmed a plan to form a joint aviation unit, equipped with C-130J transport aircraft, by 2021. In the long term, the pillar of cooperation may be Franco-German defence industrial projects, especially the development of a new generation tank, the EURO MALE reconnaissance/surveillance drone (involving Italy and Spain) and, far more ambitious, the next generation of jet fighter.

Due to its capacity and readiness to engage in the most difficult operations, the United Kingdom, despite Brexit, is gradually becoming a strategic partner for France. At a bilateral summit on 18 January, a plan to launch a joint expeditionary force by 2020 (CJEF, approximately 10,000 soldiers) was confirmed and British support for operation Barkhane (three heavy transport helicopters) announced. A new Defence Ministerial Council was established and is obliged to meet three times a year. France also encourages the UK to participate in the European Intervention Initiative. This new concept is intended to become a mechanism of cooperation and coordination between the strongest military countries in Europe as regards expeditionary operations, and, most importantly, should remain outside the EU and NATO. For now, there are no concrete political or operational dimensions to the concept. Both countries are also developing defence industrial cooperation, focusing on the maritime counter-mine drone, the Neuron unmanned aerial combat vehicle, and the next generation of cruise missiles.

France is also engaging Sahel countries to stabilise the region. Following the French initiative and with the support of Germany, joint armed forces of the G5 Sahel group (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) were established in December 2017. By mid-2018, these forces are expected to comprise 5,000 soldiers. The force will be financed with money from the EU (€50 million), Saudi Arabia (€100 million), the U.S. (€60 million), the G5 countries (€10 million) and France (€8 million).

Prospects for Poland. France is intensively seeking partners ready to provide military support in various formats and scope to its operational engagement in Europe's southern neighbourhood. Any form of reinforcing French operations can help open new fields in bilateral cooperation with France or facilitate a consensus being reached on contentious issues. Poland may consider practical support (for instance, logistical) for French operations. Another way of supporting France could be to return to participation in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and the Middle East. Poland could also consider joining the EUFOR CROC project. The Polish contribution to the force elements catalogue could be, for example, military police units, which have relatively extensive experience from past operations in Africa. At the same time, in NATO and the EU, more attention should be paid to the European Intervention Initiative, which should be developed with NATO operational and defence planning priorities in mind.