

The Three Dimensions of Europe's Defense Debate

By Barbara Kunz

In light of transatlantic tensions and a deteriorated security environment, European security affairs are at the crossroads. Many European capitals are looking at France and Germany's moves on European defense — some looking for leadership, others wary of Franco-German domination, and still others fearing paralyzing divides between the two countries. Ambitions stated by Paris and Berlin are high, both for purely bilateral cooperation and cooperation in a wider, multilateral context. Yet, issues such as disagreement over armament exports have the potential to poison the relationship.

A closer look at French and German approaches to defense and security moreover reveals that structural differences have not disappeared, notably with respect to the three dimensions of Europe's current security debate: the East versus South dimension, defining the right level of ambitions for the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), and the question of whether Europe needs a plan B for its defense in times of an increasingly weakened transatlantic link.

Against the backdrop of quickly evolving European and transatlantic security affairs, this year and the next will be decisive in Franco-German defense cooperation. After a long period of inertia under his predecessor, Emmanuel Macron's election as French president and his strong commitment to the Franco-German tandem gave new impetus to Franco-German relations. This includes defense cooperation. In July 2017, the two countries agreed on an ambitious bilateral agenda on capabilities, operations, and the "Alliance for the Sahel."¹ Cooperation on the Sahel seems like the perfect combination of French (military) and German (civilian) strengths. The flagship project remains the joint development and production of a replacement for the Rafale and Eurofighter jets, with an initial agreement signed between Airbus and Dassault in April 2018.² Paris and Berlin also pledged to continue and deepen their cooperation on land systems and remotely piloted aircraft. 55 years after the 1963 original that set the course for reconciliation and cooperation, Paris and Berlin are once more in the process of negotiating a new Elysée Treaty which will again include a chapter on defense.

Displayed ambitions notwithstanding, Franco-German defense cooperation is clearly limited by major differences between the two countries. It has become commonplace to state that incompatibilities begin at the level of strategic culture, before trickling down to the

1 Presse - und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Gemeinsame Erklärung zum Deutsch-Französischen Ministerrat, July 13, 2017, https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2017/07/2017-07-13-abschlusserklaerung-d-f-ministerrat.pdf.jsessionid=72DC486EC2DCFFC44169A7BFB074435Fs3t2?__blob=publicationFile&v=2.

2 "Airbus, Dassault to Team Up for New Fighter Jet Project," Reuters, April 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-airshow-airbus-dassault-avi/airbus-dassault-to-team-up-for-new-fighter-jet-project-idUSKBN1HW14U>.



political, operational, and industrial levels. Perhaps the most fundamental of these differences is the sense of urgency felt in Paris and Berlin when it comes to defense. In both countries, the idea that Europe's strategic environment has worsened crops up in official discourses and general debates alike. But for large portions of the German population and political class, defense arguably remains a “nice-to-have,” while it is inarguably considered a “must-have” in France. If defense budgets and the controversies surrounding them may serve as an indicator, the picture is clear: France, under less-than-perfect economic circumstances, intends to make an effort to reach the 2 percent objective.³ Germany, faced with a budget surplus, plans to reach 1.5 percent of GDP by 2024 despite huge shortcomings in Bundeswehr staffing and equipment.⁴ More money is needed, but the German social democrats — part of the governing coalition — warn about a “spiral of arms build-up,”⁵ thereby turning back the wheel a decade or two in Germany's difficult security debate. Defense is a major bone of contention in the ruling grand coalition. Progress will consequently be difficult to make in today's broadly inward-looking Germany. This also includes any attempts at reforming decision-making processes, including Germany's parliamentary reserve, which many in Paris perceive as a true obstacle to moving quickly when necessary.⁶

“ ***It seems fair to assume that bilateral defense cooperation between Paris and Berlin will remain complicated and underwhelming.*** ”

Thus Paris still lacks the partner it had hoped for, and is growing more disappointed. When Germany rolled out its new discourse on security and defense in 2014, declaring its willingness to assume more international responsibility, many in Paris thought that German strategic culture, in a sort of teleological process, would come ever closer to France's. Four years on, it is increasingly evident that these hopes will not be realized. Truly ambitious bilateral projects are presently limited to the industrial realm and still in their infancy — with trouble lurking around the corner. A traditional Franco-German bone of contention, the question of armament exports hangs like a dark cloud over Franco-German industrial cooperation. Although the rules are very similar in both countries, Paris is traditionally much more open to selling arms around the world — an approach helped by the fact that public opinion is only very rarely interested. The picture is entirely different in Germany, where arms exports come at a very high political cost in light of an extremely critical public opinion. These differences led to trouble in the past, when Berlin blocked sales of jointly produced materiel. Irritations caused by these episodes linger on. The new German coalition's announcement to adopt an even tougher stance on the matter has not been welcomed by Paris. Overall, it seems fair to assume that bilateral defense cooperation between Paris and Berlin will remain complicated and underwhelming.

The Three-Dimensional Matrix

Paris and Berlin's approaches and priorities also differ within the larger European context. These differences rarely take the form of disagreements or competing visions on individual matters. They are often better understood as asymmetries of priorities and, above all, ambitions. This becomes clear when analyzing Paris and Berlin's positions in current debates on European security.

The European security debate used to be more or less binary, with proponents of “l'Europe de la defense” and “Atlanticists” pitched against each other. France and Germany found themselves on opposite sides of the fence. Since 2014 at the latest, these categories have become inadequate. Instead, current European defense debates fit into a three-dimensional matrix. The first dimension is the fairly traditional “East vs.

3 Military Programming Law 2019–2025, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/portail/enjeux2/la-lpm-2019-2025/le-projet-de-loi/loi-de-programmation-militaire-2019-2025-textes-officiels>.

4 German Ministry of Defense, “Entwicklung und Struktur des Verteidigungshaushalts,” <https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/verteidigungshaushalt/entwicklung-und-struktur-des-verteidigungshaushalts>.

5 “Nahles warnt vor ‘Aufrüstungsspirale’ beim Wehretat,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 3, 2018, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/nahles-gegen-leyen-aufruestungsspirale-beim-wehretat-15572803.html>

6 An attempt at doing so under the previous government, based on the work of the so-called Ruhe Commission, essentially came to nothing, the related bill got stuck in parliamentary process. See Barbara Kunz, “Deploying the Bundeswehr: More Transparency, More Flexibility, but Parliament's Consent Remains Key,” *Actuelles de l'Ifri*, June 16, 2015, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/actuelle_ruhe_commission_0.pdf.

South” debate. The second dimension is the debate on the right level of ambition for the European Union’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) — that is, the debate on European strategic autonomy and its meaning. The third dimension, finally, pertains to the elephant in the room: the future U.S. role in ensuring European security. Needless to say, these three dimensions are inextricably linked.

East vs. South

When it comes to the East vs. South debate, it is crucial to distinguish defense from security policy. In security policy terms, the “South” is about managing chaos and instability and preventing it from spreading. The “East” is about preserving the European security order — obviously a key priority for both France and Germany, as illustrated by their joint involvement in the Normandy format. In terms of defense, this first dimension boils down to a debate on “interventions vs. collective defense.” It is of course high time European security adopt what would be labeled a 360-degree approach in a NATO context. The East vs. South debate is in reality a non-debate: It is not either/or, it is both — plus the North.

Common wisdom has it that France looks South and Germany looks East. This is true and false at the same time. Both are active in both contexts. The list of challenges in recent national strategy documents — the 2016 German White Paper and the 2017 French *Revue Stratégique* — is very similar. But actual prioritizations and, again, the sense of urgency are not. For France, terrorism and instability in the Sahel and the Middle East is the key issue. Paris also insists on how worrisome Russian undertakings are.⁷ But France’s recently increased involvement in the East, such as its bolstered cooperation with Estonia, is better understood as a more transactional approach than as a change of priorities: The help of others in the South pays off through France’s help in the East.

Germany, in turn, does see a number of challenges, but does not perceive any imminent threat to the nation’s security. At the end of the day, fighting terrorism is not really a key priority. The refugee crisis may well have sensitized Berlin for African affairs, but the cornerstone of its approach to

“Fluchtursachenbekämpfung” (or, “the fight against the root causes of migration”) remains development, not military interventions. Mirroring France’s engagement in the East, Germany’s involvement in the South (e.g. over 1000 soldiers in UN Multinational Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali as of May 2018) is better understood as active solidarity.

“***The East vs. South debate is in reality a non-debate: It is not either/or, it is both — plus the North.***”

For France, force projection and military interventions are key. This is not to say that territorial defense is irrelevant. Of course, “traditional” territorial conflicts involving French territory at all seem unlikely, but if one were to arise, most bases are covered by the — rather costly and exclusively national — nuclear deterrent. In Germany, territorial defense will officially make its way back as the armed forces key task alongside external operations with the 2018 *Konzeption der Bundeswehr*, the translation of Germany’s 2016 White Paper into military structures. This will likely make German thinking even more NATO-centric, relegating EU defense to an even greater extent to the realm of “European integration” rather than “defense.”

European Strategic Autonomy

When it comes to European strategic autonomy, there clearly is a certain discomfort in Berlin to embrace the notion anchored — but not defined — in the 2016 EU Global Strategy. While fully integrated in the French discourse, it has so far made no appearance in official German language. It seems utterly unclear whether Paris and Berlin have the same vision of what CSDP should look like in 20 to 25 years’ time. A Franco-German — and ultimately European — vision for the decades to come is yet urgent to develop. The reality is that France has a plan, but Germany only knows what it does not want.

Recent examples such as disagreements around Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) are proof of both sides’ difficulties to reconcile their approaches.⁸ While Paris and Berlin were

⁷ See *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*, available at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/politique-de-defense/revue-strategique/revue-strategique>.

⁸ Alice Billon-Galland, Martin Quencez, “Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defense,” GMF Policy Brief n° 33, 2017.

instrumental in launching PESCO, the process again revealed fundamentally different motives, interests and objectives. Put bluntly, initially approaching the matter from a defense perspective, Paris sought to improve effectiveness and usability, working with a reduced number of countries willing and able to do so. Berlin, not keen at all on interventions, predominantly viewed PESCO from a European integration perspective, lobbying for an inclusive, capabilities-centered approach. Paris later on converged toward German views when the “Europeanist” camp had taken over in the negotiation process.

For Paris, cooperation by and large serves the purpose of being able to do more. France wants help in its endeavors in order to multiply the amount of capabilities available (while retaining national strategic autonomy). Macron’s (non-EU) European Intervention Initiative⁹ (EII) again illustrates that international operations are France’s priority. Berlin’s enthusiasm for the idea is very limited, and Angela Merkel insists she wants to see it integrated into the EU framework.¹⁰ If Germany participates, this will likely be because of a willingness to uphold the image of a functioning Franco-German engine — a desire that probably explains why Paris invited Germany to be among the ten participating countries in the first place.

This dimension also includes questions pertaining to defense industrial cooperation. The European Commission’s strong role in it — through the European Defense Fund — is a novelty. The Fund’s true impact remains to be seen, but smaller countries already fear that French and German industries will reap all the benefits. Paris and Berlin argue that their cooperation is intended to be opened up for third country participation at a later stage. Given these projects’ scope, however, there is indeed a danger that Franco-German cooperation will lead to a restructured European Defense Technological and Industrial Base — based on Paris and Berlin’s interests, rather than on a European strategy.

9 See Nick Whitney, “Macron and the European Intervention Initiative: Erasmus for soldiers?” ECFR Commentary, May 22, 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macron_and_the_european_intervention_initiative_erasmus_for_sold.

10 Thomas Gutschker, Eckart Lohse, “Europa muss handlungsfähig sein – nach außen und innen,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, June 3, 2018, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/kanzlerin-angela-merkel-f-a-s-interview-europa-muss-handlungsfahig-sein-15619721.html?premium#void>

All this results in the absence of true Franco-German leadership on European defense matters. But whether others, including the European Commission, will be able to fill that gap remains questionable. The danger is that Europeans will at some point feel compelled to choose between France and Germany drifting apart — a fear indeed held in some capitals. Any fears of a Franco-German axis remodeling European defense are therefore unfounded. If remodeling occurs, then more likely by accident due to processes such as PESCO developing their own dynamics. Regardless of whether member states agree on joint wording describing European strategic autonomy, decisions taken within EU frameworks will add up to the (implicit) definition of a level of ambition for the Common Security and Defense Policy — a definition of EU strategic autonomy. For France and Germany, it would seem preferable to actively drive this process.

The U.S. Dimension

Europeans must accept that they might need a plan B in case the transatlantic link erodes further, for example due to disagreements on trade spilling over into defense. It is about time to envision a world in which the United States no longer upholds the liberal international order. In both France and Germany, this idea is part of official discourses. According to Macron, the evolution of European integration will take place against the background of a “progressive and unavoidable disengagement of the United States.”¹¹ Merkel has repeatedly called for Europe to take its fate into its own hands.¹²

For nuclear power France, U.S. withdrawal from European security would have far lesser consequences than for Germany: In Paris, Washington is widely seen as a key partner without whom many military endeavors would not be possible — but it is not the ultimate guarantor of the country’s security. But it is for Germany. Merkel’s calls have very few real-life repercussions, German rhetoric on a European Union of Security and Defense notwithstanding. Berlin’s preference for NATO remains intact. Yet Merkel recently proposed a European Security Council in

11 See <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique/>

12 Alison Smale, Steven Erlanger, “Merkel, after Discordant G-7 Meeting, Is Looking Past Trump,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/angela-merkel-trump-alliances-g7-leaders.html>

order to strengthen the EU's ability to act – an idea that causes raised eyebrows in Paris. Just like in the wake of Barack Obama's Pacific Pivot, Paris and Berlin hardly debate Grand Strategy conclusions to be drawn from a weakening transatlantic link. Absent serious national debates, there cannot be any Franco-German — or European — debate, as urgent as it may be.

Connecting the Three Dimensions

Current developments clearly illustrate that Europe is past the point at which debating security in terms of “EU vs. NATO” made sense. PESCO at least has the potential to transcend the boundaries between the EU and NATO and to blur the lines between territorial defense and interventions — for instance through its Military Mobility project. Except perhaps for a few remaining hardcore proponents of “l'Europe de la defense,” this is good news.

Divides across Europe remain deep in all three dimensions — much deeper than within the Franco-German tandem. The weaker Franco-German leadership on defense, the more these divides will matter and block progress toward a genuinely 360-degree approach. This will likely be amplified by Brexit. The keys to addressing Europe's security challenges of course hardly lie in the hands of Paris and Berlin alone. Yet the tandem has a responsibility to take the lead in structuring problems and identifying solutions. Addressing all three dimensions together in a coherent framework must be top of the European security agenda in the years to come.

Paris and Berlin Leading the Way?

Starting at the Bilateral Level

In order to be up to the task, Paris and Berlin must get their bilateral relationship to work.¹³ Industrial cooperation — which has the potential to be a game changer for Europe's defense industrial base — must succeed. Aside from agreeing on joint specifications in order to develop and build truly joint products, it is of

key relevance to sort out the armament exports issue: Not only is it a prerequisite for successful industrial cooperation, it must also be prevented from poisoning bilateral relations at large. Measures could include a revived and updated Debré-Schmidt agreement or a joint list of acceptable export destinations. Many European states' preference for U.S. materiel will likely remain unaltered by the European Defense Fund or new Franco-German products on the market. The necessity of exports to non-Western countries must therefore be taken into account from the outset. Very importantly, solutions found must be suitable for cooperation extended beyond the Franco-German context.

“**Dissonances on matters such as the European Intervention Initiative or a European Security Council in any case clearly indicate the need for bilateral dialogue.**”

More broadly, President Macron was utterly right when he called for a European strategic culture. If something like this were attained at the Franco-German level it would mean a huge leap forward. Yet this is not something that can (solely) be achieved through measures such as the European Intervention Initiative. Rather, the tasks need to be taken on at the highest level. The elaboration of a joint White Paper, containing an analysis of the environment and the definition of joint and individual levels of ambition may serve this purpose. Dissonances on matters such as the European Intervention Initiative or a European Security Council in any case clearly indicate the need for bilateral dialogue.

Finally, Paris and Berlin cannot deny the need for Franco-German confidence building outside diplomatic and expert circles. This applies to parliaments in particular. After almost 60 years of friendship, there is still little mutual understanding of motives, decision-making processes, and political constraints. Distrust often stems from persistent prejudices: French ideas about Germany's allergy to anything nuclear, for instance, or German assumptions

¹³ For seven concrete proposals, see Ronja Kempin, Barbara Kunz, “France, Germany, and the quest for European strategic autonomy. Franco-German defence cooperation in a new era.” Notes du Cerfa, n° 141, Ifri, November 2017, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-cerfa/notes-cerfa/france-germany-and-quest-european-strategic-autonomy-franco>

that French ambitions for European defense are exclusively driven by outright anti-Americanism and dreams of French grandeur.

The forum for this could be an extended Franco-German Defense and Security Council, with the implication of both parliaments as well as the expert community. The body should also play a greater role in strategic foresight.

European Responsibilities

Yet, if France and Germany work together on these matters, this does not mean that the rest of Europe is exempt from doing so. Developing a long-term vision for European defense, including a possible plan B for further deteriorating transatlantic relations, must be on agendas throughout Europe. At this point, arguably only a handful of European capitals have such a plan. Developing one should consequently be a priority. Moreover, pushing for a 360-degree approach is everybody's responsibility. This ultimately boils down to a new model of European solidarity: acknowledging everybody's security concerns is the only viable basis for successful cooperation. Help in the East in return for help in the South is a fully legitimate — and realistic — approach to ensuring all Europeans' security.

This also means that PESCO must not be considered the ultimate achievement. It is a first step, and it must be made to work. Generating more and better European capabilities is key. It is also of utmost importance to ensure the compatibility of CSDP, NATO and any initiative taken outside existing frameworks — including the EII.¹⁴ Third country participation must above all be viewed through a security lens. Finally, it is high time for a European grand strategy debate. This is the implicit meaning of calls for a definition of “strategic autonomy,” but this debate must not be confined to CSDP. European strategic autonomy serves a greater purpose in the

overall context of European defense — attaining it is a means to preserving the transatlantic security link and a step toward a transatlantic bargain 2.0.¹⁵

¹⁴ Erik Brattberg, “Beyond European versus Transatlantic Defense,” GMF Policy Brief, January 11, 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/beyond-european-versus-transatlantic-defense>

¹⁵ Ronja Kempin, Barbara Kunz, « Washington should help Europe achieve strategic autonomy, not fight it, » War on the Rocks, April 12, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/washington-should-help-europe-achieve-strategic-autonomy-not-fight-it/>.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Author

Dr. Barbara Kunz is a research fellow at the French Institute of International Relations' Study Committee on Franco-German Relations. She specializes in Franco-German defense cooperation and Nordic security affairs.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>