

NATO after “Brain Death”: the View from France, Germany, and Poland

Michal Baranowski, Martin Quencez, and Jan Techau

Last week, France’s President Emmanuel Macron visited Poland, a couple of months after his notorious comment about NATO suffering from brain death provoked an uproar in the transatlantic alliance. The visit mattered not only because Franco-Polish relations have not been warm in recent times, but also the two countries appear to have very different perceptions of the importance of NATO to their security and Europe’s. In the context of Macron’s trip, the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) organized an expert’s meeting in Berlin to understand better the perceptions of NATO held by France, Germany, and Poland—the countries forming the “Weimar triangle.” Below, experts from the Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw offices of GMF give their short takes on NATO in the aftermath of Macron’s “brain death” comments.

Michal Baranowski, Director, Warsaw Office

President Emmanuel Macron’s assertion that NATO is brain dead was received extremely poorly in Poland. Not only was it seen as a statement undermining the alliance, given that it came in the run-up to the London leaders meeting, it was coupled with the idea of rapprochement with Russia—despite the lack of any progress in addressing Russia’s violation of international law and undermine of the European security architecture. Macron’s words also came at a time when the relations between France and Poland were effectively frozen, with recriminations and expletives flying between the two sides.

This dynamic has begun to change with the recent visit of France’s president to Warsaw. The two countries have finally started talking, and even though the visit did not produce particular deliverables, it has set a stage for rebuilding trust and dialogue. The greatest potential is in European security. Both countries are serious about defense and agree that Europe needs to do more—even if Poland emphasizes the European pillar of NATO and France’s focus is on European strategic autonomy. Where the two disagree—less than is assumed—is on threat assessment. Warsaw is still largely looking east while Paris is largely focused on the south. The two perspectives do not have to be mutually exclusive, as shown, for example, by France’s participation in NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence battalion in Estonia, and in Estonia’s military’s presence in the Sahel and its membership in the European Intervention Initiative, which many experts believe is focused mostly on the south.

14 February 2020

Macron's controversial statement stirred up a productive debate about European security—but only when the element of dialogue was added to the mix. A Polish-French dialogue should now begin in earnest at all levels of government and across the strategic community. Germany will also be a key part of the puzzle. The leaders of the three countries are set to meet in July to restart the “Weimar triangle” cooperation. However, given the current political turmoil in Berlin, it is likely that any results of this cooperation will come only after Germany's next parliamentary elections.

Martin Quencez, Deputy Director, Paris Office and Research Fellow in the Security & Defense Program

President Emmanuel Macron's remarks on NATO's brain death are now part of the transatlantic debate, having made serious concerns about the alliance more public. The deeper causes of his comments, however, have often been missed, and the NATO's leaders' meeting in London in December did not provide clear and concrete answers to the questions raised. Macron's idea was to distinguish NATO's military organization from its role as a transatlantic political alliance. In his view, while the former—the “muscle”—has successfully worked to adapt to a new security environment and to strengthen military cooperation among allies, the latter—the “brain”—is not functioning anymore and does not defend the allies' national and collective interests. For France, Turkey's military intervention in northern Syria was a point in case: the United States gave permission to an ally to act in a way that directly goes against the work of the coalition against Islamic State. The lack of coordination and Washington's inability or unwillingness to play a leading role within the alliance to defuse the resulting tensions were signs that NATO does not provide the right platform for an efficient strategic dialogue.

For France, the need for a clarifying discussion on the understandings of security threats among NATO allies is as important today as it was at the time of Macron's “brain death” comments. It is crucial to go beyond the current exchanges about defense spending and capability building and to address the more fundamental questions of strategic interests and priorities. France's commitment to NATO is not in question, but other allies cannot afford to underplay its concerns that without a real political leadership the alliance's credibility and value are directly at risk.

Jan Techau, Director of the Europe Program

President Emmanuel Macron had two reasons for describing NATO as brain dead. First, the death of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty which leaves Europe exposed to a possible nuclear arms race. Second, the United States' decision to abandon Syria and accept Turkey's military operation against the Kurds there. Both incidents confirmed to European countries what they had feared since President Barack Obama refused to enforce his “red line” on the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2014, namely that NATO's military muscle was still strong, but that the political and strategic brain of the alliance was not functioning.

While many NATO members would have probably agreed with Macron on these grounds alone, he poisoned his argument by simultaneously making diplomatic overtures to Russia. And, while French officials keep insisting that France is not naïve about the Russian threat, the double whammy of this move and the “brain death” comments triggered Europe's biggest enemy within: the lingering strategic mistrust among the conti-

ment's countries. Feverish diplomacy ensued, culminating in Macron's visit in Warsaw earlier this month, ending years of de facto silence between the two countries.

Talk of renewing the "Weimar triangle" of France, Germany, and Poland as a consulting mechanism emerged. Even though this might not be the key to NATO's future, it follows the right instinct. If distrust between the three countries forming Europe's key East-West link-up becomes too corrosive, there is zero hope for any European forcefulness in the future.

If the "brain death" episode had an upside, it is this: people talk to each other again, and about different topics. Whether it can trigger fresh foreign and security ambition in Germany, the country that most urgently needs to up its game, is a wholly different question.

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

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.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC

www.gmfus.org