French European Defense Strategy and Its Relationship with NATO

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From the stillborn European defense community in 1950 to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, France has held a leadership position in the construction of the European defense structure since its creation. This leadership role stood in contrast to the perceived position of France vis-à-vis the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), essentially after Gen Charles de Gaulle decided to withdraw France from the NATO command structure in 1966, an action that the United States always perceived as a challenge to its supremacy. Prior to President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to completely reintegrate France into NATO in March 2009, France had always had a specific role both within and outside the NATO command structure and in European defense. This explains why observers often refer to France as a nonaligned ally in characterizing its behavior in international relations. Currently, European defense is at a standstill and needs a boost, but the European political, economic, and societal context has dramatically changed in the last few years, requiring France to implement a new policy to maintain its influence in both European defense and NATO.

In this challenging context and using the dividends of its reaffirmed role after the Libyan conflict, France will maintain its autonomy to act in developing a stronger European defense—based on small-group initiatives—while it influences NATO by employing the new "smart defense" concept and deals with the US shift to the Asia-Pacific region. In this manner, France will regain its leadership role in Europe and on the international stage.

European Defense: A Lack of Political Will?

Back in 1950, the beginning of the Cold War raised the question of European security. René Pleven, president of the French Council, invented the concept

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of a European Defense Community, designed to create an integrated military force founded by European countries and directed by a supranational authority. This project was never ratified because of French domestic political reasons. Between 1954 and 1992, the Western European Union was created to maintain, *a minima*, a mutual assistance, but the security of the European continent became rooted in the transatlantic relationship.[1] In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty was signed in the context of the end of the Cold War and the perspective of German reunification. With it arose a willingness to develop a political community as well as an economic union—the European Union (EU). One of the pillars of the new organization became the Common Foreign and Security Policy, whose main objectives were to preserve fundamental European interests and independence, reinforce the security of the EU, and promote international cooperation.[2] "The June 1992 'Petersberg Declaration' was a key development in EU efforts to create its own defence capability. It was designed to avoid any confusion between the defence roles of individual EU countries, NATO and the Union acting as a bloc. The Petersberg Declaration set out three roles[:] . . . humanitarian and rescue operations, peacekeeping operations [and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking]."[3] After the Bosnian War, France and the United Kingdom (UK) wanted the EU to become a credible actor on the international stage, and the Saint-Malo Summit in December 1998 was the starting point for an actual European defense project. It also set the stage for the creation in June 1999 of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), a formal organization designed to prevent conflicts and manage crisis missions. As a subset of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in the security domain, the ESDP became the Common Security and Defense Policy with the Lisbon Treaty, ratified in December 2009, which profoundly modified the ESDP by creating the Permanent Structure for Cooperation (PSC), as well as the mutual defense clause, and improving the European Defense Agency.[4]

These three points established the new foundations of European defense and quickly became its strength. The PSC allows member states to come together in small groups in order to bypass the obligation for unanimity in several domains. The PSC, "reserved for member states whose defense efforts are the greatest, includes countries who wish to pool their investment and bring together their defense tools."[5] Inspired by the NATO Treaty, the mutual defense clause means that "if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power."[6] The European Defense Agency was created on 12 July 2004 for countries that wanted to improve their military capacity. It "aimed to develop defense capacities in the area of crisis management and to promote and

strengthen European cooperation regarding arms, and also aimed to strengthen Europe's industrial and technological base in the area of defense."[7] It is in charge of coordinating capacity and industrial projects of the member states. Today, the agency is responsible for European tanker aircraft, the pilot-training project, and the A400M transport aircraft through the Organization for Joint Armament Co-operation.

The Common Security and Defense Policy allows the EU to use civilian and military means to conduct peace-support operations (i.e., peacekeeping, peace enforcement, conflict prevention, peacemaking, and peace building). Currently, 11 civilian operations have been completed, and eight are in progress. On the military side, three have been completed, and five are in progress—the most important one the EU Naval Force's Operation Atalanta, which protects humanitarian-aid shipments and fights piracy off the Somali coast.[8] France is the primary contributor to this operation. However, the experience of conducting these operations has highlighted the weaknesses of the EU defense policy.

Indeed, all missions so far performed by the EU as a security organization have been modest. A number of treaties, institutions, and procedures have been launched during the last decade to emulate the construction of European defense. Some industrial projects were convincing, such as the A400M transport aircraft, the FREMM frigates (Italy and France), the PAAMS Naval Missile System (France, UK, and Italy), and the Tiger helicopter. Several collaborative advances have been made in space observation. But the concrete improvements are slim, and no real dynamic has emerged.[9] No military operation has been put in place since the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, and the EU had to reduce its operation center that activated in March 2012, as mentioned by Hubert Védrine in his report to the French president François Hollande.[10] At present we have to admit that European defense is at a standstill. Each time attempts were made to give a new impulse to the organization, military conservatism, industrial competition, and a lack of funding thwarted political initiatives.[11] The difficulty that European politicians now have to face is that the threats to European citizens do not demand military answers; that is, globalization, an unstable financial environment, unemployment, and ecology are distant from European defense issues. As a result, in 2011 EU27 defense spending was 40 percent of the US defense budget ($281 billion versus $711 billion, respectively).[12] France and the UK, which spent 40 percent of the EU27 defense budget, are the only two EU countries to devote more than 2 percent of their gross domestic product to military expenditures.[13] In light of these figures, Europeans have to remain pragmatic and reasonable about their collective defense ambitions. Even in the presence of a certain political goodwill, the overall process remains fragile due to financial and domestic politi-

cal issues, and words are difficult to translate into practical efforts. Part of the problem comes from the countries that are both NATO and EU members: until recent times, they feared that the EU could represent any duplication with NATO, and they trusted the United States to guarantee the safety of the European continent. As a matter of fact (and somewhat ironically), a significant part of the problem and the possible solution to the European defense dilemma resides in its relationship with NATO.

The Full and Entire Return of France to NATO

On 4 April 1949 in Washington, DC, foreign affairs ministers signed the treaty creating NATO. Twelve countries signed this pact, which came into force on 23 August 1949, as a regional organism based on mutual support among member countries in case of an attack against one of them.[14] NATO was created not only to protect the Northern Atlantic region against the Soviet threat but also to stabilize Western Europe—Germany in particular. In April 1951, the organization adopted a permanent political and military structure that included an integrated command structure for its members' military forces. NATO sought to organize its Western European members' military forces in peacetime so they could rapidly react and shift to war status in case of a Soviet attack. This implied full integration and control by the United States, accepted by all members, under authority of the Supreme Allied Command, Europe.[15] Although France was a NATO founding member, its role in the organization evolved along with its relationship with the United States and its foreign policy, upon which General de Gaulle left his mark.

On 7 March 1966, General de Gaulle announced to President Lyndon Johnson that "France proposed to recover the exercise of its sovereignty on its entire territory . . . [cease] its participation in the integrated commands within NATO . . . and no longer [give] any permanent forces to NATO."[16] Far from expressing de Gaulle's anti-Americanism, this decision was the result of three main considerations: de Gaulle's attempts to establish a Franco-British-American Security Directorate had failed; "he sought a more independent role for France in order to maximise its global influence and status[;] . . . [and] President de Gaulle . . . disagreed with the United States' intention to replace the strategy of 'Massive Retaliation' with 'Flexible Response' because he believed that this meant a weakening of the U.S. commitment to defend Europe with nuclear weapons."[17] Those three elements made de Gaulle believe that NATO was designed to ensure French subordination to US policy. France had developed its own nuclear weapon, and de Gaulle did not want to see US nuclear weapons on French soil without knowing

anything about them, even their whereabouts; this would be an unacceptable loss of sovereignty. Finally, after more than eight years of fruitless attempts, France left the NATO integrated command structures.[18] However, it stayed within the alliance and was ready to "get along with its allies in the event of the need to reach an agreement in case of a conflict."[19] Indeed, "a secret accord between U.S. and French officials, the Lemnitzer-Aillert Agreements, laid out in great detail how French forces would dovetail back into NATO's command structure should East-West hostilities break out."[20] With the exception of an abortive attempt from Jacques Chirac in 1996, no government ever challenged de Gaulle's decision until 2009. France's position vis-à-vis NATO became the symbol of its independence and nonalignment with respect to the United States. It was advantageous on both the diplomatic and the political side, especially among Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, for whom France's position was a guarantee of independence.[21] The full and entire return of France to NATO happened only on 3 April 2009 when Sarkozy was president.

What were France's motivations to initiate a step back, and what might be the consequences of this decision? Between de Gaulle's and Sarkozy's decisions, France had come closer to NATO, step by step, but in strict secrecy. From the time of the Atlantic Council, held in Paris in 1983, to the presence of more French military officers in NATO structures, through participation in the NATO Response Force and weapon interoperability, the process was ongoing and continuous.[22] Back in 2009, President Sarkozy could see only disadvantages to the French position. First, France's allies did not understand it, and it cast doubt on his country's goals and strategy: "[European] countries were reluctant to cooperate with France on such a force out of fear it would be interpreted as a split from NATO."[23] Second, France had a poor influence on the orientation of the military committee because no French general had an important position among NATO structures, and every member had doubts about French intentions.[24] Even so, opponents of the full return to NATO were numerous in France. They feared an alignment of France with US policy and a loss of the status it had enjoyed for so many years. Finally, the Parliament backed Sarkozy's decision with a vote of confidence and decided that France would be a full NATO member but would stay away from the Nuclear Planning Group. On the military side, the return meant a greater influence over NATO's decisions on the use of military forces. Nine hundred French soldiers came to NATO headquarters, and French generals received a few prestigious assignments, such as the Supreme Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia. Normalization of the French position also reassured countries within the alliance about France's intentions, role, and strategy. On the European side, and according to Hervé Morin, France's position outside the unified com-

mand caused distrust among its allied partners about its European ambitions; they thought that France wanted to substitute NATO for European defense, while they themselves remained profoundly attached to NATO.[25] The United States had always considered France's behavior a challenge to its supremacy and influence, making European defense a threat to transatlantic ties. The return of France to the NATO command structures restored trust with the United States, reassured European countries concerning France's intentions, and made clear to everybody that NATO and European defense did not have to compete but could be complementary. In sum, the construction of European defense could proceed. In April 2009,

> NATO recognise[d] the importance of a stronger and more capable European defense, and welcome[d] the EU's efforts to strengthen its capabilities and its capacity to address common security challenges that both NATO and the EU face today. These developments have significant implications and relevance for the Alliance as a whole, which is why NATO stands ready to support and work with the EU in such mutually reinforcing efforts, recognising the ongoing concerns of Allies.[26]

For France and President Sarkozy, this declaration was a success and the beginning of a new era in which France would play a greater role in NATO and renew its effort to construct European defense. Two years later, the Libyan conflict would challenge the new French position.

The Libyan Conflict:
A Test for Both NATO and the European Union

The Libyan conflict provides us with a good example of the difficulties in finding an agreement that would allow European countries to intervene independently, as opposed to NATO's extreme reaction and its ability to find compromises in situations where European defense found itself stuck. After a European summit in Brussels on 11 March 2011, the EU found a compromise "to consider 'all necessary options' to protect civilians in Libya, and called on Gaddafi to give up power. The statement did not make reference to recent French and British calls for a no-fly zone."[27] After the meeting, German chancellor Angela Merkel was "'fundamentally skeptical' of military action" while France and Britain "were considering airstrikes in Libya."[28] Germany was one of the five countries that chose abstention to United Nations (UN) Resolution 1973, thereby showing to the rest of the world and to the European countries its disagreement with military intervention in Libya.[29] Because the three main countries—Germany, the UK, and France—were unable to find a diplomatic agreement in favor of military intervention, Europeans could not act in Libya as an entity. On 1 April, the EU did an-

nounce EUFOR Libya, a military operation to support humanitarian-relief operations.[30] This limited engagement, however, was far from convincing, coming from a continent that wants to be a major player in its area of interest. Later in the conflict, the European reaction as a whole remained mixed: some countries assumed an offensive role (France and the UK), some a noncombat role (the Netherlands and Italy [even if Italy offered important support by opening its bases to NATO aircraft]), and others chose not to be part of the fight at all (Germany and Poland). All of these European countries acted in the name of NATO, not as Europeans. Domestic political issues and public opinion were significant factors in the nations not engaged, as in Germany where its historical legacy makes people extremely reluctant to use force. In sum, Libya has offered the latest example of Europe's political fragmentation regarding defense while at the same time, and despite numerous disagreements, NATO was globally quite reactive and effective.[31]

According to Michael Clarke, "Despite all the statements of unity, there were clear political differences of view over how far NATO nations should go in pushing for the defeat of the Gaddafi forces. . . . When the military operation began on 19 March with French, and then US and British air strikes, it was not clear whether or not the Alliance would be able to act at all."[32] In Brussels, alliance members could not agree on who would take the lead on military operations: "British prime minister David Cameron argued that responsibility for the no-fly zone should be transferred to NATO, while French foreign minister Alain Juppé argued, 'The Arab League does not wish the operation to be entirely placed under NATO responsibility. It isn't NATO which has taken the initiative up to now.'"[33] France was pushing hard to intervene and, knowing the reluctance of several European countries to use force, did not want to see NATO dampen the operation. But divisions inside NATO were contained to some extent by ensuring that "a largely agreed on position had been established by those at the helm of the campaign."[34] For example, France, the UK and six other countries contributed to the actual strike operations even before the NATO ambassadors discussed them. This process allowed NATO to take over air operations only 12 days after the first strikes, with Lt Gen Ralph Jodice—the combined joint force air component commander—having the relative freedom to employ his air forces. Thus, NATO managed to overcome initial tensions at the political level and was efficient at the operational level through well-trained command structures, showing strong effectiveness, whereas European defense revealed its weaknesses. In the Libyan operation, France took its first steps as a fully reintegrated member of NATO.

Indeed, the Libya crisis was the first NATO military operation since France reintegrated into the NATO military command structure. Because France had

always remained among the first five contributors to every NATO operation since Desert Storm, the new situation did not involve a significant change in its behavior.[35] Nevertheless, "through the Libya operation, France has been able to confirm its ability to take a strong leadership role within the Alliance."[36] Moreover, France demonstrated both its capacity to be the first to enter a theater and its ability to perform an autonomous strike far from its territory.[37] Today only three Western countries—the United States, UK, and France—can put together Airborne Warning and Control System, tanker, and fighter assets along with the intelligence that such a package requires. First, this situation reinforced the relationship between France and the UK: "Cooperation [between the two countries] . . . was desirable because it met two key criteria: the willingness to deploy and the willingness to spend on defence."[38] Second, it gave new momentum to the transatlantic relationship: the United States now sees France as a reliable ally on whom it can count while it transitions to Asia. Third, France reaffirmed its leadership role in Europe on the military stage, found a way to counter Germany's pressure, and demonstrated its ability to use force when necessary. If the Libyan conflict was considered a test for France in its new role since its full reintegration into NATO, then one could assert that it was a success. With renewed influence and a new legacy, though, France is also committed to do all in its power to preserve its position by maintaining a leading role in the consolidation of European defense.

The French Perspective on European Defense and Its Relation to NATO

France is ready to take on its leadership role in the construction of European defense. With respect to its closest allies, the ties between France and the UK—the two biggest military powers in Europe—will remain among the most important factors in the consolidation of European defense. The relationship between Paris and London has gone through years of rivalry and misunderstandings, yet "the 2010 Franco-British treaties have the potential to further bilateral strategic rapprochement and serve as a source of inspiration for other joint defence initiatives in Europe."[39] Indeed, the two countries found common ground for cooperation as set forth by the Lancaster-House Treaty, signed in November 2010. That document established a framework and a new potential for defense cooperation between the two countries, from nuclear and weapon systems programs such as remotely piloted aircraft to the new Combined Joint Expeditionary Force tested successfully in October 2012.[40] The rapprochement also became obvious during the Libyan conflict when French and British forces came together on both the diplomatic and military fronts. Nevertheless, difficulties can quickly reemerge. On

the procurement side, the recent British decision about the future carrier stopped all potential for further cooperation.[41] More important, on the political side, the UK does not want to integrate the bilateral mechanisms into European defense; that is symptomatic of the UK's reluctance with respect to any global EU project, preventing this country from being a European leader. Moreover, Cameron's recent gamble with the EU referendum could complicate new ententes. Finally, the capacity to capitalize on recent progress will rely on "the United Kingdom's ability to mitigate its own Eurosceptic fears in the treaties' implementation process [and] France's commitment to implementing the agreed measures and its capacity to leave behind its political and ideological aspirations when dealing with the United Kingdom."[42]

The German equation is even more complicated. Thanks to the economic crisis, Germany has "enjoy[ed] a dominant position with regard to Paris and all the other member nations. Why? Because Germany has succeeded in setting up the euro to work in its favor, developing an export-oriented economy and making the necessary reforms in good time."[43] This dominating position on the economic side has repercussions on the political side since Germany tends to favor its own preferences in all areas; the Libyan conflict is the best evidence of this assertion, emphasizing the natural German reluctance to use its armed forces. Concerning its defense views, Germany has always preferred NATO to European defense (it is the second-greatest contributor to NATO spending) and has always had a core disagreement with France over nuclear deterrence.[44] This state of mind prevents Germany from actually promoting European defense. Moreover, it recently refused the merger of the British defense contractor BAE and the Franco-German firm EADS, threatening one of the treasures of the European industrial and technological base in the area of defense.[45] Today, one must ask whether German leaders have enough will to progress, at the European level, in the area of defense.

To strengthen European defense capacities, France will need the support of Germany as well as the other Weimar+ countries (Italy, Poland, and Spain). The five countries—the most credible European defense actors with the UK—first met on 15 November 2012 and sent an important political message concerning their determination to reinforce cooperation in the defense sector. They published a joint letter stating their willingness to reinforce European defense with the creation of common defense structures. Those countries also agreed on five areas of improvement: engagement in civil-military operations, a European comprehensive approach, equipment, the complementarity of NATO and European defense, and cooperation with international organizations such as the UN. But the UK could fight this project, fearing it might rival NATO command.[46] In addition, each of these Weimar+ countries suffers from budget cuts that directly affect its

military forces. Despite the necessity to cooperate, the countries' economic difficulties could undermine their ability to implement actual strides. The ones more affected by the economic crisis will have difficulty affording any long-term and costly program such as the next-generation tanker. If France encounters less formal opposition and even some support from Italy, Spain, and Poland for the European defense implementation, it will have to make sure that the Weimar+ countries follow their words with actual facts regarding common projects directed by the European Defense Agency and their willingness to engage in military operations. The demanding economic context will help bring countries together but could also undermine long-term efforts. Indeed, in their desire to save money quickly, countries could be tempted to merge their forces and favor concrete, short-term objectives while the European structure and the importance of the issue at stake (i.e., the preservation of Europe as a power in a multipolar world) would need broader, long-term objectives with no immediate, tangible return. The implementation of European defense will have to be wise and progressive. If an immediate process involving the EU27 is impossible, the Weimar+ is the right example of the iterative construct Europe might choose: strong leadership from the most active countries to convince the others that European defense can work, encouraging smaller nations to join the group. In addition to the Weimar+ initiative, others could come together within small groups to begin pooling and sharing.[47] To strengthen its structure, Europe will also need to preserve its technological and industrial base in the defense area, which is threatened by fiscal constraints such as the reduction of European spending; further, a more aggressive American defense industrial complex (to balance sequestration) could undermine efforts to preserve a strong European industrial base.

At the European level and in the context of an economic crisis, challenges are numerous. In the short term, small-group initiatives à la carte led by the most influential European actors, pooling and sharing, and preservation of the technological and industrial base in the defense area are essential. In the long term, European countries will have to remain reasonable and make compromises on their core views if they want to push forward. The issue at stake is nothing less than Europe as a credible international actor. Through its leading role, France has already shown its willingness to make progress. However, it will need countries to convert their political goodwill into concrete actions, and it will require the support of the United States. This can help European public opinion understand that with the US transition to Asia, Europe needs to take the responsibility of securing its sphere of influence and providing the assets formerly supplied by America.[48] Finally, in this era of austerity, Europeans need to make sure that no redundancy occurs between European defense and NATO.

France decided to return to the integrated command structure in order to influence NATO. That means it is ready to contribute to the debate, as occurred during the last NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012. At the procurement level, it means that France wants the European defense complex to have a place in the smart-defense concept and to be associated with the Ballistic Missile Defense System program.[49] It also means better deconfliction between NATO and European Defense Agency programs. Above all, and according to Mr. Védrine, France wants to make NATO and European defense complementary, refocusing NATO on its regional and military prerogatives as a military alliance based on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and nuclear deterrence.[50] While European defense would act in humanitarian, peacekeeping, and civil-military operations—and possibly in crisis management—Russia represents another good example of how this complementary role could be used: "Russia's distrust of NATO has led it to adopt a more assertive foreign policy posture, in which it seeks to safeguard its traditional sphere of interest. . . . The EU could well become the mediator in the complex security policy relations between Russia and the West. The EU clearly provides a security policy agenda that Russia regards as more pragmatic and less confrontational than NATO's."[51]

Conclusion

President Sarkozy's decision to return to the NATO command structure was necessary for the renewal of European defense. This action did not represent a realignment of French strategy with US policy, as some French politicians feared, but restored trust with Europeans and the United States, reinforcing European defense in the context of the US transition to the Asia-Pacific region. France is willing to give new momentum to the preservation of Europe's credibility through small-group initiatives à la carte, pooling and sharing, and a preserved European industrial complex. Given the challenges and underlying tensions in a difficult economic context, the political goodwill among the EU27 will need to change into actions, and European countries will have to remain reasonable about their collective defense ambitions. Building on its reaffirmed role after the Libyan conflict, France has initiatives designed to maintain its influence as a European leader; they will enable France to recover its position as a major player on the international stage through a reinforced and complementary European defense and NATO.

France is ready to assume a rallying role in Europe—one that neither the UK nor Germany is ready to shoulder. After centuries of an extremely rich history marked by wars and conflicts, France has developed a true need for safety and

independence through its own defense industry and influence. What could appear sometimes as arrogant French exceptionalism is actually an exaggerated pragmatism due to the trauma of the occupation and is designed to protect both French core interests and a European status of power in a multipolar world. A small number of Western countries can afford this global vision financially, ideologically, and culturally. This comprehensive vision shares common ground with American core interests, and France has proven in the recent past—in Libya and Mali—that it is willing and able to assume its part of the burden. Both countries are aware of this fact, making the bilateral relationship better than ever.

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