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## EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND FRANCE

### INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

The expression “strategic autonomy” is associated with France. It was first mentioned in the so-called “Defence White Paper” published in 1994. The term, which has been common in French public life since the 1990s, first appeared at European level in 2013. The French approach is therefore particularly interesting when it comes to understanding how it is applied at the European level. In order to present the concept of European strategic autonomy from a French perspective, it is essential to examine factors such as France’s current position in the world. It is also important to look at the main traditional principles that have shaped French foreign and defence policy. It is also worth mentioning the international challenges that continue to shape French strategic thinking today. In this context, it is possible to analyse France’s approach to the European Union’s common security and defence policy issues and the objectives set by Paris. The idea of European strategic autonomy, which President Emmanuel Macron has put forward in recent years, is an integral part of the French traditional approach and its response to international challenges. For the governments in Paris, it is not a new realisation that France’s privileged position in the post-Second World War international system has become increasingly eroded and constrained, and even vulnerable in certain areas, with the collapse of the bipolar world order and the intensification of globalisation (BALLADUR 2023). At the same time, and pointing to certain contradictions, it can also be argued that France still has the potential to remain a visible and influential player in world politics. This is what former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing said when he referred to his country as a “medium-sized power” (TELLENNE 2023).

KEY FACTORS SHAPING FRANCE'S FOREIGN,  
SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

*France's place in the world*

Today, France accounts for less than 1% of the world's population, with 68.4 million inhabitants, and this figure is likely to continue to decrease in the coming years. This is not only because the demographic figures for some regions of the world are increasing, but also because the overall birth rate in the country has been falling since 2011 (PAPON 2023). France is in a relatively good economic position in terms of population, even if it has experienced increasing difficulties in this area in recent decades. This places it seventh among the most industrialised countries. In terms of GDP per capita, France is now only 25<sup>th</sup> in the world, having been 13<sup>th</sup> in 1980 (International Monetary Fund s. a.), ahead of the United States (PÉNEAU 2023). The country has also faced significant financial difficulties in recent years, with sovereign debt reaching 110% of GDP by 2024, or €3,101 billion. The French state is increasingly forced to rely directly or indirectly on foreign creditors. In 1993, only one third of French public debt was held by natural or legal persons not resident in France; today it is 53%. This figure was particularly high in 2009 due to the 2008 financial crisis, when 67% of creditors were non-French (La finance pour tous 2024a). The budget has been particularly overwrought recently by the Covid-19 crisis. The general government deficit in 2020 was 8.9% of GDP. It should be noted that France has not been able to balance its public finances in any year since 1975, and has only rarely met the 3% Maastricht requirement (La finance pour tous 2024b). It is worth noting, however, that French people's currency savings reached almost €6,000 billion in 2023 (Fédération Bancaire Française 2024). In France, the population saves substantial amounts of money each year, well above the European average. Governments repeatedly try to encourage the public to invest their money in strategic sectors, but public efforts in this direction have so far produced few tangible results. It is also important to point out the fact that the process of globalisation has significantly transformed the French economy and society in recent decades, as Jérôme Fourquet has described in detail in several books (FOURQUET 2019; FOURQUET–CASSELY 2021; FOURQUET 2023). Among these, it is relevant to underline the process of deindustrialisation (FOURQUET–CASSELY 2021: 21–42). France lost half of its industrial installations between 1995 and 2015. It is the most affected country in Europe in this area. France has lost 2.5 million industrial jobs in the last fifty years (DUFOURCQ 2022). At the same time, the country's economic exposure has increased. In 2021, 17,000 companies employed 2.2 million French

people in the country (LAURENT–MOLDOVAN 2023), a direct consequence of the fact that France is the destination of choice for most foreign investors in Europe (SILBERT 2024). At the same time, foreign trade has also increased significantly. In 2023, French exports accounted for 34% of GDP and imports for 38% of GDP (Ministère de l'Économie des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle, énergétique et numérique 2024). It is important to note that there are more French than Germans among the world's 500 most powerful companies (VÉDRINE 2014). France's attractiveness is also demonstrated by the fact that it has been the number one tourist destination for thirty years. Tourism generates 8% of France's GDP each year and provides employment for nearly 2 million people (Ministère de l'économie, des finances et de la souveraineté industrielle, énergétique et numérique 2023). Another important aspect of the situation in France is the fragmentation that has manifested itself in various forms, and which has increased significantly over the last decade. This is not a problem in itself, because diversity is not an obstacle to effective politics, but if society is so divided that it cannot reach consensus on major issues, if it cannot generate pragmatic decisions but becomes a victim of ideological debates, it can go down the road to self-destruction (DE MONTBRIAL 2023: 10–11).

As can be seen above, the globalisation process has generated contradictory results in France. On the one hand, the country is an active participant and beneficiary of this process, but on the other hand, it is also a constant reproducer of many of its negative consequences. The majority of the population has a negative view of globalisation and associates it mainly with the dominance of the United States (FOUGIER 2018).

The main reason behind the French criticism is that for France this process is not only an economic issue, but also a political, cultural and, through them, a direct factor affecting national identity. Globalisation is particularly problematic for the population of this country because it can be interpreted as a direct attack on the French model of universality, rather than as a counterweight to the predominance of the U.S. and, increasingly, China. At the same time, the French are progressively more aware of the fact that the size of their country is such that they are unable to have any real influence on this process, and that it may well be possible to pursue their interests and their vision of the world through a common Europe, often with contradictory political approaches. Paris is all the keener to rely on the European Union because it wants to see it above all as the key to the establishment of a multipolar world order, as a safeguard against the potential excesses and hegemonic ambitions of a single centre of power.

France is in a special position in Europe. One reason is that it has land on several continents of the world. In addition, France is the second largest country in the world

with an exclusive maritime economic zone (EEZ) (DOBELLE 2021). In addition to its territorial assets, an important factor is that France has a large diplomatic network. It should be noted, however, that France has fallen from second to fifth place over the last ten years. The size of its diplomatic network has decreased in recent years, mainly due to financial difficulties (Lowy Institute 2024). France is also a founding member of several international organisations and informal forums. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council since 1945, member of NATO since 1949. It is a founding member of the Council of Europe, the European Union and Euratom. It is also a founding member and participant in the G7 and G20. France has also been a nuclear-weapon state since 1960. It is one of the 9 nuclear powers currently recognised. The exact number is not publicly available, but it is admitted that the French military has 300 nuclear weapons, the fourth largest arsenal in the world (HAUPAIS 2019). France was the 11<sup>th</sup> largest military power in the world in 2024, according to the Global Firepower statistics. Not counting Russia, it is second in Europe after Italy in this area since Brexit (Global Fire Power 2023).<sup>1</sup> This is compounded by the importance of France's influence through the French language. One of the instruments for this is the International Francophone Organisation (OIF), which was set up in 1970 and today has 88 member countries. It is also worth pointing out that the population of French-speaking African countries is growing significantly, so that, according to some estimates, it could go from being the fifth most spoken language in Africa to the second or third by 2050 (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie 2019).

### *Key factors in French foreign policy thinking*

These factors, which seem to be more important from a foreign and security policy point of view, illustrate that France is a middle power that still has considerable influence and means on the international stage, even if it has lost much of its former position in certain areas. It is important to note, however, that the majority of French citizens perceive the trends as mostly negative. According to Hubert Védrine, former French foreign minister and international relations expert, this pessimism is an enormous mistake and will only exacerbate the decline. In his book he underlines that there are many elements of this negative outlook that can be traced back to fear (VÉDRINE 2014: 63–88). The French are worried, among other things, about France's place in the world. They experience the erosion of their country's role as a

<sup>1</sup> In 2023, it was ahead of Italy. In 2020, it was in 7<sup>th</sup> place.

great power as a kind of identity crisis, in the light of international trends that have affected their lives since the end of the Cold War. The French image of themselves and of their mission is an integral part of their relationship with the outside world. Their perception, rooted in history and based on geographical, demographic and cultural-intellectual foundations, sees France not only as the world's dominant power but also as a kind of universal role model, thanks to its universal mission (VINCZE 2005). It is through foreign policy that the maintenance of the "French greatness" *par excellence* can be achieved. It is not by coincidence that France has always placed and continues to place great emphasis on diplomacy and military strength. Without these two, it is hardly possible to achieve the main objectives that the French have been demanding for centuries in relation to their place in the world.

### *Traditional principles of French foreign and defence policy*

France's first and most important foreign policy objective is independence. In other words, to guarantee the French nation's autonomy of decision and action. This approach does not exclude international cooperation, but seeks to avoid any situation in which France's space for manoeuvre would be restricted. Independence has become a guiding principle in French foreign policy thinking. In this context, the interpretation of French sovereignty has also changed, and the concept has become increasingly widespread that a partial transfer of sovereignty within the European Union does not mean giving up independence, but rather offers an opportunity to recapture within a European framework a national capacity for action that is becoming increasingly difficult in a context of globalisation (VINCZE 2005: 169). An important element in French foreign policy thinking is also the aspiration to a global role and the emphasis on "greatness", which underlines France's international standing and responsibility, and the sense of a civilising mission that goes with it. Defence policy also plays an essential role in the implementation of these principles. In the French conception, foreign and security policy and defence are closely linked. The main objective of France's defence policy is to provide an appropriate military framework for maintaining national autonomy of decision and action and for the implementation of a global presence. The previous is not a target in itself, but an exercise of responsibility and solidarity commensurate with the country's international weight, and a contribution to meeting the challenges facing the world.

Another important premise of French defence policy is that it is autonomous, but not alone. This is illustrated, for example, by the fact that in 1966 General Charles de Gaulle did not withdraw France from NATO, but said no to the integration

process under the leadership of the United States (BOZO 2022). In the French view, sovereignty and strategic autonomy were violated by excessive U.S. control of NATO. The principle of a defence policy open to cooperation also contributes to the traditional Parisian commitment to the gradual development of European security policy autonomy. The 1994 White Paper states, among others things, that “France cannot entrust the defence of its vital interests to others. However, we must not lose sight of the questions raised by the prospect of building a common European defence within the European Union” (Ministère de la Défense 1994). The document establishes that France has the task of acting as the main representative of the European defence identity within NATO and of providing direction and motivation for the creation of the European Union’s defence dimension.

#### THE FRENCH SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the light of the above, it is clear that Paris is an indispensable player in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). France has a long history of playing this role. As early as 1947, the Treaty of Dunkirk and, a year later, the Treaty of Brussels were a first step in this direction. The so-called European Defence Community (EDC) project, announced in 1950 by the French Minister of Defence, René Pleven, was the first attempt to build an integrated European army, and was specifically linked to France (WASSENBERG 2010). Although the idea was not supported by the French National Assembly in 1954, it can be seen as an important precursor of the later common European security and defence policy, as well as of the initiatives taken in the framework of Franco–German cooperation on this subject. For example, the Elysée Treaty signed in 1963 aims at the approximation of the defence strategies of the two countries, the development of common concepts and even the coordination of arms production. However, concrete progress was only made in the second half of the 1980s. For example, the Franco–German Defence and Security Council was established in 1988, and the Franco–German Corps (BFA) was set up in 1989, with headquarters in Müllheim. France had an interest in military cooperation because it could keep a greater distance from the United States by controlling Bonn and could generate sufficient financial resources for military technology development. After the end of the Cold War, the common security and defence policy in Europe became a more important issue, at the Franco–German initiative (FEJÉRDY 2021: 125–135). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the two countries continued to give security policy an important role, although they viewed it differently. Attitudes to defence

cooperation at European level were strongly influenced by the relationship with the United States. France, which has always sought greater distance, saw European defence policy as a balance against NATO and, through it, Washington, while Germany saw it more as a complementary pillar. Despite the conflicting concepts, on 6 December 1990 the two Heads of State announced the plan to create a common European foreign and security policy (CFSP), which a year later became the second pillar of the Maastricht Treaty. In 1991 the Franco–German Brigade (BFA) was ready for military operation. On this basis, it was decided, at the La Rochelle summit of 22 May 1992, to create a European corps (EUROCORPS), which was officially set up on 1 October 1993.

Three years later, at the 68<sup>th</sup> Franco–German Heads of State meeting, an agreement was reached to develop a common defence and security strategy. At the same time, partly as a result of the Franco–American rapprochement of the mid-1990s, Washington agreed to the creation of a so-called European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within NATO. This was a compromise between the French and American conceptions. In the end, however, its implementation did not bring the result Paris had hoped for – greater European autonomy (GORDON 1998). The hostility in Kosovo, the Amsterdam Treaty and changes in British domestic politics also encouraged London to develop the European Union's defence capabilities independently of the United States. It is in this context that the British–French St. Malo Declaration was born, which can clearly be seen as a concrete step towards an independent European defence policy. This meeting confirmed the direction set out in the 1994 White Paper, the French defence strategy (DU RÉAU 2009). The role of Paris was particularly significant in allowing this bilateral agreement to develop within the framework of the European Union. In the spring of 1999, at the initiative of Paris, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Franco–German Summit held in Toulouse adopted a French proposal for a credible European military capability independent of the United States. This was confirmed at the Cologne European Council and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which is capable of autonomous crisis management, was launched (DUMOULIN 2019). The EU summit in Helsinki in December 1999 was also an important milestone, with a number of key decisions on this issue. First of all, on the creation of a rapid reaction force of 50–60 thousand troops by 2003 and on the creation of a European military corps capable of managing autonomous operations. This is how the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) and the European Union Military Staff (EUMS) were set up, with the active participation of France, at the end of 2000. Both bodies have been chaired by France on several occasions. Still in 1999, the framework for cooperation between NATO and the European Union was restructured, with the European Security

and Defence Identity (ESDI) being renamed the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). At the instigation of France, among others, it was made clear that consultation and cooperation between the European Union and NATO would not affect the Union's decision-making autonomy.

French Heads of State have consistently stressed the importance of the European Union being able to act completely independently of Washington. This was particularly the case during the Iraq crisis (VAÏSSE-LEQUESNE 2013: 119–123), with Paris at the forefront of the various operations launched by the CSDP since 2003. Thus, in its first European crisis management operation, which also mobilised military forces, the operation in Macedonia in the former Yugoslavia, known as EUFOR Concordia, in which 400 troops from 26 countries took part, France was the largest contingent, with 175 troops. Between 2003 and 2009, the European Union launched more than twenty-five stabilisation missions, some of which were purely military and most of which combined civilian means and a military dimension, but all of which were aimed at strengthening stability in crisis-affected areas and all of which involved French troops.

The fear of losing French sovereignty was an important factor in the failure of the ratification of the draft Treaty establishing a European Constitution in France in 2005. In the end, the Lisbon Treaty was agreed at the urging and under the strong guidance of Nicolas Sarkozy, the French President elected in 2007. It made decisive progress in the area of common security and defence policy. The Treaty brought radical change by establishing Permanent Structured Cooperation and a mutual defence clause, and by strengthening the European Defence Agency. The latter was set up in 2004, *inter alia*, to support the European defence industry. Its creation was driven by French ambition. After 1990, France was one of the Western countries with the greatest military industrial potential and it was not secretly keen to use this to control, or at least influence, this sector at European level (GIOVACHINI 2004). The Agency has an important role in coordinating the industrial capabilities and projects of the Member States. For example, it is responsible for European tanker aircraft and pilot training through the OCCAR (Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation), in which France is, of course, involved.

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Common Security and Defence Policy gives the EU the possibility to use civilian and military assets to conduct peace support operations – peacekeeping, peace building, conflict prevention, peace building and peace consolidation. Eleven civilian and three military operations have been successfully completed and several more were ongoing until 2014. France is the largest contributor to this operation. However, the experience gained from the implementation of these operations has also highlighted weaknesses



in the EU's defence policy. Paris has regularly criticised the extremely slow and cumbersome way in which EU defence decisions are taken, because agreements between Member States are slow to reach consensus and often require clauses that are ineffective. France also expressed regular dissatisfaction with the cost of the missions undertaken (MENON 2011). In 2008, the French side also came up with the idea of creating a G6 for defence, in order to increase efficiency and military cooperation within the Union. France wanted to rely primarily on the great countries for security policy, and, most of all, on the then member state Great Britain (see the Lancaster House Treaty of 2010 in Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs 2011), which alone shared the Parisian view that Europeans should be able to deploy military force in the world.

At the same time as the Lisbon Treaty, France withdrew from the NATO Integrated Command. It did so formally in 2009, but the 2008 White Paper already anticipated this. President Nicolas Sarkozy basically justified his decision on the grounds that it would strengthen relations between the United States and the EU, but it would also boost European defence policy by giving it greater confidence among its pro-Atlantic partners (LAVALLÉE 2018). Paris's defence policy ambitions, however, remained ambivalent. France wanted both to remain independent and to have an effective European foreign and security policy. The latter was seen and considered important as a multiplier of strength and power. In 2008, defence policy was an important priority of the French EU Presidency, even if few tangible results were achieved (FEJÉRDY 2009: 94–95). President Sarkozy hoped that, as France, the EU would develop a long-term defence strategy and increase its autonomy in the international arena. On the initiative of Paris, an agreement was reached between several EU Member States to create a European air fleet, a multinational A400M unit and to ensure the interoperability of European maritime aviation. The French also tried – mostly unsuccessfully – to update the European Security Strategy in 2008, put forward a number of institutional proposals in 2011 with the other Weimar countries (Germany and Poland) (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2024a) and actively participated in the preparation of the December 2013 European Council meeting on defence. Nevertheless, France has learned its lessons and has invested less and less energy in strategic or institutional debates where it was clear that a consensual solution was unlikely to be found (DE FRANCE 2015). Paradoxically, Paris has adopted a more Anglo-Saxon approach in the early 2010s: gradual, pragmatic and very much focused on capabilities in the field of European defence policy. This has been compounded by the drift in Franco–German relations, particularly after the Libyan intervention.

However, Paris played an important role in the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011. It also took over the position of Secretary General of the EEAS in order to increase French influence and tried to become a key player in the institutional system during this period (FAURE 2014). Paris was actively involved in all new defence policy initiatives, although it had little real hope of making significant progress on the common security policy at EU level. In 2012, Hubert Védrine pointed out in his analysis for the new French President that European defence was still at an impasse (VÉDRINE 2012). Whenever attempts were made to give it a new impetus, political initiatives were blocked by military conservatism, industrial competition and lack of funding. The French leadership argued that, if there was some good will to revitalise European security policy, few concrete efforts had been made because of financial and internal political difficulties. In particular, Paris deplored the reluctance of European partners to join the French military action in the Sahel, despite the fact that the stabilisation of the region was seen as a key security issue for the Old Continent. France has undertaken military interventions in a number of places to help resolve crises that are of concern to it, but also to the European Union. In December 2013, for example, the international community called on France to help prevent massacres in the Central African Republic (Operation Sangaris). In 2014, France was again involved in the Daech offensive in Iraq, and in 2015, its troops were deployed in Syria as part of the coalition. Paris also sent its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the region as part of Operation Chammal. During François Hollande's presidency, Paris has constantly sought to promote cooperation at the level of the 28, in particular to ensure that France is not the only country to bear the costs of operations that are also in the interests of the European Union. Nevertheless of course, there was always the contradiction of France wanting to involve its partners while at the same time retaining a certain autonomy in the field of defence policy.

At EU level, 2015 was a significant turning point. That year, France was hit by a succession of attacks linked to Islamist terrorism. In February, the murders of the creators of the satirical newspaper "Charlie Hebdo", followed by the horrific series of attacks in Paris in November, shook Europe. On 13 November 2015, Article 42 of the Lisbon Treaty, the mutual protection and assistance clause, was activated for the first time. On the French side, there was a growing appreciation that further steps forward were needed in the area of common defence policy (LEGRAND 2015). Already in 2015, EU Member States put a noticeably greater emphasis on military spending. That year, EU countries spent €203 billion on defence, which was around the world's second most important budget, putting the EU second only to the United States. In 2016, with the strong support and partial initiative of Paris, the

European Council adopted the EU Global Strategy for Europe four days after the Brexit vote. This, as is well known, sets out the EU's strategic priorities and defence needs in the international context. Importantly, the document introduces the concept of strategic autonomy, underlining that the European Union should not be content with being a "soft power", but a full-fledged power, capable of autonomy and freedom of action. In his speech of 13 July 2016, the French President François Hollande particularly underlined France's commitment to a more effective European defence policy. He underlined that "it is up to Europeans to take care of their own security and to act autonomously wherever possible" (HOLLANDE 2016). Paris considered it important that not only budgetary efforts but also interoperability should be an essential aspect of the Union. There was also greater French support for military-industrial cooperation, although this remained controversial, as Paris envisioned moves in this direction primarily under French leadership.

On the French side, its commitment to strengthening the common European defence policy has become even more pronounced since 2017, when Emmanuel Macron took office as Head of State. In his famous Sorbonne speech (MACRON 2017) in September 2017, the President proposed that Europe should set up a common intervention force and have a common defence budget and a common doctrine of action. The first concrete step in these ambitious proposals was the signing by nine Member States on 25 June 2018 of a Memorandum of Understanding on the launch of a "European Intervention Initiative". This new enterprise is not part of the institutional framework of PESD, but Paris has given assurances that it will seek to maintain close links with PESD, and in particular with PESCO. Paris has supported all plans to strengthen European defence policy over the past decade. Most particularly, it has tried to move forward in this area together with Germany. This was also enshrined by the leaders of the two countries in the 2019 Aachen Agreement, and in the Franco-German Defence Council meetings held after 2017. In November 2017, the French joined the 22 other Member States that set up the ambitious European Defence Fund (EDF). The concrete inauguration took place in 2021. France is an important player in its creation, as well as in its use. For the period 2021–2027, the French want to make the most of the €7.9 billion managed by the fund, and until 2024 the French European Commissioner Thierry Breton had been working to this end, to some extent in the interests of France (PUGNET – BOURGERY-GONSE 2023). For Paris, the criteria for European support for arms production are not satisfactory, because they are not sufficiently strict and negotiations are still under way between the states concerned (PUGNET 2024). In particular, France has incorporated European defence policy in all its aspects. In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine made it even clearer to France that Europe's

security can be ensured primarily through its own military efforts. In 2022, the so-called *Antarès* naval and air operation was launched with European partners, which provided defence policy missions in the area from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. In the framework of the European Union, France supported the training of Ukrainian soldiers (EUMAM).

Defence policy was also one of the key topics during the French Presidency of the EU in 2022. In March 2022, in Versailles, France called for the development of a European defence strategy to strengthen the EU's common defence industrial base, to achieve greater strategic autonomy, to develop a European defence strategy in response to the Russian aggression, and to strengthen the initiatives for the joint arms procurement of Member States (EDIRPA) and European military production capabilities (ammunition and missile production, ASAP). The adoption of the so-called Strategic Compass in 2022 was considered a major success by the Parisian leadership, which finally took steps towards the adoption of a common military doctrine and a concrete roadmap up to 2030, also on the French impulse (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2024b).

France has also provided support through the European Peace Facility to 22 partners, including Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, and in Africa through the Gulf of Guinea Initiative for Defence and Security. The strengthening of the EU's capacity to defend contested strategic places, in particular the fight against hybrid threats and information manipulation, as well as the adoption of a space security and defence strategy, were also initiated by Paris. President Macron has also created the European Political Community (EPC), which also serves partly defence purposes indirectly, in the interests of greater geopolitical stability. Paris is also an active participant in counterterrorism missions. France is also an essential player in the fight against piracy at sea, including off the coast of Somalia (FRÉCON 2023). French participation in the EUNAVFOR *Aspides* operation, which ensures the protection of maritime trade in the Red Sea, is also self-evident. Without wishing to be exhaustive, it should also be mentioned here that, primarily in defence of European interests, France, although increasingly marginalised on the South Continent, is also trying to promote stability in Africa by providing financial resources, for example in the case of Rwanda (MACRON 2024).

In a speech at the Sorbonne on 25 April 2024, Emmanuel Macron called for the creation of "a credible European defence", capable of defending against even a single Russian attack, alongside NATO. The Head of State of France also raised the possibility that French nuclear weapons could even be used for European defence (QUENTIN 2024). This has caused much controversy, but it shows that France is fully committed to European defence policy.

EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY  
THROUGH FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

The expression “strategic autonomy” is associated with France. It was first mentioned in the so-called “Defence White Paper” published in 1994. In this document, drawn up by Marceau Long, Édouard Balladour and François Léotard, the term is used above all in the international context after the end of the Cold War, as part of the argument for the preservation of the French nuclear deterrent and as an autonomous national European defence policy objective, under NATO guarantees, assuring independence. Since 1972, France has regularly produced a strategic document covering defence and national security issues, taking into account the risks and threats facing the country and the global response to these challenges. From 1972 to 2013, four White Papers were published. The 2019–2025 military programming law is based on the Strategic Review of Defence and National Security submitted to the President of the Republic on 13 October 2017. Following the Covid-19 pandemic and in view of the complexity of the geostrategic situation, it seemed appropriate to update the strategic review in 2021. In 2013, this type of strategic analysis was published under the name “White Paper”, since 2017 it has been called “National Strategic Review”. In 2022, the last official document setting out this type of forward-looking defence objectives was produced. The concept of “strategic autonomy” has been recurrent in these documents since 1994.

The term, which has been common in French public life since the 1990s, first appeared at European level in 2013. It was then included in the final declaration of the European Council of 19 and 20 December, at the suggestion of France, among others. This document stated that

“Europe must have a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) to ensure the development and support of its defence capabilities, which will also enable it to increase its strategic autonomy and its capacity to act with its partners.”

At the time, the EU28 therefore saw the strengthening of Europe’s autonomy as a means of building more effective alliances, not denying them. But the French side wanted to go further. This was first voiced in September 2017 by the French President Emmanuel Macron, elected a few months earlier, who, in the famous Sorbonne speech, stressed, among other things, the need to develop a common defence strategy, despite the different sensitivities of the Member States in this area. Paris, therefore, underlined the need to bear in mind the need to create an

independent European defence capability. Macron's statement was made in the context of then U.S. President Donald Trump's threat to cut U.S. funding for NATO, but it went beyond that. This idea has remained a recurrent and important part of the French European discourse. In 2019, in his speech to ambassadors in defence of European civilisation, President Macron went so far as to talk about the importance of establishing European sovereignty, of which strategic autonomy is an inevitable part. Here, moreover, he also drew attention to the threat to the Union posed by the great power policy of the United States and China.

In November 2019, President Macron was even more explicit in an interview with *The Economist*, when he criticised NATO's loss of purpose and direction, calling it "brain dead" and underlining that he no longer believed European countries could rely on the United States for help. The French President thus indirectly stressed the importance of European strategic autonomy.

The outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020 has highlighted the significant dependence of EU Member States on China, not only for specific defence policy issues, but in many other areas that could pose a serious threat. The French side, for example, has been keen to stress the importance of keeping strategic industries in Europe and returning them there, as key factors for the continent's autonomy and, through it, its security. Macron has made this issue, the objective of strengthening Europe's sovereignty and its economic and strategic autonomy in the world, a key point on the agenda of the French Presidency of the European Union in 2022. In the French interpretation, the concept of "strategic autonomy" at European level is not only linked to defence issues in the strict sense, but goes beyond them, as it also sees a need to reduce dependence in other sectors. This is particularly true of the digital sector, but also of many other areas, and for Paris, trade, health and energy are also concerned by this issue, given the interdependence of the world's economies. Following this logic, the so-called "Strategic Compass" was adopted at EU level in 2022, on the initiative of France, as an ambitious action plan to strengthen the European Union's security and defence policy by 2030. In 2023, Macron had already said that France's approach to strategic autonomy had always been ambiguous. On the one hand, there has been a distrust of the French approach to U.S.-led NATO since De Gaulle. Paris fears a worst-case scenario, where Washington, as an ally, may not take its commitments to the defence of the Old Continent seriously, or may use its European military positions to advance its own interests. France is therefore thinking of preparing for such an undesirable turn of events under the heading of strategic autonomy.

At the same time, there is a more assertive consideration, which, for European and French interests, is also pursuing objectives that sometimes even compete with

NATO in order to achieve a much more autonomous defence and foreign policy margin. The latter can be seen, for example, in the idea of expanding the European defence industry to reduce its heavy dependence on U.S. arms.

It should also be noted that it is part of the traditional French strategic culture to define France's role, ambitions and objectives in global affairs in a way that often exceeds the country's capabilities. It is a well-known fact that Paris wishes to use the European Union, among other things, as a means to achieve its vision, even if achieving consensus among the 27 Member States in the field of security and defence seems to be a particularly uncomfortable road. It is no coincidence that Macron is thinking, first of all, of a narrower European cooperation, to which all member states can voluntarily subscribe later.

President Macron and a large part of the French political elite believe that Europe must be ready to defend itself autonomously by 2027 at the latest (BRUGIER-HAROCHE 2023). Despite the fact that the closer we get to this date, the less possible this seems, France is pushing to accelerate the cooperation it has already started in the face of major geopolitical challenges. However, Paris is often at odds with the French view of the confluence of national and European interests, which are not always exactly the same, particularly as the Member States' approach to the issue is far from uniform.

In Paris, they fear excessive U.S. exposure. The French are aware that Europe is currently unable to defend itself, but they are also wary of excessive U.S. dominance. The possible return of Donald Trump worries France because it fears that Europe will very soon be on its own and that the United States will no longer provide security guarantees. However, Paris is increasingly aware that, regardless of the November 2024 scenario, the United States intends to reduce its European defence commitment. As François Heisbourg, a prominent French analyst, points out in his analysis (HEISBOURG 2024).

According to France, there is no alternative to European defence cooperation and the realisation of strategic autonomy, because if this is not achieved, the EU could be destroyed. It is important to note, however, that the aim should be, first and foremost, to pool the military strength of the larger European Member States. Although there is, for example, a Weimar Triangle between Germany, France and Poland, it is difficult to reconcile their interests in the field of defence policy.

Of course, it is important to point out that the French elite is not entirely united. Internal tensions have increased significantly in France in recent years, leading to the strengthening of various radical political formations. President Macron's flight ahead after the 2024 European Parliament elections, when he called for early elections to the legislature, has further exacerbated these internal tensions. Today, France is

finding it harder to make its influence felt at European level, as different views on defence policy issues are emerging among the political elite. However, one idea is constantly present in all French political formations, namely that Europe needs to become more autonomous.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

France has thus traditionally been inescapable in the development of European defence policy, and indeed the driving force behind it. In fact, there is practically no initiative that it has not initiated or participated in over the last 80 years. Today, its political weight may well be in decline even within the EU, but it is still an important player as the only European power with a significant military force and nuclear weapons after the Brexit. In the traditional French conception, securing autonomy and seeking greater room for manoeuvre in strategic areas is essential to preserve sovereignty and assert its interests. For decades, France has periodically examined its geopolitical situation from a number of angles and has prepared a document to help it respond effectively to security challenges. In the French approach, it is important that this traditional defence policy approach is also applied at the European level on a broader scale, taking into account, where possible, Paris' key interests. France's leadership is aware that it cannot achieve the strategic autonomy goals it has set for itself on its own, and that it can only do so with the help of, and in cooperation with its neighbours and close alliances. It is not a question of Paris imposing a French approach and interests on its partners, but rather of a joint search for a common path, where the objective is the same: to guarantee Europe's security.

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