

Pragmatic and European: France sets new goals for a European defence policy

by Claudia Major and Christian Mölling

With his Revue Stratégique, President Macron has given France's defence policy a new direction. Instead of concentrating on the institutional framework of a European Union defence policy, Paris has placed pragmatic solutions and Europe's capacity to take action into the forefront. This has consequences for both Germany and Europe: Berlin should give a speedy and constructive answer to Paris.

On the 13th of October 2017, France published a new way forward for its defence policy: the Revue Stratégique. It explains how France sees its interests and ambitions in the world for the next five years of Macron's presidency, as well as the threats it perceives and the ways it will adapt its military instruments as a result.

The Revue Stratégique is also the basis for the next military planning law, which will, amongst other things, determine how the defence budget is to be spent. These are good reasons why other Europeans should take note of the Révue, especially Germany, as France is the country's most important partner in current attempts to build a common European defence.

The Revue Stratégique continues Emmanuel Macron's decidedly pro-European stance from the election campaign in a pragmatic manner. This direction was already apparent when, at the end of June 2017 in one of his first acts in office, Macron commissioned a group of security experts to compile a Revue Stratégique. The task of heading the group was given to a Euro-politician, Arnaud Danjean, who chaired the European Parliament Subcommittee on Security and Defence for five years.

Matching his reputation as an ambitious and impatient president, Macron, chose the format of a Revue Stratégique, which is faster than a traditional White Paper on

Defence. It took just three months for the findings to be made available. After Macron's carefully crafted speeches in Athens, Versailles and the Sorbonne, the Revue presents the formal highlight of his thoughts on the future French defence policy.

It is part of the nature of these documents that they comment on almost all aspects of defence policy. Therefore, it is not surprising that the document notes that threats – as well as the geopolitical sphere – have changed drastically since the last White Paper of Defence was published in 2013, and that jihadism is now posing a crucial threat.

But not only the French reading of current threats and challenges is becoming clearer as a result of the Revue; the same can be said about expectations and offers to partners. While France has maintained traditional positions such as the national autonomy for action and nuclear deterrence, Paris is opening up for European cooperation to a degree previously unknown. France is also becoming more pragmatic and is placing less importance on ideology. Three changes are particularly relevant for Germany and the EU partners:

1. Shifting from national to European autonomy

On a conceptual level, Macron has moved away from the concept of strategic autonomy on a purely national level, towards common European autonomy. He argues that France's sovereignty can be strengthened by greater European security.

This has enormous consequences: Until now, the organization of the armed forces and the defence industry has been designed to ensure it is capable of acting on a national basis, without the help of partners. However, the reality has long been different: the armed forces are overstretched, they can begin operations alone, but can't carry them on by themselves. France needs partners. Facing this reality opens up new opportunities to act for Paris and its partners. At the same time, France must now show that it can let go – that it can co-operate without dominating.

2. Focusing on pragmatic results instead of institutions

In addition to opening up to a European autonomy, Macron clearly focuses on results rather than institutions and processes in a European defence policy. Berlin has interpreted Macron's speeches to be a call for co-operation within the EU on defence matters - this would be well in line with Germany's preferences.

But in reality France wants pragmatic solutions instead of ideological arguments whether the EU or NATO offers the better institutional framework for co-operation. Macron speaks of Europe, not only of the EU. He focusses on results and the possibility that all those who are willing and capable to partake in military action can work together pragmatically. In this, it is secondary what framework is used.

At first, this is not new: France's uneasiness with NATO can still be felt and for a long time the EU was considered the better option. Now, however, France is open to all alliances: what matters is that co-operation produces results and is not only celebrated symbolically. This is also true for the widely acclaimed current EU initiatives, which Macron mentions. However, they are merely an option amongst many for him and do not stand in the centre of his considerations.

3. France's primary goal: Instant readiness in cooperation with partners

Pragmatism also directs Macron's vision of a new European intervention force that is to be assembled

depending on the requirements. European states that are willing and militarily capable should be able to work together pragmatically and ad hoc, without being constrained by the decision-making structures of the EU and NATO. With this "European Intervention Initiative" Macron wants to avoid the problem of other multinational formations, such as the long and complicated institutional decisions and the micro-contribution of some states which is symbolically valuable, but of little military use. Quite pragmatically, Paris is not striving for a new, standing formation, but rather a force that can be put together depending on the needs of a certain operation. Such a force can be deployed not only in the EU, but also in NATO, the United Nations, as well as the coalition of the willing.

This focus on immediate, modular co-operation may be seen as a result of the current overload and thus France's old need for direct assistance. But it does not sufficiently answer the problem that Europe's military capacity for action is not secured in the long term. Despite a large number of initiatives, and despite all the manifestations of states wanting to increase defence budgets, Europe is losing its capacity to act as the number of tanks and war ships, for instance, is dwindling.

The more France is now relying on its partners, the more it must be interested in their capabilities in the long term. This requires a significant change of mentality in Paris.

In contrast, the *Revue Stratégique* does not go much beyond the classical national approach in the areas of nuclear weapons and the defence industry. Nuclear weapons are at the heart of the French defence policy. They are closely linked to the idea of autonomy and the tasks of the armed forces, and they explain state participation in various defence companies. They are deeply rooted in the strategic thinking of France. Nevertheless, there are some signs that France is also bringing its understanding of nuclear weapons closer to that of other NATO partners.

However, the *Revue* remains vague when it comes to the defence industry. Contrary to the very clear understanding in the armaments sector that Germany and France reached at their summit on 13 July 2017, the *Revue Stratégique* is indecisive where the defence industry is concerned. France has, for some time, accepted that its national industrial base has no long-term sustainability. But, like Germany, it is unwilling to accept the consequences: it is not prepared to accept its dependence on other nations also in the industrial sector.

The tasks for Berlin

The French government has explicitly highlighted the importance of Germany as a partner, ahead of even the United Kingdom. But while Paris wants to take the issue of defence beyond the scope of the EU into a European-wide dimension, Berlin has kept up the aesthetics of EU institutions. This, because Germany sees defence in the EU as an issue of integration, not a security issue. The coalition agreement which needs to be negotiated has to find answers to France's questions and Paris' clear invitation for more and new European co-operation. To repeat old phrases ranging from a European army to more NATO

is not a satisfactory response. If Paris and Berlin reach an agreement, then both can go forward from 2018 with new impetus and bring other Europeans on board as they build a deployable European defence. Berlin should give a speedy and constructive answer to Paris.

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