



BULLETIN

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June Defence Summit: France Seeks to Add CSDP to the Core of the EU's Global Approach

Nathan Dufour

Pushed by a degraded security context both at home and abroad, France sees first and foremost the June European Council session on defence as an opportunity to consolidate the previously endorsed “small steps” approach to CSDP, in particular to support its own efforts to maintain its “strategic autonomy.”¹ Yet, the mixed results of this policy so far are leading France to engage more with its partners on re-introducing a political vision that could help push CSDP out of its muddy scrapes. Poland should build on this since it could bolster the EU's ownership in providing genuine solutions to crises in the neighbourhood.

Some 18 months later, the European Council this month will discuss the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but in a dramatically changed security context—one with a multitude of crises facing Europeans in their own neighbourhood and with a direct impact on their defence systems and internal security. While Russia's actions in Ukraine cause many to seek to strengthen NATO, France remains at the forefront of developments related to the “broader” southern neighbourhood. The scope and significance of this context might well encourage the country to slowly compromise on the re-introduction of a much-needed political vision for CSDP.

Ensuring Leadership in a Degraded Security Context. Using an unprecedented window of opportunity to play a leadership role in European security (with the U.S. shift away from Europe, UK restraint in these matters and budgetary constraints elsewhere), the country has notably embarked on its own “war on terrorism” that mixes defence and security-related aspects. The resulting continuum, as described in its 2013 “White Book on Defence and National Security,” is indeed now a tangible reality and one further subscribed to since January's terrorist attacks in Paris.

Director of French Military Intelligence Christophe Gomart said the most challenging element now is the ever-increasing continuity between the “enemy” being fought abroad and the one representing a threat at home. Besides hiring 2,600 additional staff to strengthen its domestic security apparatus, France's government deployed 10,000 soldiers to sensitive places all over the country in January under “Operation Sentinel.” It is now being turned into a 7,000 troop-strong long-term deployment, further stretching military capabilities to conduct overseas operations.

Indeed, France has significantly strengthened its “upstream” military and counter-intelligence activities, such as in the Middle East (Lebanon and Iraq) and in the Sahel-Saharan strip, a zone equivalent to the size of the European Union. Immediately following the completion of “Operation Serval,” in which 4,000 troops deployed to Mali fought militants with Al Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM), the next mission, “Operation Barkhane” and its 3,800 troops, picked up in August 2014. A thousand special forces units are also said to be very active in the region, tellingly by the hundreds of presumed jihadists killed or arrested since the beginning of the operations.

France sees its actions as a direct contribution to the EU's security as a whole, not least by tackling the spread and increasingly interconnected terrorist networks in the broader region (including in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria). The country is also a very active contributor to the U.S. military campaign in Iraq through “Operation Chammal” (800 troops, 12 fighter jets, and its only nuclear-aircraft carrier). Additionally,

¹ N. Dufour, “France's Intent at the December Defence Council: Opportunities for Poland,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 138 (591), 17 December 2013.

France's sights are now increasingly focused on Libya, which is seen as a new "safe haven" for ISIS-inspired jihadist groups as well as a prime engine of irregular immigration. Here, though, is an ideal situation in which support from the EU, backed by an adequate strategy and resources, appears essential to offsetting France's capability problems.

Sustaining "Strategic Autonomy." France's primary objective to maintain its so-called strategic autonomy in three areas—assessment, decision and action—and in three corresponding sets of capabilities—deterrence, intelligence, and power projection—seems more crucial to it than ever. As a result, French authorities have had a complex new round of budgetary manoeuvres in order to maintain its ambitious response.

In order to be able to maintain its out-of-area operations, given the prolonged "Operation Sentinel," President Francois Hollande brought forward a slightly upgraded version of its 2013 military multiannual financial framework to parliament in May. While France is not expected to meet the NATO's defence spending threshold of 2% of GDP anytime soon (now 1.5%), for the first time additional financial resources are in play instead of the usual trims, a change unforeseen before the January's shocking terrorist attacks.

Practically, France would commit an additional €3.8 billion in funding, upping the overall military budget from €158.61 billion to €162.41 billion for the upcoming five years. Most of it (€2.8 billion) will be used to finance a previously planned reduction in personnel, but which has been lowered from 34,000 to 15,250 units. In addition, €500 million will be dedicated to the urgent maintenance of military equipment. As explained by Gen. Pierre de Villiers, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, about 20% of the equipment returned from the anti-terrorist "Barkhane" mission has been lost to the harsh operational conditions. An additional €500 million will be devoted to new armament purchases (e.g., MQ-9 Reaper drones).

In order to reach long-term budgetary stability, some €6bn in "exceptional incomes" was turned into permanent credit lines. Also, France has benefited from an surge in arms exports, with an estimated €15 billion in 2015 alone, thanks to sales of its Rafale multi-role jets during the first half of the year and also FREMM frigates. However, this unexpected success could cause serious delays in domestic deliveries of such equipment to the military.

The June Summit. France seems to have renewed its political efforts to provide the EU with its own strategic autonomy, although on very French terms.

To emphasize that its actions abroad benefit all Member States, France seeks to embed the notion of yearly European summits on CSDP. Not only does it want a continuing commitment (following on from the 2013 European Council) to a pragmatic bottom-up revival of CSDP that offsets its own capability gaps, notably through military-to-military and industrial defence cooperation amongst Member States but it also now appears to be building on the willingness of some of its European allies (i.e., Poland, Germany) to revise the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) to give CSDP a core role in it.

Although France was reluctant to initiate this ESS revision, it is finally taking a leading role in the process that will officially assign tasks to EU High Representative and Commission Vice-President Federica Mogherini, but under the express condition that this debate does not hijack practical outcomes during the June summit.

Another tangible sign of France's changing approach was a joint letter delivered to Mogherini by the Foreign Affairs Ministers of the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany, Poland) in early April. This letter held out common ideas to whip up CSDP's core input to the EU's comprehensive responses to security issues. Among these, the partners highlighted the need for greater commitment and efficiency of EU capacity-building missions so regional organisations or countries may take on a growing share of their security challenges. The rationale is that it should lead the EU to better respond to the security-development nexus, notably by resorting to aid funding to finance local troops' basic equipment—a small but interesting step to help the EU "de-compartmentalise" CSDP missions/operations and other EU instruments. Furthermore, the Weimar ministers expect the June Summit to bring EU Battlegroups back to the centre of attention by considering them a "first entrance" instrument by default in upcoming operations. Finally, they express the wish that the EU would establish a perennial financial tool for research and technology funding in the defence sector and not only for dual-use technologies.

Opportunities for Poland and the Other Weimar States. France's renewed political activism is good news for Poland, which has long advocated for setting out a more political vision of CSDP. However, its efforts remain hesitant and practically instrumental. Poland needs to build on the recent strengthening of its political weight in Euro-Atlantic forums to ensure consolidation of both EU and NATO procedures and instruments to face the changing environment. It should use the political capital accumulated with France in recent years—recently highlighted by Poland's purchase of 50 multi-role Caracal helicopters from Airbus and France's decision to halt the Mistral deal with Russia—to further re-activate Weimar support to quickly develop a political vision on EU ownership of genuine solutions to crises in its neighbourhood. Considering the growing number of these crises, solutions such as the possibility of autonomous capability of command and control in EU-led operations could be re-activated. Despite the UK's refusal in 2011 to cooperate on such capability, the Weimar appears to be a powerful lever that could help move forward with the idea even with a smaller group of states. Far from undermining NATO military structures, this could result in an increased sense of responsibility among Europeans to further invest in their defence and security by easing the means for rapid responses to potential crises in which non-European NATO members may be indifferent or have a different interest altogether.