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## French defence policy in a time of uncertainties

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Besides the United States the EU is the only grouping of nations able to project its influence worldwide. Despite the current crisis, the EU remains a global economic superpower with the highest GNP worldwide when the various GNP of its members are combined. In the foreseeable future this situation will be preserved, allowing the Union to generate financial surpluses which can be used to back its policy of global influence based on diverse forms of “civilian” power with a central position in various international networks and a significant role in international institutions. Indeed, the EU is the single largest financial contributor to the UN system: at the end of the 2010 decade the EU provided for 38%

of the UN’s regular budget, for a significant amount of UN peacekeeping operations, and one-half of all UN member states’ contributions to UN funds and programs. EU member states are also signatories to almost all international treaties currently in force. In the last two decades, the EU has finalized the single market; established a single currency; created a zone without internal frontiers (“Schengen”); launched common defense, foreign and internal security policies; and expanded from twelve to 27 members. These are very positive developments in a globalised world where cooperation in trade, social development, environment preservation, etc. are the dominant value.

Even in defence matters, Europe does possess know-how and capabilities which do not impede fruitful cooperation and interoperability with the United States. With about 20% of the world's military spending, the EU is far ahead of China (6 to 5%), Russia (3%) or India (2%) in relation to other « big » countries. But precisely for the reason that the influence exerted by the EU is more “civilian” than “military”, the defence dimension of the EU has never had the priority over others aspects of the European project. Of course several reasons (historical, societal, diplomatic, etc.) explain the many difficulties met by the Europeans to further their cooperation in that field and the various ambiguities in the conduct of each EU country's defence affairs.

France shares with her EU's partners, and notably those members of the Eurozone, the dire effects of the financial and economic crisis. The debt issue, in conjunction with economic stagnation, will affect public spending and, notably, defence expenditure. However, France retains particularities in terms of a national consensus on defence, in terms of prominence of the executive power vis-à-vis the Parliament, to contain the extent of the likely reduction of the defence budget in order to preserve the current coherence of the French military model.

### **France's defence organisation and cooperation with NATO's countries**

Probably one of the key and original characteristic of this model remains that strategic affairs and defence are deeply embedded into the power of the French State. Even the defence industry is closely linked to the State's nomenclature, including privatised firms, whose leaders are by and large selected from Grandes Ecoles (*Ecole polytechnique* dubbed as l'X and *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, ENA), as are their counterparts in politics and the banking system. In addition, the State remains a key purveyor of investments in high tech firms and notably those working in armament development and production. Those many connections serve as a hedge against drastic reductions of the format of those industries. Such realities bear heavily upon collaborative projects in the framework of NATO which are US lead and often seen as a potential risk to national and European industries.

In the military domains the French defence organisation, whatever its limits, has been organised to be efficient and to maintain the coherence of the French defence posture. The Executive (the President of the Republic) is the head of the armed forces according to the constitution.

He provides guidance (subsequently agreed on by the Parliament) on the overall strategy and military organisation. He carefully controls their execution through his military staff at the Elysée palace and directs their implementation through the chairing of the high council on defence (Conseil de défense). He particularly cares about maintaining autonomy of action in key domains, respecting commitments to alliances (EU, NATO, out of areas agreements such as those with some African countries or Abu Dhabi) and coherence of the French defence posture. This precise stature gives the French head of State a wide margin of action who can decide to commit French forces without prior acquiescence from the Parliament even if, debates are, later, organized where parliamentarians from the National Assembly and the Senate are discussing the rationale and the scope of the military operation, sometimes without any vote following the debates. Such debates occur when the issue is involving a certain amount of forces and allies. Otherwise concerning “small” operations in Africa, the Parliament is rarely consulted. For example, this was the case for operation Epervier in Chad which has been in place since 1986 or operation Boali in the Central African Republic (since 2002) where French forces contribute actively to the stability of these countries in the heart of Africa. Operation Boali provides a good example of the functioning of the French processes to commit forces in urgency. In 2007 a small detachment of French forces, based in Birao, near the Sudanese border, was attacked and encircled by an important group of rebels. If Birao had fallen, there would have been a big risk of destabilization in Chad and subsequently in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Elysée palace military headquarters was immediately warned of the situation and, after the president's approval, ordered the EMA (*Etat-Major des Armées*) to take the appropriate measure in air dropping parachutists flying from Gabon and Djibouti to intervene as a backup force. The French chain of command from the political decision to the actual use of force is probably unique among Western democracies and it continues to give a significant capacity of reactivity to the French president. In his tasks as commander in chief, the head of state is supported by diverse structures to implement his decisions. Two are noteworthy. The first one is the general staff (*Etat-major des Armées* – EMA) who conducts forces in actions, plans operations and is in charge of training the forces. The second one is the defence industry directorate (*Direction Générale de l'Armement* – DGA) who oversees the elaboration and oversee the production of de-

fence equipment and is a guarantor, in conjunction with EMA, of the coherence of the French defence architecture. Coherence means that general functions are assigned to the military.

The French defence organization remains, thus, highly centralised. It is built around the pre-eminence of the president of the Republic, commander in chief, from whom EMA and DGA receive presidential guidance to maintain autonomy of action in key domains, ability to respect commitments to alliances (EU, NATO, out of areas agreements such as those with some African countries or Abu Dhabi) and coherence of the French defence posture. Such an organization, although in some aspects relatively cumbersome, permits consistency and long term planning – protecting French armed forces from hasty cuts that may lead to incoherence in the French military posture.

### **Conventional forces**

Conventional forces have their role and structure defined in large part by three key tasks enunciated in the “2008 White Book on Defence” which will certainly be maintained under the leadership of president Hollande: prevention, protection and projection. For each component (Air, Land and Sea) an adequate command structure for engagement at the operational level exists and each is NATO certified. This certification also includes Special Forces. This certification is important in the sense that it signifies having capabilities to enter first on a theatre of operation. This remains a key requirement in order to maintain autonomy of decision as well as in the ability to develop cooperation with major allies such as the US, Great-Britain or Germany. France participates with these countries in the MIC (Multinational Interoperability Council) where complex command structures and new modes of operation are tested in common. French participation in the MIC dates back to the early 2000s. The development of the MIC, although not highly publicised – probably because of the complexity and the technicality of the works being done – also signifies a relative neglect with regards to NATO.

The decrease in the European defence budgets and its potential implications are becoming a recurring theme for French officials. The French Chief of Staff, Admiral Edouard Guillaud, mentioned, when testifying at the National Assembly, early January 2012, on the next defence budget, that, between 2001 and 2010 defence spending increased by 80% in the USA and 70% in East Asia, while it increased only by 4% in Europe

whose share in world spending in defence has fallen down from 29 to 20%. Politically, this evolution justifies for the French the transfer to the MIC of the experimenting and planning of future complex military operations. However, NATO retains its role as provider of proven command structures and of processes to enhance interoperability among allies. For the French, the EU defence perspectives are far from being ignored in that scheme, once the dynamic of closer financial, banking and fiscal harmonization will start again, defence will follow. Then the benefit of NATO’s heritage as well as the knowhow developed at MIC will be by and large transferred to the EU as a military actor when and if the EU under one form or another develops its own defence policy.

In the meantime the French have to maintain coherent, well trained conventional forces. In 2011 these forces have been engaged for actual military operations in Kosovo, Ivory Coast, the Sahel region, Lebanon, Libya, the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan. As a whole, these operations amounted to around € 1,3 Bn for 2011.

### **The structuring effect of nuclear deterrence on French defence policy**

The reduced level of immediate threat to Europe does not equate to the absence of any threat, hence the strong reaffirmation in the NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon of the role of nuclear deterrence in the defence of the allies. France is particularly sensitive on this issue. Besides historical reasons, nuclear deterrence has become the central component of French security policy. Having reduced the size of its nuclear forces in the last two decades Paris is determined to maintain a robust nuclear posture benefiting internally of a large political consensus. President François Hollande, during his electoral campaign conspicuously indicated, to its allies from the green party (EEVL – *Europe Ecologie les Verts*) that nuclear deterrence will continue to be the backbone of France’s military posture. Indeed nuclear deterrence has kept for the French its relevance. Former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, enunciated in 2008 the role of deterrence for France in full continuity with his predecessors: to preserve France from aggression against its vital interest; preserve France’s independence and strategic autonomy; to guarantee the ability of a limited nuclear warning shot against any adversary who may misread the delineation of French vital interest; to conceive and built in total national autonomy

the necessary tools for possessing a credible nuclear deterrence; to plan and execute strategic strike. The place and role of nuclear deterrence explains that a significant part of the defence budget (26% of the equipment budget, i.e. € 3,7 Bn) is allotted to deterrence.

With approximately 300 operational warheads, France has reached what is considered as proper level of sufficiency. These capabilities are split into two components: four SSBN of a new generation are carrying each 16 M51 missiles with an approximate range of 9 000 km carrying 6 MIRVs of about 100 kt each and penetration aids; 2 squadrons of *Rafale* mod.3 fighter-bombers are carrying a supersonic cruise missile (ASMP-A) with a 100/300 kt warhead. The technological and industrial capacities that lead to develop and built these nuclear components have, in fact, give France a special position within NATO. A fact barely understood among most of NATO's allies – with the exception of the UK and the USA.

Indeed the control of nuclear weapons is not in itself enough to explain that situation. The issue here is about possessing and maintaining a specific technological and industrial base in the domain of nuclear weapons as well as well some key intelligence assets notably space based. Both provide strategic benefits and open the way to bilateral cooperation which go far beyond their initial purpose in bringing strategic and political values. Numerous examples can support this assertion. The military nuclear R&D complex is central to explore new domains related notably to nuclear simulation. Simulation has become a priority after France renounced, with the others nuclear powers part of the TNP, to nuclear testing. Billions of euros have been spent on these programs in the last decade, they brought results and many strategic sides effects with political consequences. Among the many simulation processes built one can mention the cooperation on an equal footing between the French Atomic establishment (CEA-DAM: *Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique-Direction des Applications Militaires*) with its US equivalent to design and built, in each country, a highly sophisticated Laser, the *Laser Méga Joule* having been built near Bordeaux, in southern France and its US equivalent the National Ignition Facility at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the US. The cooperation carried not only the expected technological advantages but also led to an agreement between France and Great-Britain on nuclear issues signed in December 2010 at Lancaster House.

## **The geopolitical and geostrategic context of French defence policy**

The NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon in 2010 reaffirmed the military nature of the Atlantic alliance and its primary responsibility to protect the population and the territory of its members. This has been a long-lasting objective of the Alliance as stated in the Washington treaty's article 5. Such positive reaffirmation of the indivisibility of allies' security confirmed the enduring strength of the link binding them together; it did not, however, add new supplementary tasks for the Western alliance. In addition, the disappearance of direct military threats to the European area lessened the practical implication of this traditional goal of the alliance. At the same time, the complexity and the great fluidity of the international scene have significantly reduced the ability of the Atlantic alliance to provide solutions to the many challenges confronting the Western allies.

On the European continent perspective of conflicts has almost vanished. Although a difficult partner still haunted by a Cold war mind-set, Russia, with the exception of its significant nuclear forces, can no longer be considered as a threat. From a military standpoint, the bulk of Russian military forces have been significantly reduced in quantity and in quality. They are generally lacking high tech equipment in number and conventional forces, with the exception of selected units for rapid intervention, are, in terms of training, lagging behind the professionalism of most western forces. Lastly, deployment of Russian military units, particularly for ground forces, is no longer oriented towards Western Europe. If one looks, for example, at the disposition of the eleven existing Russian army corps, nine are located far away from the western borders of Russia on a line spreading from the Caucasus to the Far East. The NSC confirmed the strategic character of the partnership the Alliance is seeking to develop with Moscow. If the Kremlin may poses difficulties with its rather controversial governance organization, France tends to consider Russia as an essential component of any future security architecture of Europe. Despite the fact that scepticism remains about democratic life in Russia, the French have not, with few exceptions, significant grievances concerning Russia that still haunt relations with Moscow – notably in the Baltic area or in Eastern Europe where criticism was strong when Paris sold two Mistral class helicopter carrier to the Russians.

## **The NATO dimension: malaise and necessity**

The Chicago summit of May 2012 had in many ways confirmed the slow decline of the NATO's military organization and the diminished place it has for the US who, nevertheless continues to consider the organization as the main channel of their political influence throughout Europe. Seen from Washington, the symptoms of the relative decline of NATO are numerous, however largely camouflaged by an active policy of lobbying and communication. One can only be amused by the use of the term "historic" to describe the NATO's Lisbon summit of November 2010 that was said to be "the most important in NATO's history". NATO's Chicago summit-the city of President Obama - was the first to be held in the United States in 13 years, having been initially billed as an "implementation summit" at which the alliance's political leaders assessed the evolution of the ambitious plan agreed on in Lisbon to speed up NATO's efforts to adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its purpose was, also, to back President Obama's stature in the presidential campaign. However, behind the scene, the withdrawal of American forces from Europe is amplified by the repatriation of two US Army brigades (both stationed in Germany: the 170<sup>th</sup> in Baumholder and 171<sup>th</sup> in Grafenwöhr). The strength of the US Army in Europe will amount to 30 000 men against 270 000 25 years ago. In total, the US will maintain around 70 000 personnel in Europe. The reasons of such withdrawal are various and range from US internal political reasons to the shift of US national interest.

Budgetary pressures are becoming strong with a Federal budget deficit almost out of control. If budgetary constrains provoke an increased irritation in Washington about NATO's allies, the apparition of a new generation of American leaders, far less inclined to look towards Europe as did their predecessors, may accentuate the relative distance that the American are taking with NATO. The reassessment of US national interests is linked to the growing importance of Asia in the world game. It is striking to see that, in the strategic guidance on U.S. defence priorities for the years ahead, released by President Barack Obama in early January 2012, the word Asia appeared nine times, while NATO makes just two appearances. These shifts, also, correspond to a transformation in the way the Americans intend to use force. The lessons of the last 15 years led them to curtail, in the future, military engagements about situations which are not linked to major US interests. Accordingly, if they are willing to continue supporting their allies in the

framework of ad hoc coalitions they will do it as "off-shore balancer" as they did during the operations against Gaddafi's Libya. They will offer logistical support and intelligence but will refrain from committing active forces participating to the kinetic part of the operations.

## **Conclusion**

Today NATO is under the pressure of different forces and requirement which are politically disruptive. On one hand one finds small countries. The Baltic States are obsessed with a resurgence of a possible Russian military threat and are ready to defer their security to requirements defined by the US in exchange of the protection offered by Washington. The Scandinavian countries still have the Russian factor in mind due to their geostrategic proximity to Russia. But they are in a position where it is probably easier to compromise with America than to choose the path of any form of European defence policy that will compel them to work and cooperate with a country like France which they do not understand and to which they express a certain form of mistrust and suspicion. Eastern and Central European countries of NATO are mostly in the same position as the Baltic States with the exception of Poland whose commitments to defense is serious, although with little to offer in terms of budgetary and military capabilities. However, Poland has shown a real commitment to enhancing European defence perspectives and it is worth mentioning that in the framework of the Weimar Triangle, Warsaw associated with Berlin and Paris to plea for the creation of a European strategic headquarters (OHQ). Berlin itself is modernizing its forces in a very interesting manner although the internal political condition existing in Germany makes Berlin largely absent when committing forces out of area as witnessed during the Libyan campaign of spring/summer 2011. The UK is in a state of disarray regarding its defence policy. Having one of the best militaries in Europe, the British defence posture has been dramatically impacted by the deflationary effect of the 2010's SDR which have been translated by internal incoherence. The UK shares with France the will to remain a key player in defence but is currently haunted by a kind of existential crisis which resurrect new appeal towards a rapprochement with its former associate within the Commonwealth as if it represented a serious opportunity. This crisis may endure as long as they will have not cut the Gordian knot about their relations with Europe leaving their partners uncertain about the degree to which further cooperation with London.

France is, as many other European countries, suffering from the financial and economic crisis. Temptation to retreat to oneself exists. However, as for the British, this does not represent a promising opportunity. There remains the option of continuing a traditional ambiguous

strategy: working for preserving a certain degree of autonomy, acting as a fair player in NATO to wait for the favorable moment to speed up a genuine European defence policy while developing ad hoc bilateral cooperation with the American ally.◇

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*Assertions and opinions in this paper  
are solely those of the author.*

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