

Franco-German Security and Defence Cooperation: Stepping Stone or Stumbling Block for European Strategic Autonomy?

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The *Treaty of Aachen* signed by France and Germany on the 56th anniversary of the *Elysée Treaty* on 22 January 2019 provides an important marker to reflect on the state of the bilateral relationship, in particular as it concerns security and defence cooperation.¹ While the ambition in 1963 was reconciliation, in 2019, the Aachen treaty was meant strengthen convergence between France and Germany, so that Paris and Berlin would be able to work together for a stronger Europe.

In defence matters, changes in the international security environment have brought the latent question of Europe's role as a security actor to the forefront. Greater strategic autonomy for the European Union (EU) has been proposed by both French and German political leaders. However, while there is political will in Paris and Berlin to pursue shared ambitions, in reality, different strategic cultures often provide obstacles to meaningful cooperation. Given these differences, it remains an open question whether or not Franco-German security and defence cooperation is likely to be a stepping-stone on the path to greater European strategic autonomy.

While the importance of the Franco-German partnership should not be underestimated, it is prudent to acknowledge the stumbling blocks that litter the path to meaningful action. No other bilateral partnership in the EU can combine similar resources, capability and industrial capacity. In other words, France and Germany are core players, because if they agree on a course of action, they can actually move the debate generate political change for the continent at large. Second, France and Germany are different enough in their political disposition and in their preferences, that once the two form a shared position, most other EU member states will be able to associate themselves with that position. France and Germany often need to compromise to move forward and that resulting compromise satisfies many other political players. Third, the bilateral relationship is highly institutionalised and the web of government-to-government interactions is dense. An established rhythm will bring together chiefs of defence, defence ministers, foreign ministers, heads of government and heads of state. There are a flurry of lower level coordination meetings, trying to identify action items, monitoring their implementation and reporting on progress. All of this repeated interaction should build trust, understanding and momentum over time.

And yet: the reality is that the soaring rhetoric that both French and German leaders sometimes employ, often does not deliver significant output in security and defence. The expectations are high, but time and again enthusiasm turns into frustration at the sight of meagre results and the effort required to get there. The central reason for this conundrum are different strategic cultures in France and Germany.

For Germany, the phrase most widely used to describe its national preferences is the so-called culture of restraint. It implies a deeply rooted national preference for civilian over military instruments and an inclination to look for multilateral solutions as the default. Germany's decision-making structures reflect this strategic culture. For example, when it comes to the parliamentary involvement in decisions to deploy armed force abroad or with regards to the role of the Chancellor, who, as the head of government, has the power to set overall guidelines for policy but has only limited control over the agenda pursued by cabinet ministers when it comes to their own portfolio.

For France, the picture looks rather different. The armed forces are an accepted and valued part of the foreign policy toolbox and their employment in pursuit of the national interest is much less controversial than it is in Germany. Political leaders in France have a much more pronounced concept of national sovereignty in security and defence compared to their German counterparts. For France, cooperation with others is often an attempt to try and reconcile changing international circumstances with national ambitions. To a degree the constitutional and institutional set up in France reflect these preferences.

In France, strategic autonomy it is an established part of French discourse, in government, in the analytical community and possibly even the interested public. It refers to independence and sovereignty and engaging in cooperation with others when it serves these overarching goals. More often than not, it concerns itself with the ability to act independent of others, such as the United States. France's view of European strategic autonomy is thus coherent with France's strategic culture.

Germany, in turn, struggled to embrace any notion of strategic autonomy. It was only when circumstances around Germany changed, notably with the policies of the Trump administration in the US, that the Merkel government accepted it needed to adjust course. In 2018, foreign minister Heiko Maas floated the idea of an alliance of multilateralists, a grouping that would take corrective measures when the US violates red lines and ends up undermining the liberal international order (France has since joined this project).²

Most students of Franco-German security and defence cooperation are quite comfortable to admit that Germany and France do not have to be alike in order to succeed. A complementary set of preferences should be enough to achieve coherence. Stanley Hoffmann's term of a "balance of imbalances", sitting at the core of Franco-German cooperation comes to mind.³ The imbalance that matters most in this sense was that whereas Germany was economically stronger, France was superior in military terms.

Naturally, a shining symbol of Franco-German cooperation in this area is the Franco-German Brigade, which has become operational at the end of the 1980s. Several French and German commanders of the Franco-German Brigade insisted that it would be ready to fight if called upon. Previous deployments of this formation have effectively only tested parts and smaller

elements of the brigade, including in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Baltic and Mali. Many fairly prosaic interoperability challenges persist. The German units in the brigade use different guns and different radios from the French units, a fact that creates challenges when working together on a day-by-day basis. Sometimes, like in Mali, German and French soldiers from the brigade deploy to the same country but carry out very different tasks on that deployment.

For France, the Mali narrative is linked to counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. There is an articulated threat perception and part of the answer the French government puts forward to meet the threat are military deployments. For Germany, being in Mali is primarily perceived to be a gesture of support for France. In Berlin, arguments linked to how instability in Mali might have security implications for Germany itself are secondary. Germany's threat perception is so muted that the threat itself would not carry the weight of a more robust engagement. For a partner like France, the misalignment with Germany on military operations will very often be around the question of what to achieve and how to justify the deployment, less about the general question of whether to deploy in the first place.

Applying that same logic of muscular symbolism to the Franco-German Brigade it seems clear that Germany sees the existence of such a formation as a useful thing in itself. Paris is much more likely to question whether the Brigade can actually be used according to its capacity. In a way, Germany seems still stuck in the logic of reconciliation, whereas, at least on this point, France seems willing to push for convergence.

The resulting message regarding the utility of bi- or multinational formed units for European security is decidedly mixed. The EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, PESCO, launched with much fanfare at the end of 2017, suggests a similar problem. At this point in time, the 25 participating EU member states have launched some 34 projects, even though not all of the projects have actually started, much less produced success.⁴

France and Germany jointly pushed for the launch of PESCO, but did so from diametrically opposed positions. France, going back to the original idea of PESCO as enshrined in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, was interested in setting up an *avant-garde* of EU member states based on entry criteria and measurable commitment. Germany, wanted the opposite. As broad as possible – the more EU member states participated in PESCO the better, even if the correlate was that criteria for participation and metrics to measure commitment would need to be vague to enable this. France wanted cooperation to be ambitious, Germany wanted cooperation to be inclusive. Both are legitimate objectives of government policy. For France, generating output in form of improved European military capabilities was central. For Germany, it was to create positive momentum for European integration in the area of security and defence. But can we have a PESCO that is ambitious and inclusive? There is at least a very real risk that this Franco-German initiative produces at best marginal improvements to European capability. At worst, PESCO simply becomes a matter of irritation among Europeans and across the Atlantic without output that would justify this cost.⁵

A much more ambitious bilateral agenda item are the plans for joint defence equipment development and procurement, hammered out between the French and German

governments in 2017 and 2018. These plans foresee that France and Germany will undertake to work together on future combat air systems, most likely to include a next generation fighter aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles and cruise missiles. Plans are afoot for a new Major Ground Combat System that would replace the current main battle tank fleets in France and in Germany. In addition, France and Germany want to work together on a future artillery system, and collaborate on military satellite as maritime patrol aircrafts.

The division of labour foresees that France would lead on the future combat air programme whereas Germany would be the lead nation for the land systems under development. With this lead-nation status does presumable come the ability to decide on industrial leadership of the programmes as well. France, quite reasonably from a national point of view, is arguing that the next generation combat aircraft needs to be able to carry nuclear weapons and needs to be able to operate aboard an aircraft carrier. France also seems to think that the future of this yet to be developed aircraft depends on Germany not buying any F-35 combat aircraft from the US to replace Germany's ageing fleet of *Tornado* aircraft. If Germany had the F-35 in its inventory, so the logic, the need to produce a new aircraft together with France for an in-service date of around 2040 would be less strong. For now that argument – essentially a defence industrial aspect of strategic autonomy – seems to have some support with the German ministry of defence. Germany announced at the end of January 2019 that the F-35 had been eliminated from the German competition to replace the *Tornado*.⁶

Nevertheless, the challenge will be to agree on a common design that leaves enough flexibility to allow for national priorities, accepting that these will be different. On this particular point, the history of Franco-German collaboration is not a happy one. France was originally part of the *Eurofighter* consortium but decided to leave in the 1980s to build the *Rafale* combat aircraft. In part, this decision to pursue a national solution, rather than a European one, was driven by disagreement on the military requirements for the aircraft and in part to make sure France's state-owned industry received high-value contracts.

Ultimately, the result of these decisions were multiple fighter jet production lines in Europe and European products that are competing with each other. Governments at the time were willing – and arguably able – to finance industrial overcapacity. This is not the case anymore and thus the new Franco-German commitment to jointly develop and build a combat aircraft is notable. France insists that this cooperation should remain a bilateral one until the concepts have been defined and agreed. Germany for its part seems a lot more willing to consider early participation, in particular of the United Kingdom, to access skills, knowledge and funding.

The defence industrial relationship is the area that is most clearly characterised by mistrust and misunderstandings between France and Germany. From the point of view of many officials in Berlin, defence industrial collaboration with France always carries the danger that the direct influence of the French governments leaves French industry in a stronger position. Many in industry and some in government in Berlin fear an inadvertent skills and know-how transfer to France as a by-product of cooperation. From a French point of view, creating joint defence industrial projects with the Germans is problematic, because German political sensitivities can be expected to put strict limits on the international defence export potential of such projects.

The domestic political context on the question of arms export control is very different. In a situation where Germany is looking for partners and France is looking for clients, will France and Germany be able to be constructive players in a European context? The harmonisation of arms export control policies shows that this is a difficult field. Germany, at least under the current coalition government is set to become, if anything, even more restrictive when it comes to approving arms exports. The French government does not share this desire and has even suggested that industry is switching to a 'German-free' approach, trying to avoid German components in weapons systems to avoid the risk of German arms export restrictions.⁷ It is hard to see how Franco-German defence industrial cooperation on major systems can develop a strong European pull and contribute to strategic autonomy until these misgivings are resolved among the two.

Currently, the governments of France and Germany are not making their case well – too deeply embedded are the routines, rituals, and experiences of the past. The amount of work necessary to align often disparate French and German positions precludes early involvement of others, because more voices in the mix would make Franco-German agreement yet more difficult. There is another enduring issue that has plagued the bilateral relationship. France needs to work its economic competitiveness. Germany needs to work on its defence policy and willingness to take on practical, not just moral responsibility. This is not new – it describes the original balance of imbalances mentioned above. Neither France nor Germany have addressed their respective weaknesses in a systematic and sustainable manner. Perhaps it is even worse and both countries have also allowed their respective strengths to be undermined. France is militarily stretched and already relies on British transport and other support for some of the missions in Africa. Germany has neglected its own economic and social homework in a misguided sense of strength and a political commitment to delivering budget surpluses.

In security and defence, the Franco-German duo produces a lot of symbolism, some progress and a number of missed opportunities. To recognise Franco-German security and defence cooperation for what it is means to acknowledge that it is sometimes a stepping-stone and sometimes an obstacle. Most often it is simply a building block for European efforts to strengthen the capacity for autonomous action.

¹ The treaty document is available at: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/france-and-germany/franco-german-treaty-of-aachen/> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

² Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: Eine Allianz der Multilateralisten, 3 April 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/berlin-und-paris-gruenden-allianz-der-multilateralisten-16121823.html> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

³ Stanley Hoffmann: French Dilemmas and Strategies in the New Europe. Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Working Paper Series No 38, 1992, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/stanleyhoffmann/files/ces_38.pdf (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁴ Yvonne-Stefania Efstathiou, Conor Hannigan, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau: Keeping the momentum in European defence collaboration: An early assessment of PESCO implementation, IISS, 14 May 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2019/05/pesco> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁵ Guy Chazan and Michael Peel: US warns against European joint military project, in: Financial Times, 15 May 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/ad16ce08-763b-11e9-bbad-7c18c0ea0201> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁶ Sebastian Sprenger: Germany officially knocks F-35 out of competition to replace Tornado, in: Defense News, 31 January 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/01/31/germany-officially-knocks-f-35-out-of-competition-to-replace-tornado/> (last accessed 15 May 2019).

⁷ Anne-Marie Descôtes: Vom 'German-free' zum gegenseitigen Vertrauen, Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik 7/2019, BAKS, Berlin, https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier_sicherheitspolitik_2019_7.pdf (last accessed 15 May 2019).