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THE IMPLICATIONS OF STRENGTHENING 'EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY' AND ITS DEFENCE CAPABILITIES FOR THE GROWTH OF FRANCE'S GLOBAL IMPORTANCE AND POWER

ABSTRACT

France occupies a key position in Europe's defence and security structures and the promotion of a 'Europe of defence' has been one of the political priorities of French leaders since the late 1990s. One of the key initiatives strengthening multilateral military cooperation in the EU is the *European Intervention Initiative* (EI2), which aims to instil a French strategic culture among Europeans. The aim of the study is to show that France is 'shifting' its power ambitions to Europe, which is to become a significant actor in international relations, equipped with mechanisms of political representation and credible military forces, enabling it to conduct a global-scale independent policy. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the strengthening of 'European strategic autonomy' serves to preserve a multipolar world, in which France will play the role of Europe's 'leader,' and is expected to be conducive to the development of defence industry cooperation.

Keywords: France, strengthening, '*Europe of defence*,' 'European strategic autonomy'

INTRODUCTION

The main objective and research purpose of this study is to understand France's role as one of the key promoters in strengthening European defence and to explain to what extent French interests are reflected in 'European strategic autonomy.' France, which has a key position in Europe's defence and security structures, has been pursuing the development of a European defence policy for three decades. Military policy is an important instrument for rebuilding the prestige and superpower status that France lost due to defeats in the colonial wars in Indochina and North Africa. The restoration of France's former status and world prominence was a key foreign policy objective of General Charles de Gaulle and all subsequent presidents of the Fifth Republic, embodied in a fundamental principle of strategic doctrine – autonomy of decision (*liberté d'action*) based on a system of nuclear deterrence.

France's European security and defence policy has been the subject of many studies, especially from an historical perspective.¹ Most commentators emphasise that the aim of de Gaulle's policy was to increase France's position as a third actor in the bipolar balance of power during the Cold War period.² Other analysts come to similar conclusions, noting, however, France's opposition to US hegemony, reflecting in some way the bitterness of losing its greatness.³ What is lacking, however, is a solid analysis of the impact of France on the autonomization process of a 'Europe of defence,' both from the community (PESCO) and intergovernmental (EI2) perspective and in the context of the relationship with NATO.

The study's analysis includes an examination of the reasons for France to develop 'European strategic autonomy.' To what extent does Paris succeed in 'inscribing' France's strategic autonomy within the framework of 'European defence autonomy?'⁴ (Deschaux-Dutard 2019). What interests drive this? To what extent does France see NATO as a central pillar of collective defence?⁵ Examining these aspects from a French perspective is of paramount importance for an overall understanding of the evolution of defence

¹ R. Frank, "La France et son rapport au monde au XXième siècle," *Politique étrangère*, no. 3-4 (2000), pp. 827-839; F. Bozo, *La politique étrangère de la France depuis 1945*, Flammarion 2019; M. Lefebvre, *La politique étrangère de la France*, Humensis 2019.

² F. Charillon, *La politique étrangère de la France de la fin de la guerre froide au printemps arabe*, Paris 2011.

³ L. Ray, "Anti-Americanism and left-right ideology in France," *French Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2011), pp. 201-221.

⁴ D. Deschaux-Dutard, "La coopération militaire franco-allemande et la défense européenne après le Brexit," *Les Champs de Mars*, no. 32 (2019), pp. 63-64; D. Deschaux-Dutard, "La France, l'Allemagne et la défense européenne: une locomotive symbolique plus qu'opérationnelle?" *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 821 (2019), pp. 37-42.

⁵ M. Vaisse, C. Sebag, "France and NATO: An History," *Politique étrangère*, no. 5 (2009), pp. 139-150; L. Ratti, "Stepping up to Reintegration: French Security Policy Between Transatlantic and European Defence During and After the Cold War," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2014), pp. 367-378.

policy and security structures in Europe. The study identifies factors explaining France's motives for developing a 'Europe of defence,' based on a hypothesis that 'European strategic autonomy' serves to strengthen France's political leadership in Europe and internationally, as well as economic benefits in the form of protection and promotion of the French arms industry. The first part provides a historical background to French ideas for strengthening European defence, first within NATO and later the EU.⁶ After examining the historical context, in the second part, the analysis focuses on exploring recent French initiatives to promote *European autonomy and strategic culture*⁷ due to the numerous initiatives and activities of President Emmanuel Macron in this regard.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF *L'EXCEPTION FRANÇAISE* IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY FRAMEWORK

From the idea of building the European 'Third Force' to strengthening the European pillar of NATO

After the Second World War, France lost its position as a European and later colonial empire, yet 'global prominence' remained a feature of its national doctrine. De Gaulle returned to power in 1958 to make France 'great' again: the new Fifth Republic was to have greatness (*grandeur*) and rank (*status*) and would shine (*rayonner*) its civilising mission around the globe.⁸ The restoration of France's former role and global position was a key foreign policy objective of General Charles de Gaulle, who believed that the Greatness (*La Grandeur*) of France meant the ability to defend its national interests and not be subordinate to those of others. The development of its own capabilities and the desire to build a defence independent from NATO (autonomy of decisions and independent military capabilities) became the basis of French security doctrine and a feature of French foreign policy.⁹

President Charles de Gaulle believed that if France were to play a proper role on the world stage, defence policy had to be as independent as possible from the US security guarantees. The detonation of the first nuclear bomb (*Gerboise Bleue*) in Algeria in the northern Sahara on 13 February 1960 and the creation of a nuclear deterrent force (*la force de*

⁶ H. Védrine, *Report for the President of the French Republic on the Consequences of France's Return to NATO's Integrated Military Command, on the Future of Transatlantic Relations, and the Outlook for the Europe of Defence*, Permanent Representative of France on the North Atlantic Council, 14 November 2012; G. Garnier, "La France dans l'OTAN: de l'allié difficile au contributeur essentiel", *Focus stratégique*, no. 115, IFRI, Juin 2023.

⁷ T. Gomart, *Guerres invisibles. Nos prochains défis géopolitiques*, Paris 2021; S.I. Bora, L. Schramm, "Toward a More 'Sovereign' Europe? Domestic, Bilateral, and European Factors to Explain France's (Growing) Influence on EU Politics, 2017-2022," *French Politics*, vol. 21 (2023), pp. 3-24.

⁸ J. Gaffney, "Leadership and Style in the French Fifth Republic: Nicolas Sarkozy's Presidency in Historical and Cultural Perspective," *French Politics*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2012), p. 354.

⁹ General de Gaulle was aware that if he did not have nuclear weapons, France would not have strategic autonomy.

dissuasion) created the conditions for a policy of independence (*l'exception française*) and strategic autonomy for France as an independent nuclear power.¹⁰ In practice, this was reflected in the decision to leave NATO's integrated command structure (1966), which de Gaulle saw as an instrument of Anglo-American hegemony: *ami, Allie, pas aligné*.¹¹

The term *Gaullist* has become shorthand for the protection of French national interests and autonomy, often at the price of cooperation with European or American allies.¹² De Gaulle was in favour of the creation of a European 'third force,' although in practice ties with NATO were never completely severed. Key aspects of *Gaullism* were permanently visible in French foreign policy of the 1980s and 1990s. These were expressed, inter alia, in the preservation of autonomous decision-making; the maintenance of an independent nuclear force and the rejection of automatism in French operational engagement; the refusal to participate in any integrated military command structure; the preservation of France's unique status and special global role, the refusal to grant automatic access to French territory or space in times of peace and crisis, and an arms procurement policy based predominantly on national companies.¹³

The desire to build a multipolar world, in which France would have more say than in a system of bipolar confrontation between superpowers, became even more apparent after the end of the Cold War period and the collapse of the USSR, when projects of autonomous European military integration were revived in Europe. France – like no other country in Europe – supported initiatives enabling the development of European autonomy in the field of security policy, initially within NATO (European strategic 'identity' within NATO¹⁴) and, over time, after the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty (7 February 1992), by promoting the ambition to build an independent 'Europe of defence' (*l'Europe de la Défense*).¹⁵ At the time, France sought to 'Europeanise NATO,' however, the Élysée Palace quickly understood that if it wanted to avoid political isolation in the European security debate, it had to develop cooperation with NATO. Therefore, in December 1995, the French made an offer to return to the NATO Military Committee, informally expecting to take over the Alliance's Southern Command in Naples (Base VI of the US fleet).¹⁶ This effort failed because the other NATO mem-

¹⁰ R. Frank, "La France et son...", p. 836.

¹¹ When leaving NATO, de Gaulle provided mechanisms for France-NATO military cooperation (the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreement of 1967, and the Ferber-Valentin agreement of 3 July 1974), in M. Vaisse, C. Sebag, "France and NATO...", pp. 142-144.

¹² L. Ray, "Anti-Americanism...", p. 210.

¹³ F. Charillon, *La politique étrangère...*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ *Livre Blanc sur la Défense 1994*, Vie publique, p. 35, at https://medias.vie-publique.fr/data_storage_s3/rapport/pdf/944048700.pdf, 30 September 2023.

¹⁵ 'Europe of defence' – a notion used by France, being also a French priority, is a vague concept and does not mean the military defence of Europe against military threats (which only the North Atlantic Alliance is capable of doing) but it is rather an expression of the ambition of France for greater independence in security and defence policy in situations that threaten the security and interests of the EU.

¹⁶ By decision of President Chirac, since 1995, France has joined every NATO committee except the Nuclear Planning Group.

bers, especially the United States, were not ready for what the French perceived as the 'Europeanisation' of the Alliance (autonomous European pillar within NATO).

The real breakthrough came on 4 December 1998, when France and the UK signed a joint *Declaration on the Construction of the European Security and Defence Policy*. Greeted with much surprise among European political and military circles, the declaration expressed the need for the development of a common EU defence policy that should acquire the capacity to conduct autonomous military operations based on a credible EU armed force, the creation of NATO planning and intelligence structures independent of each other, and the development of a competitive European arms industry. However, while for the British the aim of the European defence capability building process was to create a comprehensive EU crisis response mechanism and to strengthen transatlantic cooperation by making a greater European contribution to it, for the French it was another step towards making the EU independent on the international stage, with a military capability at the level of a superpower and independent of US patronage in this regard.

For decades, France's ambition has been to make its mark in Europe and in the world, and at the dawn of the 21st century, the 'Europe of defence' embodied French aspirations to build a 'Europe of power.'¹⁷ These aspirations were confirmed by the next French President, Jacques Chirac, when he presented France's position on the EU's foreign and defence policy orientations on 30 May 2000 before the Conference of Presidents of the Western European Union Parliamentary Assembly and the audience of the Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence (IHEDN) stating: *The Atlantic Organisation and our American allies should be the natural support for a European defence project... France will strive... to develop a capability target that will allow for the deployment of 60,000 people in the external theatre of operations of the EU*.¹⁸ This goal was achieved by France at the EU summit in Helsinki (10-11 December 1999), where the creation of the *European Security and Defence Policy* was officially proclaimed and the *European Headline Goal* of a European intervention force (50-60,000 people) independent of NATO was announced.

France's reintegration into NATO and the development of 'Europe of Defence' during the F. Hollande's presidency

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the enlargement of NATO to include pro-Atlantic countries (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1999) and the discord in transatlantic relations over the differing perceptions of the intervention in Iraq (2003) hampered the development of the idea of a 'Europe of defence.' In order to increase confidence in French political ambitions for the *l'Europe de la défense* project, and to

¹⁷ M. Lefebvre, *La politique étrangère...*, p. 122.

¹⁸ J. Chirac, *Discours sur la construction européenne, le rôle politique de l'UE, la réduction des tensions internationales, le maintien de la paix en Europe et dans le monde, la réconciliation entre les peuples des Balkans, le désarmement, la défense européenne, la création d'une force européenne de réaction rapide et l'ensemble des moyens dont dispose l'Europe pour agir sur la scène internationale*, Paris, Élysée, 30 May 2000, at <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-9497-fr.pdf>, 25 August 2023.

improve transatlantic relations, President Nicolas Sarkozy, at the NATO Jubilee Summit (Strasbourg/Kehl 3-4 April 2009), on the 60th anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, reaffirmed France's willingness to return to the NATO Allied Joint Force Command.

Nicolas Sarkozy believed that France returning to an integrated command would lead to a reduction in allied distrust of its intentions to develop a 'Europe of defence.' Speaking before the US Congress on 7 November 2007, he declared that France was determined to regain its full place in NATO by repealing the 1966 decision, provided that the Atlantic Alliance was substantially transformed and allowed a 'Europe of defence' to emerge.¹⁹ Sarkozy entreated: *The more successful we are in the establishment of a European Defence, the more France will be resolved to resume its full role in NATO. I would like France, a founding member of our Alliance and already one of its largest contributors, to assume its full role in the effort to renew NATO's instruments and means of action and, in this context, to allow its relations with the Alliance to evolve concurrently with the development and strengthening of a European Defence.*²⁰

France's return to NATO marked no dramatic U-turn in French security policy; rather, it was the result of a gradual and steady evolution, which was triggered by the crisis of the East-West structure of international politics during the 1980s.²¹ Reintegration into the Alliance did not end the period of *exception française*, but merely adjusted Paris' aspirations to strengthen the European security/ESDP dimension. Its purpose was to convince the Allies that the creation of a strong and autonomous European pillar of NATO would not be at the expense of Alliance cohesiveness. France was also given certain guarantees in Article 20 of the 2009 NATO Summit declaration, which stated that *NATO recognises the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence, and welcomes the EU's efforts to strengthen its capabilities and its capacity to address common security challenges that both NATO and the EU face today.* Thus, even if it is true that European defence remained 'on hold' for years after France's return to NATO, Paris could invoke Washington's support for the goal of greater European military autonomy.²²

When F. Hollande became president (May 2012), France defined new objectives for the development of the concept of 'EU strategic autonomy,' the most important of which were:²³

- 1) To keep NATO as a military organisation focused on collective defence and as little as possible as a political-military organisation;
- 2) To create the necessary new balance of responsibilities between Europeans and Americans in the domain of security and defence;

¹⁹ F. Bozo, *La politique étrangère...*, p. 264.

²⁰ N. Sarkozy, *Speech Before the United States Congress on Franco-American Relations*, Washington, 7 November 2007, Vie publique, at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/168471-declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-r>, 6 October 2023.

²¹ L. Ratti, "Stepping up to Reintegration...", pp. 375-378.

²² F. Bozo, *La politique étrangère...*, p. 266.

²³ H. Védérine, *Report for the President...*, p. 23.

- 3) To intensify and continue the efforts started for a 'Europe of defence,' which is an integral part of the EU.

In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, France's priority became engaging Germany in the 'strategic autonomy' project.²⁴ Brexit, and the end of the British veto on accelerating EU integration in the defence sector, only strengthened the impact of the French and German 'core' on the European defence project.²⁵ The day after the British referendum in June 2016, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier presented a proposal to strengthen the EU's CSDP by presenting, among other things, the idea of establishing a permanent EU Operational Command, increasing joint financing of EU operations and reviewing the defence planning of member states, including schedules for investments in armaments and military equipment with a view to coordinating them progressively (*European semester on defence capabilities*).

Another important step towards EU strategic defence autonomy was the joint French and German initiative of 16 September 2016 presented at the informal summit of EU heads of state or government in Bratislava, where President F. Hollande and Chancellor A. Merkel proposed the establishment of, inter alia, a unified military command structure in the EU, which would enable the planning and deployment of European military missions, thus increasing the strategic autonomy of the EU.²⁶ Franco-German cooperation also gave impetus to another initiative to create a *common EU defence fund*.²⁷ Indeed, Paris succeeded in convincing Berlin to support a progressive investment in European independence, which resulted in the European Commission launching on 7 June 2017 the €13 billion *European Defence Fund* (EDF) to promote the integration of military capabilities and R&D projects by the defence industries of EU member states.²⁸ France and Germany also supported the realisation on 11 December 2017 of the 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO) between EU Member States (on the basis of article 42(6) of the Treaty on European Union as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon of 13 December 2007).²⁹

²⁴ Cf. B. Koszel, "Współpraca kanclerz Angeli Merkel z prezydentami Francji," *Przegląd Zachodni*, no. 3 (2022), pp. 123-126; K. Malinowski, "Perspektywy współpracy w dziedzinie bezpieczeństwa," in J. Schulz, E. Hillebrand (eds.), *Między przyjaźnią a frustracją – Polska i Niemcy 30 lat po podpisaniu traktatu o sąsiedztwie*, trans. by A. Peszke, Poznań 2021, pp. 88-90, *Studium Niemcoznawcze*, no. 98.

²⁵ D. Deschaux-Dutard, "La France, l'Allemagne et la défense européenne: une locomotive symbolique plus qu'opérationnelle?" *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 821 (2019), p. 37. Berlin has repeatedly expressed its dislike of the term 'strategic autonomy,' preferring the term 'strategic sovereignty.'

²⁶ This proposal resulted in the decision of 8 June 2017 to establish a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) within the EU Military Staff (EUMS), responsible for the operational planning and conduct of the EU's non-executive military missions, i.e. military training missions.

²⁷ D. Deschaux-Dutard, "La coopération militaire franco-allemande et la défense européenne après le Brexit," *Les Champs de Mars*, no. 32 (2019), pp. 63-64.

²⁸ It is to be noted that the Commission based the EDF proposal on industrial policy rather than defence policy, otherwise the purchase of non-European products would have been permitted.

²⁹ *Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States*, Official Journal of the European Union 2017, L 331/57.

2. PRESIDENT MACRON'S AMBITIONS FOR EUROPEAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP BY FRANCE

European Intervention Initiative as a tool for shaping a European strategic culture

Sworn-in in May 2017, the new President of the Fifth Republic, E. Macron (like his predecessors), made promoting the concept of European sovereignty, that is, the strengthening of the EU's autonomous defence nature, one of his priorities.³⁰ According to President Macron, thanks to its inclusiveness (broad formula and large number of projects), PESCO failed to satisfy Paris' ambitions. France felt that its proposals for the exclusivity and operational use of PESCO were watered down, and that the EU was focusing more on the creation of new institutions and structures than on the actual building of military capabilities and their operational utilisation. Therefore, according to Macron, the first key to European sovereignty should be to *provide Europe with autonomous operational capabilities* outside the EU institutional framework. This postulate first emerged in a speech given by Macron at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017 in the form of an initiative to create a *European Intervention Initiative* (EI2). At the time, the French president highlighted the need to promote the idea of Europe's strategic independence in terms of security and defence and called for the creation of a 'real European army': *At the beginning of the next decade, Europe will have to be equipped with a common intervention force, a common defence budget and a common doctrine of action.*³¹

The *European Intervention Initiative* (EI2) was officially launched in June 2018. Defence ministers of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK (later joined by Finland, Sweden and Norway) signed a letter of intent in Paris at the time, establishing cooperation outside the NATO or EU CSDP military structure. @@The stated objective of EI2 is to develop a common strategic culture that will enhance the ability of European states to conduct military missions and operations *across the whole range of potential conflicts and crises affecting Europe's security, in different frameworks.*³² The flexible formula of military cooperation between selected countries with the appropriate capabilities, without the creation of formal structures (apart from a secretariat in the French Ministry of the Armed Forces and a liaison officers' contact mechanism), envisages building cooperation at a basic level, which will then become the basis for action at a higher level (bottom-up

³⁰ Cf. J.J. Węc, "Perspektywy reformy wspólnej polityki bezpieczeństwa i obrony Unii Europejskiej do 2025 roku," *Politeja*, vol. 19, no. 3(78) (2022), p. 225.

³¹ E. Macron, *Discours pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique*, Élysée, 26 September 2017, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique>, 15 October 2023.

³² *Letter of intent concerning the development of the European Intervention Initiative* (EI2), Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, at <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/25706/099f1956962441156817d7f35d08bc50/20180625-letter-of-intent-zu-der-europaeischen-interventionsinitiative-data.pdf>, 28 September 2023.

approach). The first step is to establish privileged bilateral cooperation with the French armed forces in four thematic areas: 1) strategic foresight – forecasting and intelligence sharing; 2) operational scenarios for dealing with potential crisis circumstances; 3) exchange of *lessons learned* and doctrines; and 4) support to operations.

EI2 is based on a network of privileged bilateral and intergovernmental defence relationships with selected European countries (being able and willing to conduct joint intervention operations), which makes it a model project for the realisation of the French vision of ‘European strategic autonomy.’³³ In this sense, it responds to the needs of the French armed forces, forming the framework of a possible future coalition that could quickly launch an intervention operation.³⁴ This does not exclude actions with or using the structures of NATO (as part of the NATO Framework Nation Concept), the EU (PESCO, EDF, CARD), or other countries not currently participating in EI2.

Paris was keen for this initiative to be implemented *outside the institutional framework* of the EU, so as not to have its hands ‘tied’ by institutions and technobureaucracy. According to Macron, it *gives us back some room to manoeuvre and some strategic autonomy*.³⁵ When Macron speaks of a ‘Europe of defence,’ he is not referring to the EU as a whole but to the Europeans who share his vision. This is already a permanent feature in French thinking and a continuation of the ‘multi-speed’ Europe project. In practice, EI2, on the one hand, is intended to instil a French strategic culture among European partners and, on the other, to provide France with an attractive instrument to strengthen its operational and expeditionary capabilities on a scale and in a direction in line with its political interests and military strategic priorities, which are operations in the Mediterranean and the Sahel (rather than the collective defence pursued by NATO).

The need for Paris to develop ‘defence autonomy’ also at the European level, was explicitly included in the *Strategic Defence and National Security Review* elaborated at the request of President Macron and published on 13 October 2017 (amended in 2021).³⁶ The document assumed: 1). Establishing an ambitious Permanent Structured Cooperation within the EU and operationalisation of *Article 42.7 TEU*³⁷ (by full operationalisation of the European Command Structures – EUMS/MPCC); sharing capabilities and bases in strategic zones; improvement of situation assessment capabilities and enhancement of technological and industrial independence; 2). Clearly defining the

³³ T. Gomart, *Guerres invisibles...*, pp. 54-55.

³⁴ Cf. K. Miszczak, *Armia Europejska. Strategiczne bezpieczeństwo militarne Unii Europejskiej*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 330-333.

³⁵ E. Macron, *Discours à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices de 2019*, Élysée, 27 August 2019, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>, 3 October 2023.

³⁶ *Revue Stratégique de Défense et de Sécurité Nationale 2017*, at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-revue_strategique_dsn_cle4b3beb.pdf, 5 October 2023; Ministère des Armées, *Actualisation Stratégique 2021*, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/REVUE%20STRAT%202021%2004%2002%202021%20FR.pdf>, 20 August 2023.

³⁷ According to Paris, the strengthening of Article 47.2 TEU is meant to rationalise the development of European capabilities and does not conflict with Article 5 of NATO, as it does not create an alternative to NATO’s alliance commitments.

activities of the EDF (France expects the fund to strengthen the EU's scientific, research and technological capabilities and to provide a *technological edge* by the consolidation of the European arms industry); 3). Adoption of the *Strategic Compass* setting out the EU's long-term security and defence objectives (sets the level of the EU's ambition to build a European defence from an industrial and operational point of view).

French security policy: between NATO's collective defence and the 'European strategic autonomy'

France's overall approach to NATO has not changed since the days of General de Gaulle: *to shape NATO's actions in line with French interests, without undermining the foundations on which the Alliance is based*, and in this sense, solidarity with the Alliance has never been questioned.³⁸ Paris is aware that the creation of a European defence system independent of the United States is unrealistic in the foreseeable future and, in the face of an increasing number of international challenges, France's national strategic autonomy is insufficient to secure its interests. That is why the *Strategic Review of Defence and National Security* of France (2017) states that NATO remains a key element of France's European security and defence policy, and France's defence plans are integrated into the Alliance's defence plans (and no one is seriously thinking of separating them). During a visit to Paris by J. Mattis, the US Secretary of Defence, on 2 October 2018, French Minister of the Armed Forces F. Parly stressed that allied commitments remain the basis of Europe's collective defence. Reaffirming the commitment to *collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic space* following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the French military deployment to Estonia and Romania was upheld at the 29-30 June 2022 NATO summit in Madrid. Finally, when presenting the assumptions of the Military Programming Law (LPM) for 2024-2030 (20 January 2023), President Macron declared that France would be able to field up to 20,000 troops for the purpose of NATO's collective defence.³⁹

French elites have consistently demonstrated their commitment to NATO – France is the fourth largest contributor to the NATO budget and a significant contributor (10%) to the *NATO Readiness Initiative*. France has also unequivocally supported the US standpoint regarding the INF Treaty blaming Russia unapologetically for its violation. Although France does not participate in NATO's nuclear planning, its nuclear forces will remain a vital contribution to the North Atlantic Alliance's deterrence. Paris also accepts NATO's key role within coordination and consolidation of the nuclear deterrence strategy, assuring that President Macron's proposed European dialogue and cooperation in this area complements efforts to *promote NATO's nuclear culture*.

Simultaneously, referring to Articles 2 and 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty (democracy and the rule of law and the strengthening of its capabilities), Paris promotes the

³⁸ G. Garnier, "La France dans l'OTAN...", p. 13.

³⁹ *Transformer nos armées: le Président de la République présente le nouveau projet de loi de programmation militaire*, Élysée, 20 January 2023, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/01/20/transformer-nos-armees-le-president-de-la-republique-presente-le-nouveau-projet-de-loi-de-programmation-militaire>, 16 October 2023.

concept of 'European strategic autonomy' based on: 1) a common defence doctrine; 2) a credible military intervention capability; and 3) community budgetary instruments to support European projects in the arms sector. Macron articulated this objective unequivocally in his keynote speech at Sorbonne University on 26 September 2017: *In terms of defence, our objective must be Europe's capacity for autonomous action, as a complement to NATO.*⁴⁰

In his letter *For EU Renaissance* of 5 March 2019, published simultaneously in the main journals and in all EU languages, Macron called for a defence and security treaty that would define – in cooperation with NATO – the obligations of Europeans, proposing the creation of a European Security Council with the participation of the UK, which would strengthen Europe's position on the international stage in the bipolar competition between China and the United States. According to President Macron – as expressed in his speech at L'École de Guerre (7 February 2020) – Europe is directly exposed to the effects of superpower rivalry (US–China) which alters the global balance of power and leads to a gradual erosion of the European security architecture. The response to these threats is to promote multilateralism and the development of strategic partnerships (e.g. with India, Japan) but also to create a 'strategic autonomy' for Europe: *Our standards must not be under American control, our infrastructure dependent on Chinese capital nor our internet networks under Russian pressure.*⁴¹ Reaffirming his opinions at the Munich Security Conference on 15 February 2020: [...] *for me, European collective security has two pillars: NATO and Defence Europe. It's not an alternative, but it's the logical consequence of the situation we've seen in recent years.*⁴²

France asserts that the 'European defence' project is complementary to NATO and serves to increase European defence capabilities. This is not true, because it is about strengthening the EU's defence capabilities, with a special role for France. To give greater visibility to 'European strategic autonomy,' Macron did not even hesitate to 'target' allied ties by giving a famous interview to *The Economist* on 7 November 2019, in which he stated: *What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO. We need to be aware of that. There is no coordination of strategic decisions between the US and NATO allies [...] The answer should be 'more Europe of defence.'*

France's attitude towards NATO was well defined by the former French Minister of Foreign Affairs: *we still need NATO*, but in agreement with it and in response to the American demand for greater responsibility for our own security: *We also need to be more assertive with the United States and in the transatlantic relationship, asking for a better sharing of responsibilities to be matched with a better sharing of the burden...*

⁴⁰ E. Macron, *Discours pour une Europe souveraine...*

⁴¹ Idem, *Discours sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion devant les stagiaires de la 27ème promotion de l'école de guerre*, Elysée, 7 February 2020, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-strategie-de-defense-et-de-dissuasion-devant-les-stagiaires-de-la-27eme-promotion-de-lecole-de-guerre>, 3 October 2023.

⁴² Idem, *International Security – Statements by President of the Republic, at the Munich Security Conference* (excerpts), Munich, 15 February 2020, at <https://nz.ambafrance.org/President-sets-out-vision-for-Europe-s-future-security>, 13 October 2023.

*There cannot be European defence without NATO, just as there cannot be a credible and sustainable NATO without lasting European defence commitments.*⁴³

France is keen to deepen its autonomy vis-à-vis NATO, not only operationally but also technologically – *strategic autonomy is not primarily about defence itself but the mastery of critical military technologies.*⁴⁴ The arms industry is not only a key pillar of the sovereignty of France but an important branch of the country's economy. The important goal of 'European autonomy' as understood by France is therefore support of the French armaments offer (the 'made in Europe' argument is intended as a tool to protect and promote the French defence industry). In this context, the US calls for increased defence spending have become, in the view of French diplomacy, motivated as much by the need to balance the burden within NATO as by commercial expectations – to increase purchases of US military equipment – as was explicitly expressed by Minister F. Parly during her visit to Washington on 18 March 2019: *The Alliance should be unconditional, otherwise it is not an alliance. NATO's solidarity clause is called Article 5, not article F-35.*⁴⁵ The allegation that the White House views the transatlantic relationship and defence guarantees in business-commercial terms (markets for US armaments) rather than in alliance terms (solidarity and geopolitical benefits) was sustained by President Macron: *D. Trump sees NATO as a commercial project to ensure exclusive purchases of US equipment by allies... France is not signing up to this.*⁴⁶ This leads to the conclusion that referring to the need to consolidate the European arms industry, France's underlying objectives are: 1) to limit US access to the European procurement market; 2) to maximise the benefits and increase the profitability of the French arms industry base, which cannot be ensured by national procurement alone; and 3) to increase the competitiveness of the French arms industry, meeting the development needs of French companies operating within the EU's *Defence Technological and Industrial Base* (EDTIB).

CONCLUSIONS

The beginning of the study highlighted France's defence policy course set by General de Gaulle (and continued by all his successors), which sought to guarantee France's leadership role in Europe through the creation of an independent defence force based on a credible arsenal of nuclear weapons (*force de dissuasion nucléaire*) and political-military independence from American influence. Strategic autonomy enabled France to pursue an independent foreign policy in Europe and satisfying aspirations to play the role of a global

⁴³ J.-Y. Le Drian, *Speech in Bratislava – "GLOBSEC 2020 Bratislava Forum"* (8 October 2020), at <https://id.ambafrance.org/Speech-by-Jean-Yves-Le-Drian-in-Bratislava-GLOBSEC-2020-Bratislava-Forum-8>, 25 September 2023.

⁴⁴ S.I. Bora, L. Schramm, "Toward a More...", p. 16.

⁴⁵ Euractiv with Reuters and AFP, "French Defence Minister: »It's Called Article 5, Not Article F-35,«" Euractiv, 19 March 2019, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/french-defence-minister-its-called-article-5-not-article-f-35>, 20 September 2023.

⁴⁶ "Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO is Becoming Brain-Dead," *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

power for decades to come. This created the specificity of French foreign policy, which is distinguished by independence, the idea of greatness – *la grandeur* and *global prominence*.

The study confirms that France has gradually but consistently had a strong influence on the development of ‘European strategic autonomy.’ As Bora and Schramm point out, *France’s influence on specific EU policies and on the EU’s overall political direction also is larger than many policymakers acknowledge.*⁴⁷ President Macron’s EI2 concept – which would become the embryo of the future European military force – is part of a continuation of what has been one of the main objectives of French diplomacy for several decades, that is, *inscribing France’s strategic autonomy within the framework of European defence autonomy*. In this way, Paris embeds its own aspirations and national interests into the framework of European cooperation.

Indeed, the concept of a ‘Europe of defence’ is a ‘multiplier’ of France’s national interest of maintaining its superpower status on the global stage and French leadership in Europe. The rhetoric about creating ‘autonomy and a European strategic culture’ is intended to water down and mask France’s real objectives, which are to support and to ‘relieve’ the intervention in Africa and the Sahel. France will consistently seek to increase ‘European strategic autonomy’/sovereignty by promoting military cooperation between Europeans (alongside NATO), for by imposing an ambitious defence policy vision and obtaining EU budget (EDF) funding for this, Paris is also promoting the interests of the French defence industry. On the other hand, strategic autonomy is not the same as self-sufficiency, therefore, Paris respects the key role of the North Atlantic Alliance in remaining the foundation of the collective defence of the European continent. For these reasons, ‘European strategic autonomy’ still remains more a political than a military concept.

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⁴⁷ S.I. Bora, L. Schramm, “Toward a More...,” p. 18.

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