

# COUNTRY CHAPTER ON FRANCE

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# THE FRENCH DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF NATO

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## FRANCE IN NATO – A SHORT HISTORICAL OUTLINE

France's foreign policy is guided by the *leitmotif* of autonomy (Ostermann 2019; Pannier/Schmitt 2020). This is also reflected in France's attitude towards NATO. Although France was one of the organization's founding members, it is the only country to have left its integrated command structure, before returning (with the exception of the Nuclear Planning Group) in 2009. Still, the French government considers NATO to be just one pillar of European security and the French view of it differs in important respects from the views of other European states.

Today, the country's full membership of the Alliance is no longer publicly questioned and the 2017 French Strategic Review stated that NATO is »a key component of European security« (French Strategic Review 2017: 59). In contrast to other European states, France has traditionally emphasized NATO's character as a collective defence organization and has downplayed its role as a forum for political consultation and coordination. President Macron, while slightly adjusting the balance between collective defence and common security, remains in this tradition.

France participates regularly in NATO missions, is part of the NATO deployment in the Baltic States and Poland, and holds the post of Supreme Allied Commander for Transformation (SACT). Also, French defence spending as a proportion of GDP will probably reach more than two per cent in 2021, although this is »purely an arithmetic consequence of the [Covid-19] crisis« (Parly 2020). Nevertheless, France pursues its visions of European sovereignty and defence autonomy in parallel with its commitment to NATO. Reasons for France's ambivalent stance towards NATO also lie in the country's relationship with the United States – France has from the beginning perceived NATO primarily as an instrument of American influence in Europe (Pannier/Schmitt 2020: 147). On one hand, the United States is seen as occupying a central position when it comes to guaranteeing European security; on the other hand, France regularly questions the reliability of the US commitment to the defence of Europe. The United States is not a European power and traditionally French discourse on NATO has warned of its hegemonic posture. The United States' pivot to Asia is further increasing this uncertainty about the country's security guarantee for Europe.

Still, even though France favours the European Union in its public diplomacy and defence initiatives, these efforts do not come at the expense of the country's engagement in NATO. According to Christelle Calmels, France's main objectives regarding NATO since its return into the military structure are to reform the alliance not only with a view to improving the management of budgetary and human resources, but also to strengthen France's participation in decision-making at all levels, and promoting a 360° approach (Calmels 2020a). By strongly committing France to NATO, the government also hopes to dispel the impression that French support for European defence will undermine NATO.

## THREAT PERCEPTIONS: NATO'S »BRAIN DEATH« AND A COMPLEX AND DIVERSE THREAT ENVIRONMENT

French think tanks and research institutes that shape the French expert discourse on NATO – most notably the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), and the Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) – are mainly part of a national consensus regarding NATO's role in France's security policy. The future of NATO is not at the centre of the French expert discourse. Discussions on this matter take place somewhat on the side-lines and are conducted only by »a select few« (expert interview), compared with the generally strong interest in French national security policy and in European defence. The alliance is accepted as *one* pillar of France's and Europe's security, but nothing more. In discussions about the future of the geostrategic balance for example, NATO is mentioned, but does not hold a prominent place when considering possible actions and alternatives.

Looking at **threat perceptions**, French experts agree overall that France and Europe are facing a multifaceted and deteriorating threat environment and that threats have become more diverse and complex. This includes, among other things, Islamist terrorism, Russia, regional instability and state fragility in Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) and Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), the return of great power competition globally and the geostrategic rise of China (Brustlein/Simón 2019: 33; Calmels 2020b; Institut Mon-

## »NATO is doing fine, but the atlantic alliance is in trouble«

Tertrais 2019

taigne 2021). But in France these issues are not necessarily perceived as being a challenge for NATO or something that should be dealt with by the Atlantic Alliance. For a majority of French experts, at the moment the biggest challenge for NATO lies in the lack of unity between its member states. President Macron's »brain death« commentary in his interview with *The Economist* in 2019 (Macron 2019) was directed at Turkey and the lack of consultation between NATO member states, but should also be seen in a bigger context (President Obama's choice not to sanction Syria after the use of chemical weapons in 2013, the US decision to withdraw troops from Syria in 2019, thus leaving a vacuum and room for Turkish manoeuvre) (Boniface 2019a). Thus, for French pundits, the biggest threat to NATO does not necessarily come from outside, but rather from dissent inside the Alliance, the lack of consultation between the Allies, and the deterioration of transatlantic political links (Moïsi 2019; Mauro 2019a). As Bruno Tertrais, FRS's Deputy Director and Senior Fellow at the Institut Montaigne, has prominently put it, »NATO is doing fine, but the Atlantic Alliance is in trouble« (Tertrais 2019). According to him, the lack of unity poses the biggest threat to the credibility of NATO's deterrence. This is a rather common position in the French debate (cf. Mauro 2019b).

### RUSSIA AND THE FUTURE OF NATO

On **Russia**, there certainly seems to be some understanding of the eastern European member states' threat perception. Nevertheless, differences exist when it comes to assessing how big the Russian threat really is for Europe. Some see Russia as a problem, just not in the conventional sense. Rather, as Frédéric Mauro (2019b: 3), Associate Research Fellow at IRIS, highlights, this security problem stems from the danger it poses to European unity: »for the time being, the threat lies more in the fact that Russia divides Europeans than that it might invade them«. The conflict with Russia is not fought on the battlefield, but in the cyber, political and electoral space. Regarding the latter, France already had its own experiences with a disinformation campaign just days before the second round of the 2017 presidential elections. This effort failed, also because the French authorities were aware of a possible threat posed by disinformation. France has never officially attributed responsibility, but it is most likely that »the perpetrators were (...) at least linked to Russia« (Jeangène Vilmer 2019: 23). Nevertheless, French pundits are mostly on the same page in assessing that the conventional threat by a country »whose GDP is equivalent to Spain« (Mauro 2019a; cf. Boniface 2019b) should not be overestimated. IRIS Director Pascal Boniface (2019a), for example, states that »Moscou pose un défi stratégique, mais pas une menace militaire« [Moscow presents a strategic challenge but not a military threat]. According to him, the Crimea case holds historic and strategic specificities that do not offer a precedent for future annexations.

Still, the militarisation of Russian diplomacy, as well as the systematic use of aggressive practices is perceived as more than just an unconventional problem by some French experts (Maulny 2017). As Dominique Moïsi (2019), Special Advisor at Institut Montaigne, points out, »Tous ceux qui proclament qu'il n'existe pas de menace russe, souffrent soit de problème oculaire aigu, soit poursuivent un agenda qui n'a rien à voir avec l'analyse objective de la réalité« [All those who claim that there is no Russian threat are either blind or are pursuing an agenda that has nothing to do with the objective analysis of reality]. Tertrais (2019: 4, cf. Heisbourg 2020: 88) agrees with this view and concludes that as long as Russia remains a significant potential threat to Europe, its deterrence is likely to remain a dominant feature of NATO. Additionally, some pundits point to the possibility that Russia could be »tempted to take advantage of the US's focus on its confrontation with China« (Haroche 2020: 10; cf. Brustlein/Simón 2019) and expand its presence in the (wider) European neighbourhood, especially in regions where it is already militarily deployed (such as Syria and the CAR).

All in all, the French position regarding a possible threat by Russia is summed up in Tertrais' (2018: 34) assessment that »[t]he Russian problem is real and serious – but it is political more than it is military«. French advances to »build bridges with Russia« (Maulny 2020: 7) do not mean that France does not believe in a tough stance towards Russia, but should be understood as an attempt to overcome the game of great power rivalry. These efforts were never about »whitewashing Russia« (expert interview), but about getting out of the strategic deadlock in Europe and keeping dialogue channels for cooperative solutions open (Panier/Schmitt 2020: 141).

### CHINA AND THE FUTURE OF NATO

**China** is perceived as a challenge, from a strategic point of view, because of its more aggressive demeanour in the Indo-Pacific Region. As an Indo-Pacific power France holds important strategic interest in the region and sees the growing importance of maritime security issues in its regional strategy (Regaud 2020). Therefore, some have already called for a French »pivot' towards Asia« (Duclos 2020a), be it only in the geo-economic sphere. The challenges China poses on a geopolitical scale, especially with its values, its increasing military power but also its ambitions to shape the political, economic and technological order on an international scale, are constantly debated in France – just not with regard to the role of NATO. Rather, the focus lies on finding a common European position that should strengthen Europe's resilience towards Chinese interference. French commentators highlight the need for Europeans to create their own narrative with regard to the Sino-American conflict (Simon 2020). It is in the French interest to keep the issue outside of NATO in order to pre-

vent it from getting militarized and to keep the United States at arm's length on an issue that – from a French point of view – first of all affects the European Union and should therefore be resolved within a European context. As Pascal Boniface (2020) puts it, when it comes to China, the Report of the 2020 Reflection Group is »clairement une instrumentalisation des États-Unis pour emporter avec eux les pays européens membres de l'OTAN dans leur lutte globale contre la Chine« [clearly the United States taking advantage to get the European NATO members on board in its global struggle against China].

Still, some experts consider the strategic challenges China poses for NATO. Here, French opinion and discourse is intrinsically linked to the assessment of the United States' engagement in NATO: the question is whether China is considered as a direct threat to the Alliance and its member states or if it is mainly an indirect threat because of the rising geostrategic competition between the United States and China. FRS' Special Advisor François Heisbourg (2020: 89) for example sees the emergence and establishment of China as »America's peer competitor« as the starting point for a shift from the debate on *burden-sharing* to a debate on *burden-shifting*. The Director of Ifri's Security Studies Center, Corentin Brustlein (2019: 41), also points to the fact that European armed forces will need to increase their strategic flexibility at the higher end of the conflict spectrum in the future. As the United States will most likely pivot even more towards Asia, European countries will need to compensate for the withdrawal of US high-end military capabilities (cf. Haroche 2020).

## NATO–EU RELATIONS: EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FOR A MORE CAPABLE NATO

France was advocating a stronger European role in defence even before the end of the Cold War (Maulny 2020). In France, strategic autonomy is »still considered a priority goal of defense policy« (Brustlein 2018: 2). Therefore, the concept of strategic autonomy is deeply engrained in French strategic culture and the country's strategic debate. The Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed President Macron's opinion that »economic, security and normative challenges are increasingly interrelated and should be addressed by a renewed investment in Europe's strategic autonomy« (Pannier 2021: 25). Additionally, structural trends pulling the United States away from Europe, like the pivot to Asia, and President Trump's disruptive policies in particular demand a greater European self-reliance in the field of defence (Tertais 2019; Boniface 2019b). Some scholars even support Jolyon Howorth's (2019) proposition to merge NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), or at least to call for more Europeanisation of NATO (Mauro 2019b: 19). The main preoccupation of French commentators on this matter is the need for European countries to take matters into their own hands, in order to be able to manage crises in the European neighbourhood (Mauro 2020; Bellais/Nicolas 2019; Duclos 2020). According to FRS Research Fel-

low Benjamin Hautecouverture (2021), the »question of strategic autonomy runs through European thinking against the backdrop of a generally shared perception that Europe is entering an era of heightened strategic and geopolitical competition«.

In the view of French scholars, European self-reliance and emancipation from US hegemony needs to manifest itself also in the field of armament cooperation. As French Minister of Defence Florence Parly has pointed out, NATO's solidarity clause »is called Article 5, not Article F-35« (Parly 2019). Thus, French calls for more common investment in European defence projects (Brustlein 2018) are not only linked to the perception of a more challenging threat environment, but also necessary to balancing the perceived economic and political hegemony of the United States inside NATO (Mauro 2019b; Mauro/Fernandez-Cras 2020; Bellais/Nicolas 2019). French experts agree that closer integration at the European level is imperative in order to overcome the inefficiencies resulting from the national fragmentation of armament industries and armed forces. Guided by a strong tradition of strategic thinking, studies and proposals exist on the necessary development of capabilities in order to achieve strategic autonomy. For example, Corentin Brustlein proposes a strategic capability concept »that emphasizes flexibility (...) but gives priority to those capabilities suited to the higher end of the conflict spectrum« (Brustlein/Simón 2019: 34–35). Frédéric Mauro (2019b: 20) brings the idea of a »defence Eurogroup« into the debate, which could work outside the framework of EU institutions »as an embryonic, integrated and autonomous 'European army'«. This configuration could work under qualified majority voting or at least decision-making by consensus or consensus minus one, a procedure he identifies as one of NATO's main successes.

Nevertheless, according to Corentin Brustlein (2018: 2), fears that France aims at a »Gaullist turn« that would »sever the transatlantic link while bolstering French influence« are unfounded: France's perception of strategic autonomy has become much more nuanced. An ambitious vision of European strategic autonomy therefore does not stand in contrast to NATO. Quite the contrary: a stronger Europe would also strengthen the Atlantic Alliance (de Fougères 2020; Institut Montaigne 2021: 138). Also, NATO will continue to provide collective defence and enhance military interoperability. Additionally, France has become more pragmatic with regard to European strategic autonomy. This pragmatism reflects the French acknowledgement that many European leaders, even in Germany, still look to the United States for leadership in defence (Boniface 2019b) and do not engage seriously enough with French initiatives (Berghofer 2020).<sup>1</sup> Thus, an agnostic perception of European strategic autonomy is to be

<sup>1</sup> Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's statement that »Illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end« has been particularly disappointing for French scholars. Cf. Kramp-Karrenbauer: »Europe still needs America«, in: Politico, 2 November 2020 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/>) and »Macrons rebuttal – Ein Gespräch mit dem französischen Staatspräsidenten«, in: Der Grand Continent, 16. November 2020, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/de/2020/11/16/macron/> (accessed 22. November 2020).

found in French thinking, according to which it is unnecessary to put much energy into the discussion and just work with what's available – meaning that NATO remains »indispensable autant qu'incontournable« [indispensable as well as unavoidable] (Moisi 2019).

## NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AND DISARMAMENT

The French debate on (nuclear) deterrence and arms control reflects France's status as one of the five declared Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). However, the French debate differs from debates in the United States and the United Kingdom. One difference concerns the production of knowledge on nuclear weapons and deterrence. In the United States, central concepts such as strategic stability, extended deterrence or escalation control have been developed by think tanks such as RAND. In France, strategic thinking and the development of doctrines such as »deterrence from the weak to the strong« and the »equalizing power of the atom« have been heavily influenced by state officials, such as colonels Pierre-Marie Gallois and Charles Ailleret and by President de Gaulle himself (Tertrais 2020: 14). In some ways, this state centrism characterizes French debates even today (de Montbrial/Gomart 2019). Politically, no significant voice doubts that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the *force de frappe* should be retained. Issues of arms control, too, are rarely discussed in Parliament. Nuclear deterrence and the French nuclear forces are not a major issue and are not a topic of public controversy or among French NGO's (Tertrais 2020: 23). The French press reports on arms control only in relation to major international issues such as North Korea or the Iranian nuclear deal.

With few exceptions, the French expert discourse is also characterized by this general sense of acceptance. Specialized think tanks such as Ifri and CERI debate these issues at great length. However, they usually do not position themselves in political debates on nuclear deterrence and disarmament, but rather analyse the historical, sociological and strategic perspectives of French policies in this field. The exception is CERI experts who question more openly the foundations of nuclear deterrence and the rationale of France's nuclear posture (Pelopidas 2017). The majority of scholars, however, do not criticize the official policy of maintaining nuclear deterrence and basic strategic concepts such as vital interests, sufficiency and unacceptable damage. Nor do they question the contribution of France's independent nuclear forces to European security within the context of NATO.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the issue of a stronger European role for France's independent nuclear forces, most scholars discuss affirmatively France's overtures to its European partners in general and President Macron's 2020 affirmation of the

*force de frappe's* European dimension in particular. In his speech at the École de Guerre, Macron underlined that »France's vital interests (whose violation might trigger a nuclear response) now have a European dimension« (Macron 2020). The exception is again CERI scholars who question whether a nuclear deterrence arrangement is still necessary and useful given that US nuclear deterrence capabilities in Europe have »since the 1960s been both ineffective and unnecessary« (Egeland/Pelopidas 2021: 242). In their view, the recurring debates about European nuclear capabilities – recently launched again by President Macron's Speech at the École de Guerre – thus resemble a »zombie that can never be finally put to rest« (Egeland/Pelopidas 2021: 238). They emphasize the »weaknesses in the case for Euro-nukes« and question whether Macron's offer will be taken up by sceptical publics and decision-makers in Germany and other European countries (Egeland/Pelopidas 2021).

The majority discourse on NATO and arms control is shaped by the prevalent nuclear doctrines. Thus, scholars support the notion that NATO should remain a nuclear alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist. French scholars propose legally binding arms control instruments, transparency and confidence-building measures, doctrinal exchanges and information-sharing as instruments that can help to increase the stability of nuclear deterrence (HauteCouverture/Maitre/Tertrais 2021).<sup>3</sup> They see no room, however, for French nuclear arms reductions as long as the quantities of nuclear weapons deployed by the United States and Russia surpass by magnitudes the number of French weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, too, does not resonate with the French expert community. As one of the five official nuclear weapon states, France has consistently rejected the Treaty, as well as the notion that the Treaty sets international customary law.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, most scholars do not accept the argument of a close link between the NPT obligation of nuclear weapon states to disarm and the prohibition of non-nuclear weapon states acquiring these weapons (Maitre 2019: 27). The French concept of vital interests to be protected by nuclear deterrence also runs counter to the idea of no-first-use. Instead, most scholars refer to the unilateral reductions France made after the end of the Cold War and propose concrete arms control measures such as the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty as a way forward (Brustlein 2021).

<sup>2</sup> NATO recognized the value of France's independent nuclear force for the first time in the 1974 Ottawa declaration which states that the British and French »nuclear forces capable of playing a deterrent role of their own contribute to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance«.

<sup>3</sup> The French sense of the urgency of arms control has also been expressed by President Macron himself: against the backdrop of mounting tensions, he demanded in 2020 that »Europeans must also propose together an international arms control agenda. The end of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the uncertainties about the future of the New START Treaty and the crisis of the conventional arms control regime in Europe has led to the possibility of a return of pure, unhindered military and nuclear competition by 2021, which has not been seen since the end of the 1960s« (Macron 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.icanw.org/france>. However, French public opinion seems to be more receptive ([https://www.mvtpaix.org/word-press/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CP-05.07.2018-Sondage-TIAN\\_EN.pdf](https://www.mvtpaix.org/word-press/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CP-05.07.2018-Sondage-TIAN_EN.pdf)) and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly »recommended that the government »mitigate its criticism« of the treaty »to show that we understand and take into account the concerns of states and their desire for more balanced global governance« (see: <https://www.icanw.org/france>).



## NATO: A SECURITY ORGANIZATION

France has always seen NATO primarily as a **military organization** and not as a community of values (Tertrais 2020). French commentators definitely do not share the 2020 Reflection Group's view that NATO has always been based on shared values. As Pascal Boniface (2020) highlights, Portugal's Salazar regime was a founding member of NATO and military coups in Turkey and Greece have never put these countries' membership in NATO into doubt. Thus, from a French point of view, NATO has always been a »military machine« and is therefore not »the ideal forum or vehicle for foreign policy convergence« (de France 2019). On this matter, Michel Duclos, Special Advisor at Institut Montaigne, proposes to expand the transatlantic agenda for addressing current challenges by making the EU the key geopolitical partner of the United States (Duclos 2020). French wishes for NATO reform are therefore linked to enhancing decision-making and better consultation on security issues, but no more. As part of the »Southern Quartet«, an informal grouping including France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, France calls for a more balanced approach on the part of NATO to dealing with Russia and threats in the South, as well as better coordination with the European Union in the Mediterranean region (Calmels 2020b). Still, the French call for a **360° approach** should be considered »a discursive way to alleviate the Alliance's focus on Russia while not involving an increased NATO presence in the South« (Calmels 2020b: 422).

When it comes to **future operations**, French pundits deem it unlikely that there will be more than training missions in the Southern Region (Pannier/Schmitt 2020: 141; Calmels 2020b). First of all, future operations in the region would need a robust legal basis (unlikely with the current blockades in the UN Security Council) and strong support from the United States (unlikely due to »post-Afghanistan operational fatigue«). Additionally, given its bureaucratic nature, internal divisions and slow decision-making procedures, NATO is not in a position to tackle the »diffuse and multifaceted nature of southern threats« (Calmels 2020b: 429) and it is questionable whether NATO should even be involved in tasks such as migration management or countering terrorist actions. Even though both the United States and European countries share the terrorist threat as a security problem, French pundits deem it fairly unlikely that NATO will get involved »even though several relevant programmes have been launched to adapt defence instruments to new threats and hybrid forms of armed violence« (Hautecouverture 2021). In the view of French scholars, coalitions-of-the-willing are more flexible and better placed to react to such contingencies. Regarding responses to instability in the South, NATO should either work closely with the better resources of the EU or leave the responsibility entirely to the EU. This would allow NATO to focus on its main purpose, namely territorial defence.

Regarding decision-making procedures, French experts take the view that changes in this area seem unlikely, if not impossible. Thus, increased consultation and dialogue on threat perceptions among the partners could once again lead to a

cohesive common policy, something that is currently lacking, but that has always been achieved in the past. For this, Joe Biden's presidency could be a good opportunity to revive the debates on collective security in Europe and the future of the transatlantic alliance. Biden's foreign policy priority to »restore and reimagine« alliances has opened up some leeway for a new strategic dialogue between the transatlantic partners, of which the Europeans should now take advantage (Hautecouverture 2021).

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