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ARMAMENT AND TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The French Perspective

By

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*The views expressed here are solely those of the author.
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Comment

ABSTRACT

France has always been an ally of the US and one of the most important NATO contributors, even when it was outside NATO's integrated military command. At the same time, France is also one of the European countries convinced that the citizens must accept and act to improve their autonomy and develop their own security and defence. In this perspective, the relationship between France and the US has been animated for a long time by this will of independence and autonomy. France has always tried to preserve as large a spectrum of military, industrial and technological capabilities as possible, favouring national solutions and European cooperation and, if necessary, US cooperation.

Keywords: *France and US relationships, strategic autonomy, European defence and armament*

American criticism of the too weak involvement of the Europeans in their own security is not a new phenomenon. In the '60s and the '70s, this analysis, widespread in the United States, had given rise to a theoretical corpus: The Theory of Alliances. In the framework of a European security mostly supported by the United States within NATO, France's will to preserve its autonomy could have been interpreted as an answer to the US criticism against the Europeans. However, France made a radical choice when it developed an autonomous and sovereign defence policy after the crisis of Suez. One of the main decisions taken by France at that time had been to leave NATO's integrated military command in 1966.

France's original stance in the transatlantic relationship normalised in 2009 when French President Nicolas Sarkozy decided it was time for the country to come back to NATO's integrated military command. Then for about ten years, France's policies relatively followed the United States. Both countries developed their cooperation through actions such as integrating French aviators in the Strategic Studies group of the US Air Force in 2011¹, or the US support to provide intelligence to the French troops during operation Serval in Africa².

However, the elections of President Trump in the US in November 2016, and of President Macron in France in May 2017, have somewhat changed the situation. As an alternative to the previous close relationship between President Obama and Chancellor Merkel, President Macron quickly positioned himself as the privileged interlocutor of President Trump in Europe³ while being a strong advocate of European defence initiatives.

Meanwhile, with President Trump, American criticisms of the Europeans have turned into threats also directed at the future involvement of the US in NATO. European defence issues were at that time at a crossroads with the UK decision to leave the EU and the various European initiatives (EDF, EDIDP, PESCO etc.) to support an improvement of the European military capabilities. Convinced European, President Macron took advantage of the situation by defending the idea that it was time for the EU countries to improve their strategic autonomy. The European army was the focal point of his discourses since an army requires a defence and security strategy, the identification of capability needs and gaps, and industrial investments to support innovation and a European DTIB.

¹ Pannier, A. (2018). La France et ses alliés les plus proches : évolutions, opportunités et défis d'un engagement multiple. Les Champs de Mars, 30 + supplément (1), 9a-17.

² Rapport d'information N°1288 de l'Assemblée Nationale déposé par la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur l'opération Serval au Mali, 18 juillet 2013.

³ De Hoop Scheffer A., & Quencez M. (2018), The US-France Special Relationship: Testing Macron Method, The German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief N°006/2018.

Within the context previously described, it becomes clear why the demand made by the US to Federica Mogherini both shocked and reassured France at the same time⁴. It was a shock because it was quite difficult to understand for a country as strongly attached to the concept of sovereignty as France that another country, moreover an ally, could be so directive and condescending⁵. It also reassured France because America's ire was seen as a sign that Americans were beginning to believe in Europe's will to strengthen its own defence capabilities, and to fear the effects it could have on the US leadership in Europe. The French authorities preferred not to react officially to the US letter nor to the answer sent by the Commission. However, the EU answer corresponded fully to the French official position whereby the EDF and PESCO would reinforce the European pillar in NATO and consequently, may not threaten the US.

France has long been convinced that being too close and dependant to the US for its security may threaten its operational and industrial capabilities, slow down European integration, reduce interoperability within NATO and limit the European autonomy. This is why France has limited its cooperation with the US in the field of armament to the bare necessities. The country has always had a pragmatic (sometimes even opportunistic) approach of its relationship with the US with several concerns in its line of sight:

- European industrial cooperation was systematically given priority over foreign cooperation. Consequently, industrial cooperation with the US was limited to cases for which the French DTIB might find an advantage in terms of capabilities without losing its skills and know-how. It would have been for example totally unthinkable for France to be associated to the US F-35 programme. Moreover, cooperation between American and French companies had not been very convincing (see for example the case of MEADS anti-missile system or the NATO frigate in the '90s);
- Off-the-shelf purchases limited to situations where the French industry is not yet able to provide the equipment (cases of the General Atomics' UAVs MALE MQ-9 Reaper or Lockheed Martin's C130 J) or when investments would have very limited interest due to the cost of such investments, or because it is impossible to design or build the equipment in Europe (Awacs airplane);
- Another mobile limiting the cooperation between the French and US industries may be found in the will of the French administration to preserve its autonomy in

⁴ See the letter sent to Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy by Ellen M. Lord, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment and Andrea L. Thompson, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, May 01 2019, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/1073-19-5-1-02-letter-to-hrvp-moghe/6cdebd319d226b532785/optimized/full.pdf>

⁵ Conway-Mouret H. (2019), *The Americans are trying to undermine Europe's efforts to become more autonomous over security*, *The Financial Times*, April, 11.

its exports policy and use of French equipment, ITAR regulation being considered too restrictive.

In this context, France imports relatively few US armaments and ranks only seventeenth on the list of US customers for arms procurements⁶.

Despite budgetary pressure, President Macron has committed to preserve and improve the full spectrum of military capabilities and to reach NATO's defence spending target of dedicating 2% of the GDP to military spending in 2025. As France has always been a major contributor of troops to NATO military operations, and a financial contributor to the alliance, this French commitment should reinforce NATO's allies' confidence in the French involvement to improve European security within NATO and the EU. However, this effort will be difficult to explain in France if it does not lead to support sovereignty, freedom of will, conservation, and development of European capabilities. In that perspective, Europe must define a more balanced relationship with the US that would strengthen industrial and technological skills in Europe, in order to reduce the gap between US and Europe capabilities in NATO. This is not only about defence issues or strategic autonomy, but, in an increasingly competitive world, it is also about the future of the European industry, of innovation in Europe and finally, prosperity, wealth and security in the future. ■

⁶ Belin J., Hartley K., Lefeez S., Linnenkamp H., Lundmark M., Masson H., Maulny J.-P. & Ungaro A. (2017), Defence Industrial Links between the EU and the US, Ares Group Report #20, Septembre 2017.

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ARES GROUP

The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group) was created in 2016 by The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (Iris), who coordinates the Group. The aim of the Ares Group, a high-level network of security and defence specialists across Europe, is to provide a forum to the European armament community, bringing together top defence industrial policy specialists, to encourage fresh strategic thinking in the field, develop innovative policy proposals and conduct studies for public and private actors.

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