

How to keep France engaged in NATO

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Analysis

France's policy vis-à-vis NATO has always been ambivalent. On paper, France's strategic culture fits well within NATO's nature and agenda: France is committed to the collective defence of the transatlantic space and to upholding the liberal principles of the international order; it maintains robust and modern military forces as well as a nuclear deterrent; and it has a propensity to participate in expeditionary operations, which is an asset for a military alliance such as NATO.

Yet, in practice, French membership of NATO has always been uneasy. French elites have tended to view NATO as skewed towards US interests, with too little support for the formation of a true 'European pillar' within the Alliance, while the US and other allies have tended to view France as causing unnecessary strain in the transatlantic relationship, through *unhelpful declarations* or *unilateral diplomatic initiatives*. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron's attempt at resuming a dialogue with Russia (alongside deterrence) has also received little support from allies. Then, in a very commented interview to *The Economist* (2019), Macron suggested that NATO was experiencing 'brain death': a provocative way of denouncing the *lack of political and strategic coordination* among allies. While the declaration arguably accelerated the thinking within the alliance on the need for renewed reflection, the declaration also confirmed France's reputation as a troublemaker.

It is in both NATO and France's interests to take the opportunity of the reflection process and the next strategic concept to try and make the most of the membership of the 4th largest contributor to NATO, in terms of Alliance budget and national defence spending.

This short briefing highlights some of the key determinants for how fruitful France's role within NATO will be in the future. Several intra-alliance developments will likely affect the quality of French-NATO relations over the next few years: US foreign policy priorities and its attitude towards EU defence and strategic autonomy; bilateral relations with the UK and Turkey; the agreed upon role distribution for dealing with emerging security threats; and the evolution of French politics after the next presidential elections. Each of those elements offers opportunities for the Alliance and its members to engage with France within NATO.

(1) US Foreign policy and its attitude towards European defence

French-US relations are a key factor in determining the French attitude towards NATO, even if the Alliance is not the primary vehicle for defence and security cooperation between Paris and Washington. Two factors matter in particular: the extent to which Paris perceives that Washington takes into account the security concerns of Europeans, not least in the Middle East and Africa; and the US attitude towards European defence initiatives.

On the former, French authorities are concerned about the gradual US disengagement from unstable regions, not least the Sahel and the Middle East. Seen from Paris, a US disengagement from the Middle East and Africa would hurt European interests by harming their counter-terrorist efforts, which could potentially lead to the emergence of new havens for terrorist networks and organised crime, and/or would let other powers fill the vacuum and gain influence in Europe's vicinity. Thus, the French government expressed a particularly strong reaction in 2019 when the US announced its intention of withdrawing troops from northern Syria without prior consultation with its European allies. In the view of French diplomats, the discrepancy between US and European security interests, which has led the US to be unwilling to take military or political risks in the MENA region, was not the result of Trump's election but of a longer-term shift in US foreign policy priorities. The incoming Biden Administration was seen as a hopeful sign for transatlantic cooperation in an increasingly degraded strategic environment. The messy disengagement from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the 'blundering' lack of consultation ahead of the AUKUS alliance announcement in September 2021 illustrate that effective foreign policy coordination should be at the heart of NATO's role in the coming years.

Secondly, the quality of French-US relations (and thus French-NATO relations) depends on the Biden Administration's attitude towards European defence efforts. President Emmanuel Macron's view of the articulation between NATO and European defence is – in line with previous French Presidents – as follows: “our security also inevitably requires that Europeans have a greater capacity for autonomous action. [...] Europeans must now take greater responsibility for this European defence, this European pillar within NATO. [...]. NATO and European Defence are two pillars of European collective security” (Macron, 2020).¹ Macron managed to get out of the AUKUS crisis in September 2021 with a recognition, from his counterpart ‘of the importance of European defence for transatlantic security and that of Europe’. While seemingly symbolic, such declarations could mark a shift after 30 years of US Administrations that warned against ‘duplication’ rather than welcoming European initiatives to develop defence capabilities. Seen from Paris, further US insistence will be needed to convince Europe to fully invest in its capabilities and in the tools developed by the EU and thus to strengthen NATO's European pillar.

¹ Emmanuel Macron (2020), ‘Déclaration du Président de la République sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion’, speech, Paris, 7/II/2020.

(2) France's bilateral relations with the UK and Turkey

Aside from Washington, the extent of French engagement in NATO, and the quality of intra-Alliance cohesion, will arguably also be defined by two other bilateral relations, that with the UK and that with Turkey. French-Turkish relations have been at their lowest since 2019, after Erdoğan launched offensives in northern Syria against the YPG, threatened to open up the border with Greece and reopen the migration route into the EU, disregarded the arms embargo against Libya and signed a maritime agreement with the GNA that infringes Greek and Cypriot sovereignty, and started exploring gas in Cypriot waters. In his 2019 *Economist* interview, Emmanuel Macron explained that in Syria there had been 'uncoordinated aggressive action by another NATO ally, Turkey, in an area where our interests are at stake. There has been no NATO planning, nor any coordination. There hasn't even been any NATO deconfliction' (Macron, *The Economist*, 2019). In this context, France's positive engagement in NATO is partly defined by the support it receives in its effort to ensure collective security among European countries. Arguably, relations with Turkey will not be solely a French matter but will also be a determining factor to facilitate EU-NATO cooperation –a central stake as the two organisations' agendas converge on a number of 'new' threats–.

France's action within NATO is characterised by a strong investment in intra-alliance partnerships: the P3 (France, the UK and the US), the Quad (P3 plus Germany) and the Quint (Quad, plus Italy). The Quad is also useful to Paris to remain engaged on nuclear matters that concern the Alliance, as France does not participate in the Nuclear Planning Group. Among the Quint countries, the relationship between Paris and London is the most strained, after years of tense Brexit negotiations, and most recently the rift over AUKUS. NATO's strength will depend on the ability of French and British political decision-makers to reaffirm their commitment to the bilateral defence relationship and to successfully articulate it within the Alliance. Given the strategic role of France and the UK in Euro-Atlantic security, each year that passes without real progress in capability, nuclear, operational cooperation or on emerging security issues is a waste of time that will have to be made up for in the future. To wait for better days would be illusory: the longer the revival of the partnership is postponed, the greater effort both parties will have to make to ensure their defence strategies converge, and the greater the deficit in terms of security for the whole Atlantic alliance.

(3) Role distribution in the new threat landscape

Thirdly, a key element in the quality of French-NATO relations will be the degree of convergence on the new threat landscape, and the respective roles attributed to NATO, individual states and the EU in addressing these threats. When looking at security challenges that France is concerned with (Russia and China's aggressive foreign policies, hybrid and emerging security threats, terrorism or instability in the Middle East and Africa), French decision-makers see a role for NATO, albeit a limited one, complementing European and national efforts.

Close to Europe, France has supported NATO's renewed investment in collective defence after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. France has taken part in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) and welcomes NATO's ability to design a 'balanced, deterrent and predictable posture' in Eastern

Europe (Ministère des Armées, 2017, p. 23). At the same time, Emmanuel Macron has been viewed by some NATO partners as ambiguous as he has, simultaneously, advocated a renewed dialogue with Russia so as to avoid further misunderstandings.

When it comes to threats and instability south of Europe, which do matter to France, France has been reluctant about the idea of a significant NATO engagement. Despite supporting a NATO '360' approach, French leaders have favoured coalitions or the EU, rather than NATO, to act in Europe's southern neighbourhood. NATO's role has nonetheless been welcomed for naval operations in the Mediterranean or in the Gulf of Aden.

Meanwhile, emerging threats have been growing in importance, including new weapon systems, cyberattacks and the militarisation of space, as well as 'soft' security challenges such as economic coercion and risks to critical infrastructures. In many ways, these threats raise the question of the Alliance's attitude towards and role vis-à-vis China. During the Trump years, but even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of a bipartisan consensus on China in Washington, Paris has been concerned with the strategic uncertainties that an all-out US-China rivalry would create for Europeans. Summarising this view, the 2021 Strategic Update puts that Washington's 'overly exclusive focus on competition with Beijing, and the resulting temptation to restore a form of bipolarity based on the alignment of allies, could be inconsistent with a complex, resolutely multipolar world'. From the French viewpoint it is not illegitimate for NATO to address the China question, in some of its aspects. The view is that China poses no direct military threat (yet) to European or North Atlantic territory. However, there is concern for China and other countries' development of new military systems (including hypersonic missiles), as well as activities in space and cyberspace, which can pose threats to Europe. France thus supports a NATO role in space, cyber and arms control.

The accelerated digitalisation of a wide array of activities following the COVID-19 pandemic, together with China's aggressive diplomacy, also prompt a reflection on the risks associated with foreign dependencies in critical technological sectors including telecom infrastructure, data management technologies and software, semiconductors and raw materials. Meanwhile, foreign control over infrastructure (ports, transport and telecommunications) and strategic companies could create weak points for Europe in the event of future conflict. That being said, the suggestion of expanding NATO's role into foreign investment screening, intellectual property theft or the protection of civilian critical infrastructure, as suggested by some, is viewed in Paris with caution. Seen from Paris, the EU is often more effective or legitimate in tackling these issues and/or has already undertaken policy measures. Exchanges of views to coordinate policies on risk management and resilience of infrastructure will thus preferably take place within the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council or the G7, or we risk facing a 'duplication reverse' debate within the Alliance.

In many ways, French views on role distribution for managing threats –and in particular the appropriate breadth of NATO's role– link back to the quality of intra-alliance rapports. Thus, in practice, after an incident involving French and Turkish vessels in June 2020, France decided to suspend its participation in NATO's *Sea Guardian* naval patrol mission. More recently, the breach of trust caused by the AUKUS deal could lead France

to lean even more towards a more autonomous European action in the Indo-Pacific or to block further progress of NATO's actions and partnerships in the region.

(4) The French presidential elections

Last, but not least, the outcome of the April 2022 French presidential election could be decisive for French foreign and defence policy and alliance politics. Particular attention should be paid to the upcoming presidential campaign, considering the number of candidates who hold unconventional views about NATO, the US and relations with Russia. The mere prospect of having the candidate of the Rassemblement National at the Elysée would fundamentally alter France's policy vis-à-vis the Alliance, in the most unpredictable manner. While President Macron is ahead in the polls at the time of writing, it is important to note that among his (potential) contenders, a few have expressed negative views of NATO and some have called for an outright withdrawal of the Alliance or its integrated structures –especially after the AUKUS incident–.

French public opinion about NATO has deteriorated in recent years. Positive opinions of NATO in France have been steadily declining since 2009 (when France reintegrated NATO's military structure). While in 2009 71% of respondents declared being in favour of the Alliance, in 2020 they were only 50% –ie, 10% less than the average for NATO members–, with a significant drop all along the Trump presidency (Pew Research Center). But most importantly, the French population's knowledge about the Alliance is very limited. In 2019 only 66% of respondents knew that France was a member of NATO (IPSOS) and in 2020 almost a quarter of them did not have an opinion or did not know about it (2020 GMF). In addition, the French appear to have some misconceptions about the alliance –for example, in a 2019 IPSOS poll, only a small majority of respondents (56%) knew that an attack against one is an attack against all, and 42% believed that the alliance was conducting a military operation in Syria (IPSOS, 2019)–. That France holds one of the most senior positions within the Alliance, with Allied Command Transformation, is probably known to only a handful of students and policy elites. Thus, while France should show pedagogy in laying out its vision for NATO and clarify its intent, the Alliance could also try and engage in a public diplomacy effort towards the French public.

Disclaimer: The Elcano Royal Institute is launching a series of publications with the aim of feeding into the emerging debate around NATO's Strategic Concept by providing a collective and national approach to the future of NATO. Selected national experts from different NATO allies (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal and Poland) have contributed to the series by portraying the current debate in their home countries around the Strategic Concept and the future of the Alliance. Thus, the Elcano Royal Institute seeks to highlight the importance of the renewal of the Concept and its adoption at the Madrid Summit, to be held in Madrid in June 2022.