

# DEFENCE: THE FRENCH AMBITION FOR EUROPE

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As the Commission on the French White Paper on Defence and National Security hands in its report to the president of the French Republic, Nicole Gnesotto and Sophie-Caroline de Margerie give us their thoughts on the future of national defence and on the French ambition for Europe, and analyse the consequences of American military redeployment.

## 1. In the light of the drastic budget cuts that are due to be made under the upcoming Military Planning Law for 2014-2020, how does the White Paper propose to structure France's priorities in the field of intervention abroad? What picture of French interests does it give?

Defining strategic interests and priorities in the field of intervention is the sum of a complex series of factors. Budget constraints are only one of those aspects, an important one of course, but not decisive. The state of the world, the prospective development of threats and risks on the one hand, and the question of whether or not we will be facing those threats and risks alone or with our partners on the other, are equally crucial. In view of this combination of resources, threats and potential partnerships, the White Paper establishes five political priorities:

- protecting France's territory and its population, and guaranteeing the normal functioning of its institutions and of the country;
- joining with others in guaranteeing the security of the European Union and of the North Atlantic area;
- joining with others in stabilising the approaches to Europe;
- participating in the stability of the Near East and of the Persian Gulf;
- contributing to peace in the world.

As far as intervention abroad is concerned, geography is a crucial factor, yet it is worth qualifying it in terms of the following three goals:

- protecting our citizens throughout the world;
- defending our strategic interests and those of our allies;
- exercising our international responsibilities.

In this context, Europe's near neighbours to the east and to the south are a priority, in particular the Maghreb, the Sahel and Africa's Atlantic seaboard, and the Gulf of Guinea. The Persian Gulf is also of the utmost importance on account of the risks that it harbours and of the cooperation and defence agreements binding France to a certain number of countries in the region. Then come the Indian Ocean region and Asia. Regarding all these potential areas of intervention, the White Paper calls for a common European analysis of risks and threats in the shape of a European White Paper.

## 2. To what extent do you think that this cut in capability is going to impact France's influence in Europe, in NATO and in the UN Security Council?

Military spending levels are unquestionably an important indicator of a country's power and influence, yet only a relative one. If they were the crucial factor, then countries such as Turkey, Greece and Saudi Arabia which spend over 3% of their GDP on military expenditure, would be today's great powers, even more so than France. Yet clearly, no one believes that to be the case... Conversely, the United States has entered a phase of drastic spending cuts in its military budget - it is set to spend \$500 million less over the next ten years - without anyone thinking that its standing on the world's political stage is going to weaken on that account. In other words, in the globalised context in which we now live, the military factor has become one indicator among many of a country's power, not necessarily the only one or the primary one as it used to be during the Cold War. A country's ability to influence the international environment now rests on a

combination of elements: a strategic vision, the legitimacy to act, a willingness to take risks, and political strength and cohesion. It is in this light that redressing the balance of public finances, for a country such as France, is also a crucial security objective; in fact, it is a precondition for any action on the international stage. For France to maintain a high level of military spending while sacrificing its political independence would be an unreasonable choice in strategic terms.

That being said, France's relative reduction of its budgetary effort might indeed be perceived by our partners as a lowering of the country's ambitions, even though France is still one of the European countries that invest most in defence and security. In a rather perverse way, some might even use the stagnation in French defence as an argument to question our European ambitions. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, the White Paper identifies three factors in the current context that argue in favour of a new European dynamic in connection with the management of external crises:

- the rebalancing of the United States' strategic priorities towards Asia;
- the ongoing instability on the Union's immediate eastern and southern rim, which requires that the Europeans increase their vigilance and investments, including in the sphere of defence;
- lastly, the increasing scarcity of budget resources available in each of the member states should cause the multilateral option to become all the more crucial in crisis management.

In other words, the new strategic equation proposed in the White Paper might be summed up as follows: less money, more instability and less US involvement = a more European defence system.

### **3. The 2008 White Paper is frequently held up by our European partners as a reference model. Would it be possible to draft a European White Paper of this kind, and if so, what would its added value be?**

The report on European security strategy drafted under the authority of Javier Solana dates back to 2003. The world has changed in ten years. It would indeed be a useful exercise to identify the threats besetting Europe and the interests that the European Union plans to defend, either on its own or in conjunction with the Atlantic alliance. Naturally, a document of that kind would not be easy to put together

inasmuch as it requires answers to such taboo questions as the Union's borders or as the existence of adversaries, questions which the member states prefer to sweep under the carpet. But in addition to providing welcome clarifications in that area, the advantage of a European White Paper would be to reaffirm a common ambition, leading to the development of independent and/or shared capabilities in support of the strategic vision that it defines. France, for its part, is in favour of a political initiative of that kind being taken.

### **4. Only five EU member states deployed combat aircraft in the NATO operation in Libya in 2011, while the operation in Mali has once again shown that the Europeans are very much divided over the use of force in external operations. Is Europe's ambition in the security and defence spheres inevitably restricted to civil-military operations?**

The Europeans have always been split over the use of force, quite simply because they have very different strategic histories and legacies. Between pacifist Germany, nuclear and pro-intervention France and Great Britain, neutral countries, countries that are basically in favour of UN peacekeeping operations and those that wish to leave to the United States and to NATO the job of dealing with the world at large, the strategic panorama in Europe is indeed very varied. It takes a great deal of argument, a great deal of conviction and a great deal of persuading on the part of a handful of member states, including France, to thrash out a common European decision in the field of crisis management. From that point of view, Libya was a failure. But Mali is not, because France was not looking for a CSDP operation in Mali. What France wanted was logistical support from a majority of its allies, and that is what it got. In substantive terms, the goal of the CSDP cannot be to ensure that all 28 member states play a military role in every single crisis management operation launched within the framework of the Union. Rather, the goal is to gradually develop a single, common strategic awareness to ensure that not one member state will want or be able to prevent a group of other member states from acting in the European Union's name.

Thus where the use of force is concerned, it is important to highlight two more structural developments. On the one hand, growing reluctance to use force is not a prerogative of the Europeans. Even the United States itself is changing in this regard. The United

States is currently appraising two recent military operations that it has been conducting for ten years, in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and the conclusions thus drawn point towards greater selectivity and prudence where conventional military operations are concerned. The new strategic thinking in President Obama's United States favours clandestine action, recourse to non-manned methods (drones in particular), the ability to "lead from behind" by cutting back on its own operations on the ground and so forth. On the other hand, the lessons learned from recent crises, say over the past ten or fifteen years, highlight the insufficiency of the purely military segments of an operation if they are not built into a comprehensive continuum, into an all-embracing civil-military approach which alone is capable of resolving crises in a lasting fashion. Iraq and Afghanistan are important examples of the need for a global approach to the management of external crises. And this global rather than purely military approach to crisis management was in many ways invented, encouraged, illustrated and defended by the Europeans, initially in the security strategy that they adopted back in 2003 and subsequently in the practical implementation of the crisis management operations conducted by the EU since then. In other words, civil-military intervention is not a second-best option. It is an imperative, a necessity, and it is very difficult to implement, far more difficult, demanding and crucial than a mere technical-cum-military approach.

**5. What are the consequences of the redeployment of the United States' capabilities towards Asia and of Washington's aim to see the Europeans play a greater role in their region's security? Can it help the Europeans improve the compatibility between the development of a European security and defence policy and their commitment to NATO?**

Weary from an "era of war", bent on cutting its deficit and split over the importance and manner of military intervention, the United States no longer sees itself with quite the same unbending certainty as "the indispensable nation". In this context of prudence and restraint, it has defined certain priorities for the allocation of its military and diplomatic resources, placing the Asian continent at the top of the list, without much explanation given on the objectives of this rebalancing. Is it seeking to reassure its Pacific allies, or is it seeking to contain Chinese hubris, China having become "public frenemy number one"?

One should not overstate the novelty of this concern because Asia and the Pacific have always played a role of considerable importance in US history, nor should one imagine that it is going to exclude all other concerns. The United States does not intend to lose all interest in Europe, nor indeed to relinquish its leading role in connection with Israel or with Saudi Arabia. But the fact remains that a certain interest in task-sharing can be perceived, with the Europeans being firmly urged to play a greater role in their continent's security and to police their neighbouring environment, as happened in Georgia in 2008 and in Libya in 2011.

In theory at least, this US amenability creates a climate that is favourable to improved cooperation between the Atlantic alliance and the European Union, and to the European Union playing a role in external operations. It is up to the Europeans to seize this opportunity. Do they wish to build a European defence, to recognize that military might is one of the tools of influence that no one can afford to do without in a competitive and dangerous world? France, for its part, has made that choice.

**6. With the European Council in December 2013 being devoted to developing a European security and defence policy, François Hollande has said that he is in favour of taking another step forward. How can we best prepare for this deadline and on what issues should the heads of state and government leaders focus primarily (genuine pooling and sharing efforts, industrial convergence and so forth)?**

The political signal is of the utmost importance, because this is the first time since the Lisbon Treaty came into force that the heads of state and government leaders meeting at a European Council have decided to put defence at the top of the list of their concerns. Putting security and defence issues at the highest political level concurs with a wish that France voiced back in the autumn of 2012. The White Paper, together with the Védrine Report, also lists it as one of the preconditions for imparting a fresh political boost to the CSDP. The preparation of this event is already mobilising all of the Union's structures - the EEAS, the Commission, the European Parliament -, the whole strategic community and all of the think tanks that concern themselves with these issues. Yet it is not the European institutions that play a crucial role in the field of defence but the member states. France has

taken the initiative of a root-and-branch debate taking place in a range of cooperation fora such as the “Weimar Plus” group (which, at Paris’s urging, has brought together France, Germany and Poland along with two southern countries, Italy and Spain, since last November). The European Council’s future decisions are due to be structured along four lines: strategy, operations, capabilities, and the European defence industry. And it is all linked: we need to learn the lessons imparted by recent operations in order to identify our weaknesses and the capabilities that we urgently need to build (in-flight refuelling, strategic transport aircraft and so on). We need to assess costly industrial redundancies in order to restructure Europe’s defence

industry, to boost research and to protect small and medium-sized businesses in an area which accounts for over 300,000 jobs in Europe. And lastly, we need to analyse the development of the risks and crises surrounding the EU in order to decide on the priorities to which Europe can bring added value on the basis of its own interests. There is no lack of potential progress that can be made: for instance, taking over the NATO operation in Kosovo, strengthening security actions in the Sahel, maritime strategy, a European White Paper on defence, giving preference to European industry in the defence industry sector, imparting a fresh boost to the EADS/Bae dynamic and so forth. European defence lies before us.

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