

# WHAT THE FRENCH AND THE GERMANS REALLY THINK ABOUT A EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE UNION

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## SUMMARY

We need a European Security and Defence Union, and it is what our citizens want. This narrative has accompanied recent Franco-German and European efforts to foster closer cooperation on security and defence. But what in fact do citizens actually want? This policy paper attempts to provide an answer to the question by reviewing recent French and German public opinion data. Eurobarometer polls suggest that French, German and other EU citizens have consistently been in favour of a Common Security and Defence Policy. However, one has to go beyond this rather imprecise way of measuring support in order to understand the whys and the wherefores, the hows, the what fors and indeed the how much of a European Security and Defence Union.

### 1. The ‘whys and the wherefores’: perceptions of key threats and challenges

Since 2015 French, German and other EU citizens have identified immigration and terrorism as the two most important challenges facing the Union. The traditional view, which sees France focusing primarily on the Southern Neighbourhood, and Germany on the Eastern Neighbourhood, has become blurred on the level of elites and publics.

### 2. The ‘hows’: beyond ideological divides

The extent of the EU’s strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and NATO has been a divisive issue, with the French leading the Europeanist camp and the Germans tending to be more Euro-Atlanticist. There has been convergence towards more Europeanism on the level of elites and publics. Despite equally negative attitudes towards the current US administration, French and German citizens have also developed a more positive view of NATO.

### 3. The ‘what fors’: security, defence and crisis management

The Germans and the French are in general agreement on the use of civilian resources within the framework of the Security Union (e.g. civilian counter-terrorism measures). However, public attitudes continue to differ with regard to the effectiveness and legitimacy of the use of force. The German public is likely to remain a significant veto player when it comes to using the European Defence Union for out-of-area operations.

### 4. The ‘how much’: defence expenditure

In both France and Germany the heightened perception of internal and external threats has gone hand in hand with a greater approval of increased defence expenditure. However, public opinion polls have also shown that there are striking misperceptions about the current level of European and national defence expenditure.

Thus, although there has been a degree of Franco-German convergence with regard to the whys and wherefores, the hows, and the how much of a European Security and Defence Union, differences on the what fors persist. Moreover, Franco-German convergence is not necessarily shared by other EU citizens. For this reason national governments will have to continue to explain the Security and Defence Union to their publics and to remain in close and regular touch with regard to its key purpose and strategic priorities.

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## INTRODUCTION

A day after the British referendum on withdrawal from the European Union (EU), the then French and German foreign ministers, Jean-Marc Ayrault and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, issued a joint declaration entitled “A strong Europe in an insecure world”<sup>1</sup>. One of its central messages was that the two countries intended to back the development of a European Security Union “striving for a common security and defence policy”<sup>2</sup>. The rationale for this, as was stated in the declaration, was the idea that Europe had to provide security for its citizens. This narrative has accompanied all subsequent Franco-German and EU efforts to develop a European Security and Defence Union.

The concept of a European Security and Defence Union is far from being new. It was first proposed in 2002 by the French and German foreign ministers, Dominique de Villepin and Joschka Fischer, and endorsed in 2003 by Luxembourg and Belgium at the so-called ‘Praline Summit’ on the development of the European Security and Defence Policy in Tervuren.

However, over the past two years more has happened to lend substance to this concept than in the previous decade. The Global Strategy for EU Foreign and Security Policy was published a few days after the British referendum<sup>3</sup>. This document updated the European Security Strategy drawn up in 2003. In the meantime the member states and the Commission have pursued the development of a European Security Union that focused on combating terrorism, organised crime and cybercrime, and on border protection<sup>4</sup>. The EU has also established key pillars of the European Defence Union. These include

- a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) for non-executive military (training and capacity-building) operations within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP);
- the launch of the inclusive and ambitious Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the area of defence by 25 member states<sup>5</sup>;
- the creation of a European Defence Fund (EDF) to promote more collaborative member state spending on defence research and capability development; and
- the establishment of a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD).

However, observers and analysts are sceptical about whether the European Security and Defence Union will be able to deliver. In his EU speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron singled out an important missing ingredient, the lack of a common European strategic culture. Scholars have defined this strategic culture as the “ideas, norms and patterns of behaviour that are shared across the actors and publics involved in the processes of pursuing European security and defence”<sup>6</sup>. Macron quite rightly pointed out that strategic cultures do not change rapidly. Whereas recent policy developments reflect a degree of gradual convergence on the elite level, the question is whether this is also true of normal citizens.

Some might doubt whether (and to what extent) public opinion really matters when it comes to strategic culture and security policy. Germany’s traditional adherence to a culture of military restraint, which is due to both its history and its risk-averse public, demonstrates that the perception of public opinion matters. The more relevant question might be under what circumstances it actually plays a role. According to some scholarly research<sup>7</sup>, public opinion tends to matter most when the issues at stake are publicly salient and divide the political elite ahead of elections.

1. Ayrault, Jean-Marc and Steinmeier, Frank-Walter, “A strong Europe in a world of uncertainties”, Federal Foreign Office, 27 June 2016.

2. Ibid.

3. The publication of the Global Strategy was not a response to the British referendum. The date of publication had been determined before the British vote. European External Action Service, “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, Brussels, June 2016.

4. See European Commission, “Security Union”, June 2017.

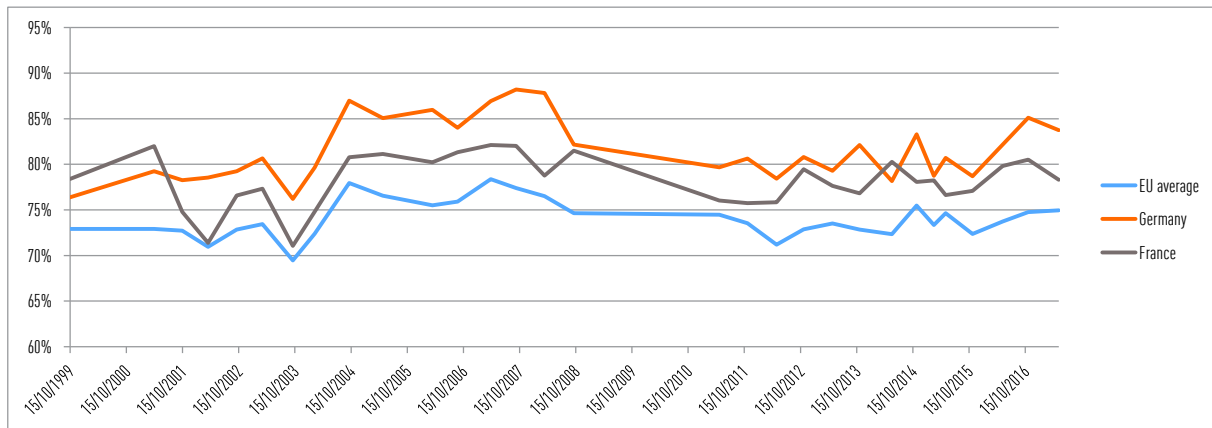
5. The ‘PESCO-outs’ include the UK, which is going to leave the EU, Denmark, which has an opt-out on defence-related EU cooperation, and neutral Malta.

6. Meyer, Christoph O., “Theorising European Strategic Culture: between convergence and the persistence of national diversity”, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), CEPS working document, 2014, Brussels, 2014: 4.

7. Oppermann, Kai, “Salience and sanctions: a principal-agent analysis of domestic win-sets in two-level games—the case of British European policy under the Blair government”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol 21, no. 2, 2008: 179–197.

These criteria do not necessarily apply to the fairly abstract idea of a European Security and Defence Union. Eurobarometer polls suggest that a majority of EU citizens in all of the member states (even including the UK and Denmark) have consistently supported a common European defence and security policy since the late 1990s (see Figure 1). The fact that there has been little significant variation over time despite institutional changes and developments in the EU's neighbourhood casts some doubt on the public's understanding of this survey item<sup>8</sup>. As previous analyses have shown<sup>9</sup>, it is necessary to go beyond such macro-questions, which are likely to conceal different and nationally determined perceptions of the meaning and purpose of a European Security and Defence Union.

**FIGURE 1** ▶ Support for a common European defence and security policy



Source: Eurobarometer, 1999-2017

This paper analyses differences and commonalities in French and German public opinion within the broader EU context. In view of the fact that post-Brexit France and Germany will not only account for roughly one-third of the EU population, but also half of its combined defence expenditure, their convergence towards a common understanding of a European Security and Defence Union will arguably have a bearing on its effectiveness. The paper goes beyond the mere approval of a joint policy and reviews public opinion data on

- the whys and wherefores (threats and challenges);
- the hows (Europeanism vs. Atlanticism);
- the what fors (practical tasks); and
- the how much (expenditure)

of a European Security and Defence Union.

As with every analysis of public opinion data, one has to start with a few caveats. First, we do not have comparable and reliable public opinion data for all of the items listed above. Second, the European Security and Defence Union may seem to be a rather distant and abstract concept as far as many citizens are concerned. Survey data reveal that there are undeniable misperceptions of national and European security policy (see section 4 of this paper). Thus one has to take public opinion data with a pinch of salt. They are the result of real and often vague attitudes and may help us to analyse some broader trends. However, they should be treated with caution when it comes to causal analysis.

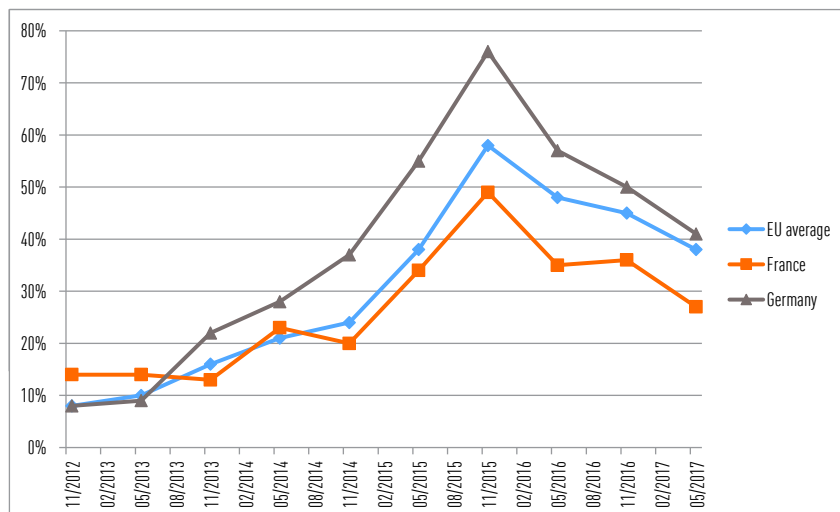
## 1. Perception of threats and challenges: Franco-German convergence

It has become a commonplace to state that one of the key challenges facing a common European security and defence policy is the divergence between the threat perceptions of the various member states. This divergence concerns both the nature of threats and their geographic origin. However, in recent years the views of French, German and other EU citizens with regard to key pan-European challenges seem to have converged.

<sup>8</sup>. Instead of measuring opinions of the EU's effective security and defence cooperation, the item may simply measure more general attitudes towards the notion of security or towards the EU as a peace project.

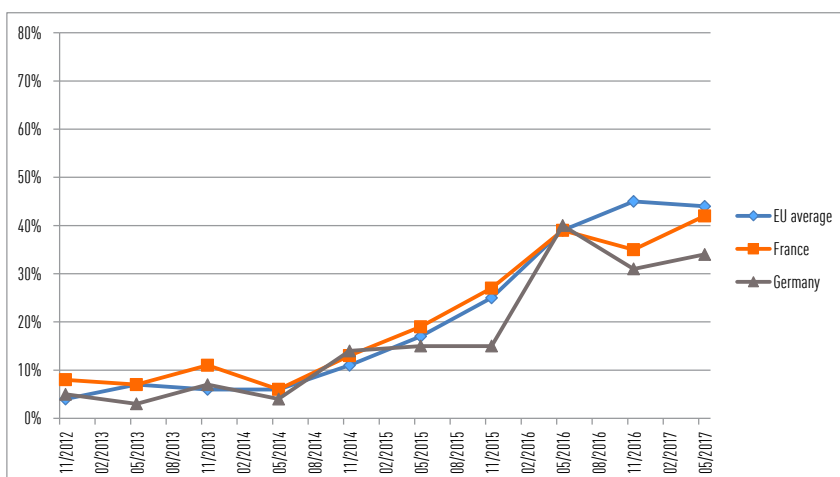
<sup>9</sup>. De France, Olivier, "What EU citizens think about European defence", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief No. 43, 2013.

**FIGURE 2** ▶ Immigration as one of the two top challenges facing the EU



Source: Eurobarometer (2012-2017)

**FIGURE 3** ▶ Terrorism as one of the two top challenges facing the EU



Source: Eurobarometer (2012-2017)

In 2015 immigration and terrorism replaced the economic situation and unemployment as the two most important pan-European challenges. At the peak of the refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015 immigration was seen as the single most important pan-European challenge.

Since then the issue has lost some of its salience in the eyes of EU citizens, partly as a result of a decrease in migrant inflows (see Figure 2). Simultaneously there has been a growing concern about terrorism (see Figure 3). Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016 and 2017 show that Europeans consider the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to be the single most important threat to national security<sup>10</sup>. The responses of German and French respondents were rather similar, even if the former were more concerned about immigration and the latter about terrorism.

Tradition has it that the Germans are more interested in the east and the French in the south, but this view has become slightly blurred. In 2013, when asked about the role of Africa in German foreign and security policy, diplomats were in the habit of saying that the map of Africa in the Foreign Office in Berlin was, figuratively speaking, far smaller than the ones in Paris and Brussels<sup>11</sup>. The German-led G20 initiative “Compact with Africa” illustrates the fact that things have changed on the elite level. The simultaneous occurrence of refugee

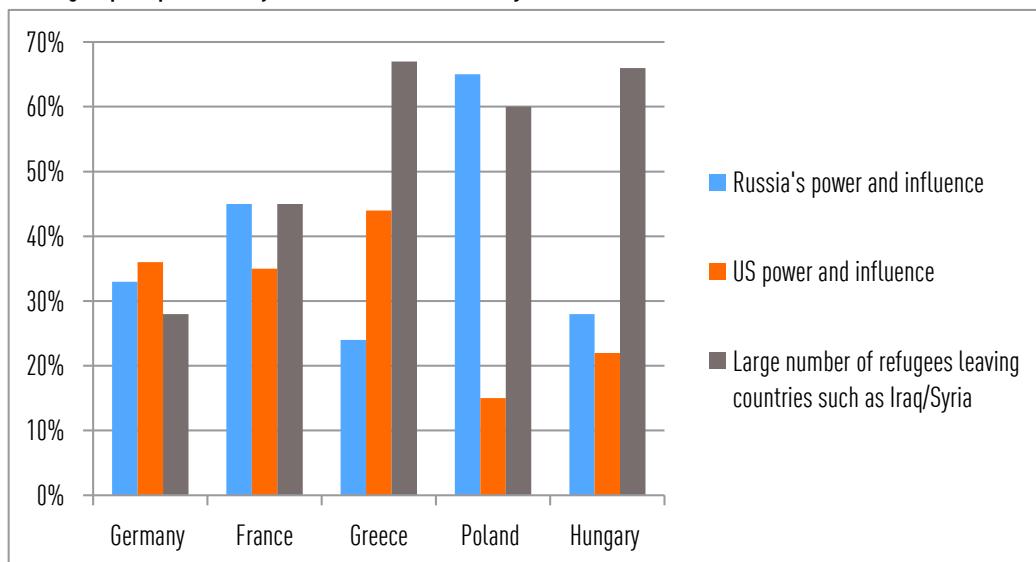
10. Pew Research Center, “Europeans face the world divided”, June 2016; Global Threats Survey, August 2017.

11. Interviews with German diplomats, Berlin, 2013.

flows and terrorism also made German citizens realise that there is a direct link between their country’s stability and that of the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood. An October 2017 survey of the Körber Foundation found that most Germans (38%) want their country to focus on Africa, followed by Russia and Eastern Europe (23%), and the Middle East (17%)<sup>12</sup>. Conversely, for the French Russia has become a more salient security concern since the start of the Ukraine conflict. According to a 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center, 45% of French citizens consider Russia’s power and influence to be a major threat to their country, whereas only 33% of the Germans are of this opinion<sup>13</sup>.

While French and German threat perceptions have converged, their views are not shared by all the other EU citizens (see Figure 4). Thus the perception of Russian influence and power is far more negative amongst Polish citizens. On the other hand, Greek citizens have a much more positive image of Russia and are far more inclined than the French and Germans to see US influence and power as a threat. After its peak in the autumn of 2015, the salience of the migration challenge may have waned in Germany, France, and the rest of the EU. However, the citizens of Hungary, Poland and Greece continue to see the large number of refugees from the Middle East not only as a challenge, but as a major threat to national security.

FIGURE 4 ► Divergent perceptions of major threats to national security (selected items)



Source: Pew Research Center (2017)

## 2. Europeanism vs. Euro-Atlanticism: bridging ideological divides

One of the differences between French and German strategic cultures is the preference for either Europeanism or Atlanticism. French politicians have traditionally led the Europeanist camp that advocates *l'Europe de la défense* with its strategic independence of NATO and of the United States (US). Their German counterparts can be classified as being Euro-Atlanticist. They tend to consider NATO as the bedrock of Germany’s defence policy, but also support the development of CSDP, which they see as an important EU integration project. However, the US pivot to Asia and the Trump administration’s transactional approach towards NATO have led to a shift in elite opinion. In her ‘beer tent speech’ in May 2017, Chancellor Merkel said that the times when Germany could rely on others were “over to some extent” and stressed: “We Europeans have to take our fate into their own hands”<sup>14</sup>. Germany has thus moved closer to France’s Europeanist camp. But is elite convergence also shared by the citizens?

12. Körber Foundation, “Einmischen oder Zurückhalten? Eine repräsentative Umfrage zur Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik”, October 2017.

13. Pew Research Center, Global Threats Survey, August 2017.

14. In Paravicini, Giulia, “Angela Merkel: Europe must take ‘our fate’ into own hands”, Politico, 28 May 2017.

Public opinion data offer a mixed picture concerning attitudes towards the US and NATO. On the one hand, French and German citizens share a low level of confidence in President Trump (comparable to President George W. Bush in 2008)<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, roughly one-third of the citizens of both countries see US power and influence as a threat to national security (see Figure 4). Interestingly, the Germans actually consider the latter to be a slightly bigger security threat than Russian power and influence. On the other hand, attitudes towards NATO have become more positive between 2016 and 2017. With NATO approval rates of 67% (+8%) and 60% (+11%) respectively, the German and French respondents were not very far apart in May 2017<sup>16</sup>. The French approval of NATO was only 2 percentage points lower than that of the British, which is surprising in view of the fact that the UK is the EU's leading Atlanticist.

Two national surveys further blur the lines between Europeanism and Atlanticism. An IFOP/DICoD poll from May 2017 found that 68% of the French support the statement *l'Europe de la défense* should be constructed within the broader context of NATO<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, an October 2017 survey commissioned by the Körber Foundation shows that 88% of the German respondents are in favour of prioritising defence cooperation with European partners over that with the US while only 9% hold the opposite view<sup>18</sup>.

All in all, the data presented above suggest that the Germans have become more Europeanist and that views on the US and NATO are rather similar. Convergent support for NATO is notable in the light of the negative attitudes towards the US and the fact that 7 out of 11 candidates in the 2017 French presidential election advocated either an exit from NATO or from its integrated military command<sup>19</sup>. It could be interpreted as a sign that citizens who feel threatened value the effective provision of security and defence more than ideology.

### 3. European Security and Defence Union: from concept to practice

French and German foreign policy elites have traditionally held different views when it comes to the EU's role in security affairs. French politicians have tended to emphasise the need for a Defence Union, whereas the Germans have advocated the EU's role as a global civilian power based on a comprehensive approach and a small military wing. These diverging perspectives are also reflected in the fact that between 2003 and 2014 the French human resources contribution to CSDP missions and operations was 3.5 times higher than the German one<sup>20</sup>. In the light of these differences it is interesting to note that German citizens have on average been slightly more supportive (82%) of a "common defence and security policy" than the French (78%) (see Figure 1). This paradox calls for a closer look at the publics' preferences with regard to the 'what fors' of a European Security and Defence Union and the preferred balance between civilian and military resources.

Public opinion data suggest that by and large German and French citizens agree with regard to the aims and civilian resources of a European Security Union. In line with their convergent threat perception (see section 1), 83% of the respondents in both countries believe that the EU should do more to fight terrorism<sup>21</sup>. This view is shared by large majorities in all member states (average: 82%)<sup>22</sup>. French, German and EU citizens are very much in favour of efforts to disrupt terrorist financing, to counter radicalization, to protect the EU's external borders as well as of more European police and intelligence cooperation<sup>23</sup>. However, EU citizens also believe that terrorism is best tackled at the international level. This is particularly the case for French respondents: 54% believe that terrorism is most efficiently addressed at the global level while only 17% see the EU as the most efficient platform<sup>24</sup>.

15. The attitudes of Spanish and British respondents followed a similar pattern but the drop in the level of confidence was less marked in the latter case: Pew Research Center, "US Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership", May 2017.

16. NATO's image has improved in a range of EU member states since 2016. Dutch and Polish respondents held more positive attitudes (79% approval) than the French and the Germans while the Spanish attitudes were less positive (45% approval): Pew Research Center, "NATO's Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic", May 2017.

17. IFOP-DICoD, "Les chiffres clés des sondages de la défense", July 2017.

18. Körber Foundation, "Einmischen oder Zurückhalten? Eine repräsentative Umfrage zur Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik", October 2017.

19. The candidates in favour of staying within NATO and its integrated military command – Emmanuel Macron, Benoît Hamon and François Fillon – received 50% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election. "La place de la France dans l'Otan", Le Monde, 2017.

20. Bakker, Anne; Drent, Margriet and Zandee, Dick, "European defence: how to engage the UK after Brexit", Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, July 2017.

21. European Parliament: "Special Eurobarometer: Europeans in 2016: Perceptions and expectations, fight against terrorism and radicalization", June 2016.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

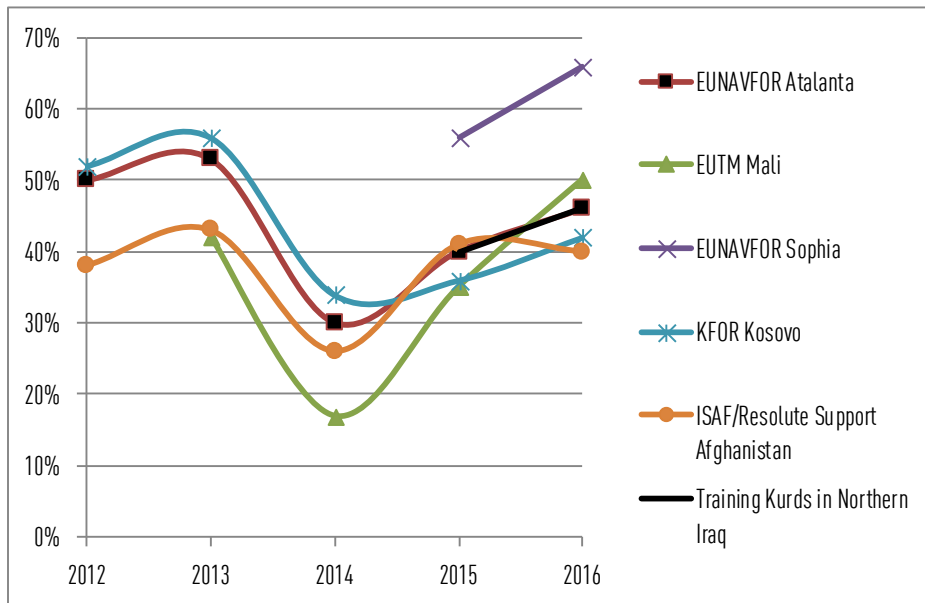
24. Ibid.

Citizens in both countries also seem to be in favour of the creation of a European army. While it is somewhat unclear what they understand by this term, it can be seen as a proxy for closer defence integration in the spirit of a European Defence Union. A Eurobarometer poll in April 2017 found that 65% of the French respondents were in favour of the creation of an EU army, while 55% of the German respondents supported the idea<sup>25</sup>. The EU average was also 55% (+2% compared to 2015). Support was highest (above 65%) in the Benelux, Bulgaria and Lithuania. Only five member states had small majorities opposed to the creation of an EU army: the UK, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Ireland. These are all neutral countries with the exception of the notoriously eurosceptic UK.

The picture is less clear-cut when we turn to the practical tasks of such a Defence Union. Thus Germans are more sceptical than the French about a military response to terrorism. Only 29% think that it is the best way to defeat terrorism, whereas 44% of the French are of this opinion<sup>26</sup>. Different attitudes towards the use of force have been stumbling blocks for the inception of EU military crisis management operations in the past. 54% of the French see joint participation in crisis management operations as the central aim of the European Defence Union. There are no directly comparable data for German citizens. However, they have been rather cautious with regard to out-of-area operations in the past in line with the country's traditional culture of military restraint.

In 2014 Germany's foreign policy elite embarked on a concerted effort to promote a more flexible interpretation of the culture of restraint. It advocated a more proactive German security policy based on the notion of international responsibility and the military option. In the following year there was a striking increase in the public's approval of more German engagement in international problems, crises and conflicts (from 43% to 66%)<sup>27</sup>. Since 2015 public attitudes to out-of-area operations have also become more positive (see Figures 5 and 6). This trend might be a response to the changed political rhetoric, but it could also be linked to heightened threat perceptions in the wake of the immigration crisis and terrorism. It would also explain the exceptionally high approval rates for EUNAVFOR Sophia, a military CSDP operation with the dual aim of rescuing migrants at sea and disrupting human trafficking and smuggling networks.

FIGURE 5 ▶ German approval of selected Bundeswehr engagements



Source: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr (2012-2016)

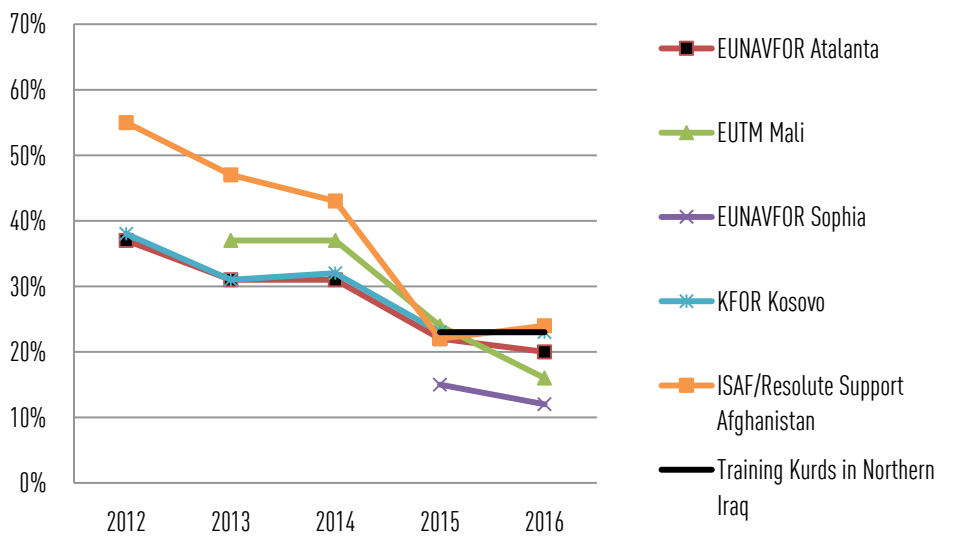
25. Eurobarometer, "Special Eurobarometer 461: Designing Europe's future: security and defence", April 2017. A September 2017 YouGov poll confirmed that 51% of the Germans were in favour to the creation of a European army and to Macron's proposals for a European intervention force and defence budget, while only 22% opposed these ideas

26. Pew Research Center, "Europeans face the world divided", June 2016.

27. Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, "Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2016".



**FIGURE 6** ▶ German disapproval of selected Bundeswehr engagements



Source: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr (2012-2016)

These trends do not imply that there is a permissive consensus with regard to military engagement. Germans are in favour of a more pronounced German role in the diplomatic and humanitarian domains, but they remain sceptical about military engagement<sup>28</sup>. It is highly questionable whether a future governing coalition would, for instance, consider deploying the German army in offensive military action against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in the light of the public's clear opposition to such operations<sup>29</sup>. The German Parliament has to approve of any military engagement and extensions of a mandate<sup>30</sup>. The public will watch these decisions closely in order to judge their legitimacy on a case-by-case basis. In the past German politicians have therefore seen themselves confronted with a trade-off situation: Military engagement can enhance Germany's international reputation, but it can also lead to losses on the domestic political front.

The situation is entirely different in France. The President decides on whether or not to embark on military intervention and parliament can only vote on the issue four months later. Moreover, polls show that the French public tends to approve of decisive presidential crisis management, and this includes the use of force. Popularity ratings of French presidents rose in the wake of the French interventions in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013), even if the positive effect was short-lived because the public's attention returned to more pressing domestic issues<sup>31</sup>. A French diplomat explained the public's attitude as follows: "If there is a challenge, the President has to live up to it. If he doesn't, he will always be accused of indecision or a lack of courage. The President thus has a choice between good and bad. This is what we understand by the representation of power"<sup>32</sup>. France's recent military engagements, which include air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and Opération Barkhane in the Sahel, have also been supported by solid majorities of up to 86%<sup>33</sup>.

Thus we come to the conclusion that the French and the German public support the concept of a European Security and Defence Union. This is especially the case with regard to civilian resources in the area of the Security Union. However, when it comes to deploying the European Defence Union in out-of-area missions, the German public will probably continue to be a significant veto player.

28. TNS Infratest, "Einmischen oder zurückhalten? Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Umfrage zur Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik", Körber-Stiftung, 2014.

29. Infratest dimap, "Umfrage für „hart aber fair“: Klare Mehrheit gegen US-Luftschlag", Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 10 April 2017.

30. Parliament must approve any deployment of the German army. According to the German Constitution, the armed forces may be deployed only for the purpose of defence or within the framework of multilateral operations.

31. Fouquet, Jérôme, "L'opinion face à l'intervention au Mali: un large soutien mais qui ne bénéficie guère à François Hollande", Huffington Post, 20 January 2013.

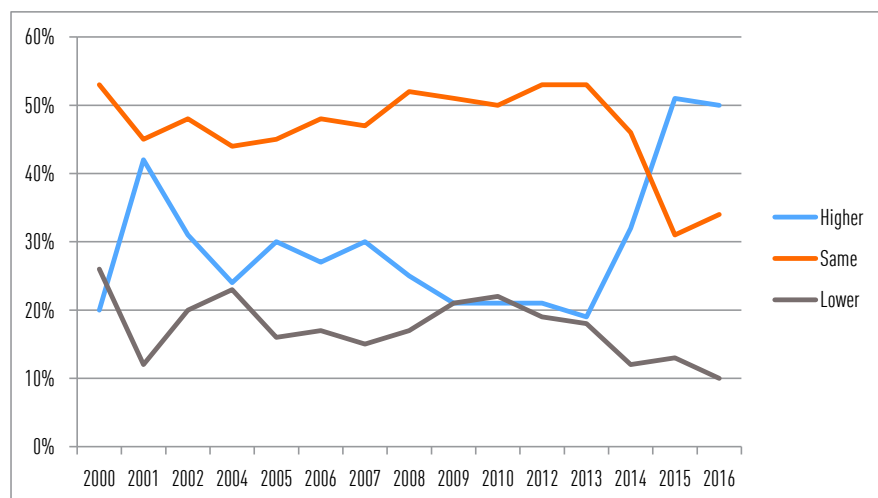
32. Interview with a French diplomat, 27 November 2013.

33. IFOP/DICoD, "Les chiffres clés des sondages de la défense", July 2017.

## 4. Increased defence spending: rising public approval

In practical terms the European Security and Defence Union will entail an increase in defence spending. This will certainly be the case if the Union wishes to be able to act independently of the US. Previous military operations in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood have demonstrated the EU's military capabilities gaps. It is thus one of the declared goals of the European Defence Fund to foster more European spending on defence research and capability development. In the meantime, in December 2017, 25 member states agreed to join PESCO and thereby pledged to increase defence budgets in real terms on a regular basis<sup>34</sup>. The extent to which national governments will be able to do so may also depend on public approval.

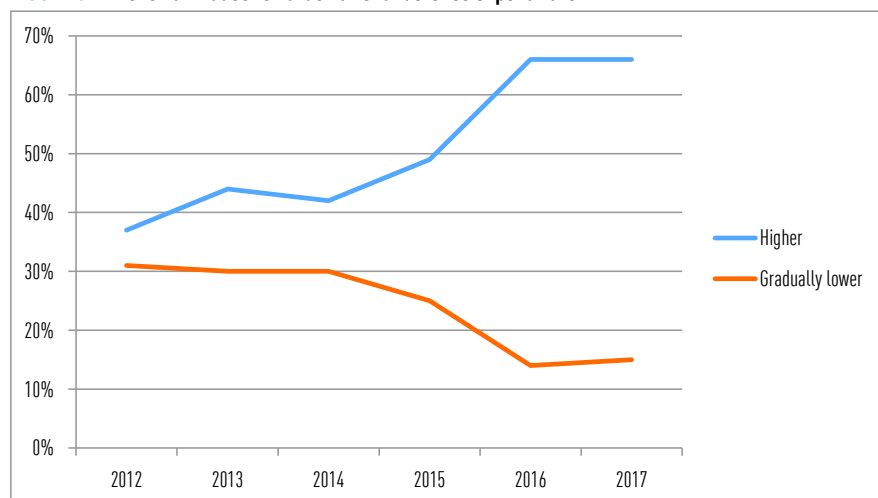
**FIGURE 7** ▶ German attitudes towards national defence expenditure



Source: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr (2000-2016)

According to two sets of national surveys French and German citizens have developed a more positive attitude towards defence expenditure over the past five and ten years respectively. In the case of the Germans, there has been a significant increase of 32 percentage points in the approval ratings between late 2013 and late 2015 (see Figure 7). The French generally have a more positive attitude towards higher defence expenditure (see Figure 8), and there has also been a 17% increase in the approval ratings between mid-2015 and mid-2016.

**FIGURE 8** ▶ French attitudes towards national defence expenditure



Source: Sondage « Baromètre externe de la défense », IFOP- DICOd, May 2017

34. "Notification on Permanent Structured Cooperation to the Council of the European Union and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy", 13 November 2017.

These increases coincide with the heightened threat perceptions by the two publics in the light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, terrorist attacks and migration flows. It is interesting to note that there was a similar upsurge in Germany's approval of higher defence expenditure in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 (see Figure 7). We cannot deduce that there is a direct causal link between such events and public opinion. These changes could also result from a securitization discourse that seeks to legitimise the use of unusual resources in the light of acute security threats and challenges.

A Eurobarometer survey on the EU budget conducted in April 2017 casts doubt on the public's understanding of the EU's resources in the field of security and defence<sup>35</sup>. Roughly a quarter of the French and German respondents believed that the lion's share of the EU budget is spent on security and defence (EU average: 27%). A similar number of respondents chose agriculture and rural development. The contrast with reality is striking. While almost 40% of the EU budget is spent on agriculture and rural development, only roughly 1% has been allocated to defence and security, and even that only begins in 2020. Similar misperceptions exist about the level of national defence expenditure, although the contrast between perception and reality is less dramatic.<sup>36</sup> There is a risk that citizens may overestimate the leverage of the EU in the Security and Defence Union.

## CONCLUSIONS

Public opinion data suggest that the perceptions of pan-European threats and challenges have converged over the past three years. As far as most citizens are concerned, the economic crisis has given way to the terrorist threat and the migration crisis. In France and Germany these trends in threat perception have coincided with four other developments:

- There has been rising approval of NATO despite the limited confidence in the current US administration.
- Approval of the establishment of an EU army has risen in both countries.
- Germans have become more open-minded with regard to a more proactive German role in the management of external conflicts and crises, and in out-of-area operations.
- The French and German publics have developed a more positive attitude towards higher national defence expenditure.

However, it is also important to point out what this does not mean. Without deeper statistical analysis we cannot deduce to what extent these trends reflect security-related developments, the political and media discourse, or other relevant factors. Moreover, we cannot assume that these trends will persist. We have seen that the public salience of the immigration challenge has dropped significantly with the decrease in the number of new arrivals. The more positive German attitudes towards existing out-of-area operations should not be taken to mean that Germany will be an easy partner when it comes to embarking on risky joint military operations. Finally, Franco-German convergence does not imply that these views are shared by the rest of the EU. Poland, where the public feels far more threatened by Russia and is far more Atlanticist, is a telling example. In the final analysis the public does not necessarily have a realistic understanding of European security and defence policy, as was demonstrated by the misperceptions of the EU's material resources.

This leaves us with two conclusions. First, EU and national decision-makers and bureaucracies should keep trying to explain the 'whys and wherefores', the 'what fors' and the 'how much' of a European Security and Defence Union and to dampen unrealistic expectations. This also applies to EU crisis management operations and missions. German public opinion data show that the level of knowledge about out-of-area operations is one of the variables which has a significantly positive influence on attitudes towards them<sup>37</sup>. Second, if they want to establish an effective European Security and Defence Union, France and Germany should avoid giving the impression that they constitute a 'G2 Steering Committee'. In a Security and Defence Union that is often going to have to reach unanimity, a regular strategic dialogue among all of its members with regard to key threats and priorities is of crucial importance. After all, this Union can only deliver if the underlying ideas, norms and patterns of behaviour are (at least to a large extent) shared by both European elites and publics.

35. European Commission, "Special Eurobarometer 461: Designing Europe's future: Opinions about the EU budget", April 2017. x

36. De France, Olivier, "What EU citizens think about European defence", European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief No. 43, 2013.

37. This effect remains significant in multivariate analysis and includes other variables such as education, political orientation or basic security policy attitudes. See: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, „Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2016“, p. 124 ff.

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