



## EUROPEAN SECURITY IN 2017: THE FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

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*This paper is based on the author's remarks at the Leangkollen Conference 2017*

**H**ow does France view the current and future state of European security after the UK referendum and the US election? What could be the choices of the next president – who will take office in May of this year? Events of 2016 somewhat validated a traditional French narrative on the UK and US roles in Europe. At the same time, the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections may herald adjustments of French policies towards Russia.

### **The Impact of Brexit**

The French have always been fairly critical of UK positions in the European Union: the British view – skepticism about supra-nationality and defense integration, promotion of enlargement and free trade – has never converged with the French one. And the UK decision to leave the European Union was seen as a confirmation of long-held views in France according to which the United Kingdom was never a full-fledged player in the European integration game (something that British Europeanists would disagree with) and would always choose Washington over Brussels.

Still, there was overall no Schadenfreude in Paris when the results of the Brexit referendum became known. In addition to fears that the UK decision could be a precedent for other members, there is concern in Paris that the painful process of Brexit, as well as its possible economic consequences, would mean a weaker and more inward-looking United Kingdom, at least for a while.

As far as defense and security are concerned, Paris definitely wants London to remain as closely associated with European Union (EU) security as possible. Such coupling will be difficult as the UK leaves the Union, EURATOM and the European Defense Agency, but there is hope that London can be easily associated with EU security policy decisions (such as sanctions) or military operations and also, crucially, with some EU homeland security arrangements such as EUROPOL or the single warrant. This will require diplomatic craftsmanship given that Paris does not want to make it “too easy” for a member to leave.

At the same time, France is confident that its own bilateral defense partnership with the UK will remain untouched. London has been Paris's main military operations partner since the Balkan wars. The two countries have consolidated their partnership with the Saint-Malo (1998) and Lancaster House (2010) summits. The latter saw, inter alia, the signature of two key defense bilateral cooperation treaties (including on nuclear programs) and the creation of a Combined



Joint Expeditionary Force. Defense industry links are many including in particular on missiles (through the MBDA industrial group), and the two countries have already signaled that they intend to deepen their cooperation in this field.

### **The Impact of Trump**

Like Brexit, the shock of Donald J. Trump's election and its initial messages towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Europe was seen as validating a traditional French narrative: since the days of Charles de Gaulle, the idea that one cannot rely on an external protector – even a powerful ally – is hardwired in the country's strategic culture. (Not that the French believe their vital interests are only located on its territory: French defense doctrine considers that the country's interests are intertwined with those of its European allies.) So there was a little bit of “we told you so” when president Trump stated that NATO was “obsolete” and others in Washington suggested that Europeans could not always count on the United States.

Of course, the initial shock was followed by reassuring messages from Vice-president Mike Pence, State Secretary Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis during meetings in Europe in mid-February. However, the French tend to see uncertainty and disruption as a possible structural feature of the Trump way of governance, and will thus continue to be skeptical. Especially since the new US view of the European Union is not particularly reassuring: the usual soothing words about the need from a strong and united Europe are yet to come. And since the possibility of a form of “grand bargain” between the United States and Russia – a Gaullist nightmare – is still being floated. To be sure, France appreciates that the number one threat identified by the new US administration is the same one that

France sees: it is the Islamic State and armed jihadism. But this is not enough to reassure Paris.

### **A Silver Lining?**

There may be a silver lining in the momentous events of 2016: at least that is how some in France sees them. As Britain is about to leave the Union and Trump heralds an era of uncertainty about the US role in Europe, many in Paris believe it is the right time to bolster European integration in the field of defense and security. This is shared by almost all the main contenders in the 2017 election (specifically by François Fillon, Emmanuel Macron and Benoît Hamon) despite their differences on how they see the United States (and Russia).

As early as mid-November, Paris and Berlin proposed an initial package of new measures to reinforce EU defense policy, including capability development, operational planning, military research and education. It was adopted by the 28 (including the United Kingdom) one month later. Thinking on common funding is also advancing.

As the Union shrinks to 27, the key question will be whether a qualitative jump in bolstering the European defense identity will be in the cards. One key measure – which has always been resisted by London – would be the set up of a Permanent Operational Headquarters. Also being debated is whether this would be the right time for willing and able countries to set up the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism envisioned by the Lisbon Treaty. This would open questions regarding the EU/NATO relationship. Renewed talk of a “European pillar of NATO” sometimes easily discards the role of non-EU but European countries such as Norway... and the United Kingdom.



*Bruno Tertrais during the Leangkollen Security Conference 2017.*

New questions are also being opened regarding nuclear deterrence. How will the Trump administration view nuclear sharing? Will Turkey always be one of its pillars (it is currently hosting what is probably the largest number of B61 bombs in Europe)? Does France now have a special nuclear responsibility in the EU as its sole nuclear-armed member? As several experts and policymakers in Germany now raise such issues, the time may have come for a serious conversation among Europeans about nuclear deterrence – something the French have long called for.

#### **French Post-Elections Security Outlook**

As one of several core EU countries facing elections this year along with the Netherlands, Germany and perhaps Italy, France will be in the spotlight between April

and June 2017. A new president elected on will take office in mid-May, a few days after the second round of the elections (May 7). A government will be formed after the second round of elections to the National Assembly, which is to be held on June 18.

Whoever wins the elections, there is little doubt that terrorism and armed jihadism will continue to be considered the number one security threat. The defense budget is also likely to increase to reach 2% of the French Gross Domestic Product during the next presidential five-year mandate.

A big unknown, however, is the future of the French view of Putin's Russia and the exact nature of its commitment for the common territorial defense of the Alliance. (At this point, the French have not taken a leading

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role in the reinforcement of NATO forces in the East, due to more pressing commitments at home, in the Sahel and in the Middle East.)

While French public opinion is wary of Vladimir Putin, two candidates consider Russia as a friend - Marine Le Pen at the extreme-right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon for the extreme-left. The neo-gaullist candidate - François Fillon - is sympathetic to Moscow's views, while the two others - Emmanuel Macron for the center, Benoît Hamon for the traditional left - are much more cautious vis-à-vis Moscow. A Le Pen victory would imply a second withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure, although bilateral cooperation with the Trump

administration, especially against terrorism, would probably be maintained. As president, François Fillon would retain France in the military structure (after all, he was Prime Minister in 2009 when Paris rejoined it) but he would be tempted to lift sanctions and attempt to devise a "new relation" with Moscow. Fillon and his first circle of advisers seem to be fascinated by Putin. Although a newcomer in French politics, Emmanuel Macron has so far given few indications of what his foreign policy preferences would be, but early signs indicate that he would be in favor of continuity, including on sanctions. He might also be inclined to give a clearer military commitment to reassurance of Eastern neighbors.

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