

To fight another day: France between the fight against terrorism and future warfare

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How have recent experiences affected France's vision on the use of military power? What do French decision-makers think about the future of warfare, and how are they attempting to adjust their strategic priorities and military structure accordingly? In this article, we address these questions by examining the institutional and cultural context of French decision-making and the country's recent military experiences, and analysing how they inform its strategic priorities and future defence policy.

France is confronted by strategic challenges similar to those facing its partners: the future of Great Power competition, the persistence of terrorism and the transformation of the character of war through emerging technologies—all in a constrained budgetary environment. In exploring the tensions that this context creates, the article provides an overview of France's recent experiences in relation to conflict and illustrates how those experiences blend with more enduring features of French defence policy-making to shape the French government's view of the future of war. We argue that in some aspects France maintains historical habits and practices when it comes to its strategic vision and interests, and remains a distinctly outward-looking and militarily willing European power. However, the challenges that France now seeks to address, and the operational and financial constraints it faces in so doing, have led to a shift in its foreign policy narrative and a new approach to the role of allies in military interventions which brings with it certain internal contradictions.

The article first briefly outlines some key features of the French strategic culture, as a set of institutions, habits and practices, before discussing recent French military interventions and the key importance of the frame of the 'fight against terrorism'. It then moves on to analyse how France's view of the role of key allies has evolved in this context. Finally, we examine how French decision-makers perceive the future character of warfare and are preparing the country's armed forces for future conflicts. The conclusion discusses some major tensions and dilemmas which will shape future discussions of French defence policy.

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Institutions, habits and practices underpinning France's strategic culture

France is a proactive state in military affairs, a stance usually explained with reference to an interventionist strategic culture.¹ It is now acknowledged that a strategic culture is itself composed of different 'strategic subcultures', which may contradict one another,² and it is thus more a resource, or a repertoire of actions, on which decision-makers can draw depending on the various circumstances they face.³ Three groups of factors are critical to understanding the French strategic culture:⁴ the institutional mechanisms facilitating the use of military power; elite perceptions of and narratives about France's role in the world; and experiences of deployment of military power, which shape mental maps and preferences relating to the use of force.

In terms of institutions, France approaches the ideal type of a strong state in defence and security issues, combining a strong executive with weak parliamentary control.⁵ The French president is the central pillar of the institutional architecture, enjoying a high level of institutional flexibility through the 'reserved domain' (*domaine réservé*) of defence, security and foreign policy.⁶ One of the bureaucratic practices facilitating the significant role of the president is the importance of the Elysée (which also has its own military headquarters, the *état-major particulier*) as a centralizing institution for all information related to foreign, security and defence affairs: reports from the intelligence services, embassies abroad, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all converge on the staff working for the president, who is thus uniquely well informed.⁷ Moreover, the president is the uncontested master of deterrence: he approves the equipment projects and the strike plans, decides on the alert levels and bears the responsibility of engaging French forces. Together, therefore, the nature of the political regime, the strategic priorities and the institutional arrangements all contribute to establishing the president as the key actor in French defence policy.⁸

Compounding the institutional context favouring the autonomy of the executive is a shared perception among the French elite of France's exceptional role in the world. While there may be divergences on how best to play this role, it is never questioned in French political discourse. Specifically, French perceptions and narratives are heir to two distinct, sometimes contradictory, traditions. First,

¹ Rashed Uz Zaman, 'Strategic culture: a "cultural" understanding of war', *Comparative Strategy* 28: 1, 2009, pp. 68–88.

² Alan Bloomfield, 'Time to move on: reconceptualising the strategic culture debate', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33: 3, 2012, pp. 437–61.

³ Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: eastern war through western eyes* (London: Hurst, 2009); Olivier Schmitt, 'Strategic users of culture: German decisions for military action', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33: 1, 2012, pp. 59–81.

⁴ Bastien Irondele and Olivier Schmitt, 'France', in Bastian Giegerich, Heiko Biehl and Alexandra Jonas, eds, *Strategic cultures in Europe* (Munich: VS, 2013), pp. 125–38.

⁵ Olivier Schmitt and Sten Rynning, 'France', in Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss, eds, *The handbook of European defence policies and armed forces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 35–51.

⁶ Anthony Forster, *Armed forces and society in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

⁷ Samy Cohen, 'Le pouvoir politique et l'armée', *Pouvoirs*, no. 125, 2008, p. 25.

⁸ Jean Guisnel and Bruno Tertrais, *Le président et la bombe: Jupiter à l'Élysée* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2016); Olivier Schmitt, 'Accompagner les mutations de la puissance française de 1962 à nos jours', in Hervé Drévilion and Olivier Wieviorka, eds, *Histoire militaire de la France: de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2018), pp. 589–666.

there is a tradition of ‘France’s missionary self-understanding: being the “country of human rights”, France has to defend and promote these rights worldwide’.⁹ This impulse usually takes the form of impassioned speeches in support of peace, or of multilateral institutions. The second defining feature of French elite perceptions is the ‘sacrosanct principle of autonomous decision-making and independent defence capabilities’,¹⁰ which is often expressed in the form of a defence of sovereignty for its own sake, but with a specific Gallic flavour. Under the Fifth Republic, President Charles de Gaulle (himself influenced by the doctrine of ‘integral nationalism’ developed by the monarchist Charles Maurras¹¹) was the obvious incarnation of this emphasis on sovereignty, which was translated into a policy of autonomy and non-dependence.

Although Gaullian principles of foreign and defence policy were not nearly as universally accepted in France during the Cold War as is sometimes considered to be the case in other countries, with strategic debates animated by divergences over the right relationships to establish with both the United States and the Soviet Union,¹² the objective of autonomy (the modalities of which had to be defined) was based on a broad consensus. After the end of the Cold War, with the disappearance of the bipolar order that had allowed French elites to walk a fine line between alliance commitments and occasional flirtations with the Soviet Union (thus practising ‘autonomy’ as a form of soft balancing), France found itself having to invent a new foreign policy for a new international order. Consequently, ‘a progressive gap was created between France’s foreign policy objectives, which had to be redefined, and the rhetoric and practice of independence, which was still implemented by French decision-makers out of habit and experience’.¹³

Today, France’s approach to foreign and defence policy is still intellectually underpinned by the cornerstone principle of ‘strategic autonomy’, but the way this autonomy is defined and implemented is an object of discussion and contestation. Moreover, this cornerstone principle often generates contradictions between the rhetoric of French diplomacy, emphasizing multilateralism and peace, and its militarized and sometimes unilateral practice. The following sections of the article highlight the tensions that permeate France’s approach to contemporary warfare. On the one hand, French decision-makers emphasize autonomy in rhetoric and practice. On the other hand, the combination of France’s limited power and the complexity of contemporary threats calls for more interdependence with allies. The dilemma between the rhetoric of independence and the practice of relying on external actors as leverage or power multipliers (external balancing) is a core challenge for French defence policy.

⁹ Schmitt and Rynning, ‘France’, p. 42.

¹⁰ Bastien Irondele and Sophie Besancenot, ‘France: the end of exceptionalism?’, in Emil J. Kirchner and James Sperling, eds, *National security cultures and global security governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 22.

¹¹ Georges-Henri Soutou and Martin Motte, eds, *Entre la vieille Europe et la seule France: Charles Maurras, la politique extérieure et la défense nationale* (Paris: Economica, 2009); Julian Jackson, *A certain idea of France: the life of Charles de Gaulle* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

¹² George-Henri Soutou, *La Guerre Froide de la France, 1941–1990* (Paris: Tallandier, 2018).

¹³ Olivier Schmitt, ‘The reluctant Atlanticist: France’s security and defence policy in a transatlantic context’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40: 4, 2017, pp. 468–71.

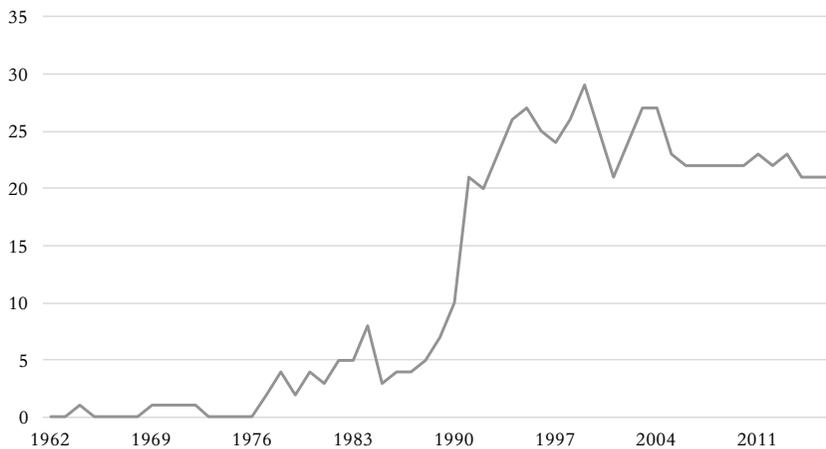
Changing experiences of military interventions: historical patterns and recent evolutions

Most of France's military deployments over the past two decades have confirmed or even reinforced at least one of the traits of its strategic culture, namely a willingness to use force independently, especially in zones of traditional French interest. Nonetheless, more recent experience with transnational terrorism has led France to emphasize its national security in both discourse and practice. This has led to new forms of deployments both at home and abroad, relying on allied support, and the adoption of a narrative of 'pragmatism' that currently downplays the 'missionary' dimension of the French security discourse.

Historical patterns: interventionism and wars of choice

A look at macro-level historical and geographical trends in military deployments illustrates the strategic priorities of French elites. To begin with, a cursory look at the number of French military operations of all types undertaken since 1962 indicates that Paris has not shied away from using military force since the end of the Cold War (figure 1).

Figure 1: French use of military force abroad since 1962 (no. of operations)



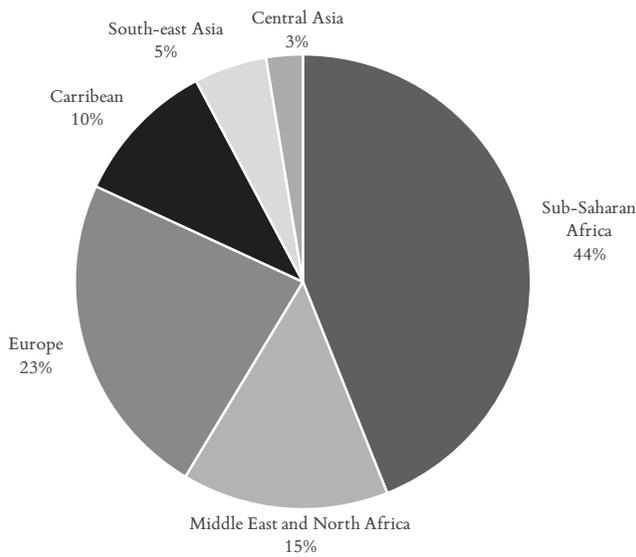
Source: Data compiled from Bernard Thorette, ed., *Rapport du groupe de travail 'Monument aux morts' en opérations extérieures* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2011). See also Philippe Chaplaud and Jean-Marc Marill, eds, *Dictionnaire des OPEX* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2018).

The graph shows the number of military operations abroad (OPEX in French military parlance) in any given year. The data include all types of interventions: high-intensity combat, peacekeeping operations, security assistance for citizens

in danger, etc. Three main conclusions emerge. First, the end of the Cold War has had a clear effect, prompting French decision-makers to realize that they needed to justify their privileged place in multilateral settings, notably France's permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.¹⁴ France's advantage compared to other medium-sized countries is precisely its military power, and the country has sought to demonstrate this, using military interventions 'as a way of preserving French prestige in [the] transforming world' of the post-Cold War period.¹⁵ Second, French interventions are cumulative processes, with many operations being launched and dragging on for years (sometimes decades) before they are finally concluded. Third, the shift from territorial defence to crisis and risk management and the international fluidity that followed the end of the Cold War multiplied military interventions by a wide range of countries, and France has been part of this trend, alongside other western powers.¹⁶ The result is that France has been consistently engaged in military operations abroad for the past 30 years.

The geographical distribution of French interventions is also informative, as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Areas of intervention by French forces since 1962



¹⁴ Rachel Utley, 'The new French interventionism', *Civil Wars* 1: 2, 1998, pp. 83–103; Olivier Zajec, 'French military operations', in Meijer and Wyss, eds, *The handbook of European defence policies and armed forces*, pp. 797–812.

¹⁵ Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Olivier Schmitt, 'Frogs of war: explaining the new French interventionism', *War on the Rocks*, 14 Oct. 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/10/frogs-of-war-explaining-the-new-french-military-interventionism/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 5 March 2019.)

¹⁶ Donald M. Snow, *The case against military intervention: why we do it and why it fails* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Yee-Kuang Heng, 'The continuing resonance of the war as risk management perspective for understanding military interventions', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39: 4, 2018, pp. 544–58.

Unsurprisingly, sub-Saharan Africa is the primary zone of intervention, accounting for 44 per cent of such activity. This is a result of French decolonization—with defence agreements and elite training continuing colonial military practices¹⁷—and enduring French interests in the area.¹⁸ These interventions create networks of veterans sharing memories and claiming expertise primarily about ‘Africa’ (as a whole), thereby helping to sustain patterns of military practices. These memories and networks fuel a broader military imaginary around the idea of the use of military force as an effective tool of foreign policy, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

While they have sometimes taken France outside its traditional zone of influence, recent campaigns—most notably in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria—have confirmed France’s noteworthy role within large, US-led coalitions which, in the cases of Afghanistan and Libya, were not triggered by immediate national security concerns. French involvement in large coalition campaigns started in Afghanistan. Following the 9/11 attacks, France very quickly expressed its support for the United States. Yet French strategic priorities lay somewhere other than Afghanistan, and Paris struggled to square the circle of displaying solidarity at a minimum cost. This explains its fluctuating military commitment. France’s participation was limited until 2008; ambitious between 2008 and 2012 (when France took responsibility for the Kapisa and Surobi districts), as decision-makers felt they had to match words with deeds after Paris rejoined NATO’s integrated military structure; and limited again after 2012, when President François Hollande declared victory and implemented his campaign pledge to withdraw ‘combat troops’ from Afghanistan by the end of 2012.¹⁹

The 2011 military campaign in Libya once again illustrated France’s political readiness to intervene in ‘wars of choice’, as well as the responsiveness and versatility of French military forces. The French military contribution in Libya was significantly superior to that of other European participating nations:²⁰ illustratively, France’s aircraft carrier, alongside American platforms, provided the majority of effective strike power,²¹ and during the air-mobile mission in May–June 2011, 90 per cent of the strikes were French.²² The Libyan intervention, however, also highlighted Europe’s reliance on key American assets. For instance, in the first few weeks of combat, before the operation was transferred to NATO, most sorties and air strikes were carried out by US forces.²³ Finally, the limited US political commitment to

¹⁷ Camille Evrard, ‘Retour sur la construction des relations militaires franco-africaines’, *Relations Internationales*, no. 165, 2016, pp. 23–42; Etienne Smith, ‘Sous l’empire des armées: les guerres africaines de la France’, *Les Temps Modernes*, nos 693–4, 2017, pp. 4–27.

¹⁸ Catherine Gégout, *Why Europe intervenes in Africa: security, prestige, and the legacy of colonialism* (London: Hurst, 2017).

¹⁹ Olivier Schmitt, *Allies that count: junior partners in coalition warfare* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), pp. 152–66.

²⁰ Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen, eds, *Short war, long shadow: the political and military legacies of the 2011 Libyan campaign*, Whitehall Report (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012).

²¹ UK House of Commons Defence Select Committee, *Operations in Libya*, 9th Report of Session 2010–12, HC950, vol. 2 (London: The Stationery Office, Feb. 2012), p. 48.

²² James Drape, ‘Building partnership capacity: Operation Harmattan and beyond’, *Air and Space Power Journal* 26: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2012, p. 68.

²³ Johnson and Mueen, eds, *Short war, long shadow*, pp. ix–x.

the intervention, which pushed Europeans to the fore, was a feature that surfaced again later in Syria, Mali and the Sahel from 2013 onwards.

Reframing French interests: the experience of the fight against terrorism

While the legitimacy of Nicolas Sarkozy's political motives for undertaking the 2011 intervention have been debated, the more recent covert and limited actions in post-Gaddafi Libya appear closer to the pursuit of France's national security interests, which have since 2013 been framed chiefly in terms of the fight against Islamist terrorism, thus leading to a relative decline of the 'missionary' narrative in the security discourse.

After NATO's Operation Unified Protector ended in October 2011, it quickly became apparent that the demise of the Libyan dictator's regime would lead to an ineffective central government, of which traffickers and Islamist militants would take advantage.²⁴ There was consensus among Europeans against launching an unrequested military intervention and in favour of maintaining UN political leadership. Under the political radar, however, special forces, intelligence services and air forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Jordan have allegedly been conducting joint missions in Libya against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) since at least mid-2015.²⁵

Just as in Libya, so in Syria the focus quickly became the rise of ISIS. France has been supporting the American air operation Inherent Resolve, as well as intelligence and training missions, in Iraq since June 2014. The United States rapidly expanded its air strikes to Syrian territory from September 2014 onwards, but it was only in September 2015 that President Hollande decided to authorize French strikes on ISIS in Syria, evoking a necessity of 'self-defence', based on intelligence suggesting the preparation of terrorist attacks against France.²⁶ The strikes were limited at first, and then extended after the attacks of November 2015 in Paris and St-Denis.²⁷

It is the interventions in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel that most clearly exemplify France's pursuit of its redefined national security interests. With this activity has come both a relative political isolation—at least in the early days—and a practical dependence on support from allies, especially from the United States.²⁸

²⁴ M. DeVore, 'Exploiting anarchy: violent entrepreneurs and the collapse of Libya's post-Qadhafi settlement', *Mediterranean Politics* 19: 3, 2014, pp. 463–70.

²⁵ N. Guibert, 'La guerre secrète de la France en Libye', *Le Monde*, 24 Feb. 2016; Karim El-Bar, 'Leaked tapes expose western support for renegade Libyan general', *Middle East Eye*, 8 July 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-leaked-tapes-expose-western-support-renegade-libyan-general-185825787>; R. Donaghy, 'Britain and Jordan's secret war in Libya', *Middle East Eye*, 25 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-britain-and-jordan-s-secret-war-libya-147374304>.

²⁶ François Hollande, 'Conférence de presse sur les défis et priorités de la politique gouvernementale', Paris, 7 Sept. 2015, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/157002278.html>.

²⁷ Simond de Galbert, 'After the Paris attacks, a European anti-ISIS coalition comes together', *Critical Questions* (Washington DC: CSIS, 3 Dec. 2015), [csis.org/analysis/after-paris-attacks-european-anti-isis-coalition-comes-together](http://www.csis.org/analysis/after-paris-attacks-european-anti-isis-coalition-comes-together).

²⁸ Simon Tisdall, 'France's lonely intervention in Mali', *Guardian*, 14 Jan. 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/14/france-lonely-intervention-mali>; Jean-Yves Haine, 'L'endiguement renforcé: les politiques de sécurité de la France et des Etats-Unis en Afrique', *Notes de l'IFRI* (Paris: Institut Français des

The operations in the Sahel and the Central African Republic (CAR) reflect the colonial heritage on which France continues to build its operations in sub-Saharan Africa, in respect of 'the small size of ... deployments, the degree of autonomy that unit commanders exercised, the high degree of risk they accepted, and their interest in leveraging local knowledge', as well as the resource constraints to which France adapts its mode of warfare.²⁹ In Mali, France has since January 2013 led an intervention launched at the request of the host government to prevent insurgent groups from attacking northern cities and taking control of the capital Bamako. Three thousand French troops were deployed for Operation Serval in Mali and neighbouring countries in January 2013. Within two weeks, France received help from the United States as well as the United Kingdom, Belgium and Denmark, providing aerial refuelling and troop transport.³⁰ Critically, the United States provided a third of French intelligence through its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems.³¹ In what has been considered a military success, France, with support, managed to prevent jihadists from taking over the country.

The missions and theatres soon multiplied, however. From December 2013 onwards, the operations in Mali were occurring in parallel with intervention in the CAR. Operation Sangaris was launched by France in support of the CAR government amid armed fighting between Christian and Muslim militias. By February 2014, France had 1,600 soldiers deployed in the CAR.³² Interestingly, this mission was framed as a humanitarian intervention designed to prevent genocide, thus demonstrating the persistence of the narrative of France as a missionary for human rights, despite the recent dominance of the 'national interest' framing.

Furthermore, following the dispersal of jihadist groups as a consequence of Operation Serval, France extended the mandate and reach of its counterterrorism mission into an effort in the broader Sahel–Saharan region with Operation Barkhane starting in August 2014; this likewise received US support in intelligence and for training missions through the US drone base in Niger.³³ Overall, within less than two years France had deployed forces almost throughout the 'arc of crisis' identified in its 2008 defence white paper, reaching from sub-Saharan Africa to Afghanistan,³⁴ thus risking military overstretch.

The most recent developments in Libya and Syria, together with the Sahel operations, all have in common the fact that they have been part of a broad counterterrorism effort: they have enshrined 'the superior principle of the fight against

Relations Internationales, Feb. 2016), p. 5. France was also politically isolated in the Central African Republic: see Armin Arefi, 'Centrafrique: l'alarmante solitude de la France', *Le Point*, 12 Dec. 2013, https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/centrafrique-l-alarmante-solitude-de-la-france-12-12-2013-1768547_24.php.

²⁹ Michael Shurkin, *France's war in Mali: lessons for an expeditionary army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), p. 40.

³⁰ Antoine d'Evry, 'L'Opération Serval à l'épreuve du doute: vrais succès et fausses leçons', *Focus Stratégique*, no. 9 (Paris: IFRI, July 2015).

³¹ Christopher Chivvis, *The French war on Al Qaida in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 119.

³² Stephanie Sanok Kostro and Meredith Boyle, 'French counterterrorism in the Sahel: implications for US policy', *Critical Questions* (Washington DC: CSIS, 4 Feb. 2014).

³³ Sanok Kostro and Boyle, 'French counterterrorism in the Sahel'.

³⁴ Premier Ministre, *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security* (New York/Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), pp. 41–2.

terrorism' in France's approach to its security,³⁵ a priority based on acknowledgement of the links between external instability and internal security. Specifically, France's military deployments have been accompanied by a rhetoric that rests, on the one hand, on the framing of a 'war against terrorism', and on the other, on the notion of a 'realist' or 'pragmatic' (as opposed to idealist) approach to security challenges.³⁶ This illustrates the current dominance of the 'national interest' dimension over the 'missionary' frame in French security discourse. The rhetorical turn first occurred during the Hollande presidency. In January 2013, the then Minister of Defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, used the phrase 'war against terrorism' with reference to France's intervention in Mali,³⁷ although the term had until then been rejected by French officials as too 'American' and reminiscent of George W. Bush's policies.³⁸ François Hollande repeated that phrase after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, declaring that 'France [was] at war', and describing the November attacks as 'acts of war'.³⁹ The Macron presidency has continued with the same vocabulary,⁴⁰ and the French Minister for Armed Forces, Florence Parly, has repeatedly expressed her approach to the treatment of foreign fighters in uncompromisingly harsh terms.⁴¹ Emmanuel Macron himself began his presidency as a self-proclaimed 'realist' in foreign policy, seeming to indicate a move away from a foreign policy doctrine and a vision of France's role grounded in certain values.⁴² He suggested, for example, that 'Bashar [al-Assad] is not our enemy, he is the enemy of the Syrian people', and offered to work with Russia in Syria in the fight against terrorism.⁴³ However, at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, while in a difficult political position as

³⁵ 'Le principe supérieur de la lutte contre le terrorisme': Haine, 'L'endigement renforcé', p. 4.

³⁶ Macron declared: 'J'assume que la sécurité soit la priorité de notre diplomatie. Parfois, cela conduit à un pragmatisme. On peut réconcilier ce réalisme et la défense de nos valeurs' [I assume that security is the priority of our diplomacy. Sometimes this leads to pragmatism. We can reconcile this realism and the defence of our values]: 'Emmanuel Macron: le grand entretien', *Le Point*, 30 Aug. 2017.

³⁷ 'La France est en guerre contre le terrorisme', *Europe 1*, 13 Jan. 2013, <http://www.europe1.fr/politique/la-france-est-en-guerre-contre-le-terrorisme-1377009>.

³⁸ Marc Hecker, 'Retour sur la "guerre contre le terrorisme" à la française', *Etudes*, no. 11, Nov. 2018, pp. 33–4.

³⁹ François Hollande, 'Déclaration devant le Parlement réuni en Congrès à la suite des attaques terroristes perpétrées à Paris et en Seine-Saint-Denis', Versailles, 16 Nov. 2015, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/157002982.html>. It is important to note that Jacques Chirac, when he was prime minister in 1987, had already talked about terrorism as 'a form of war'. See Elie Tenenbaum, 'La Sentinelle égarée?', *Focus Stratégique*, no. 68 (Paris: IFRI, June 2016), p. 19.

⁴⁰ 'Macron: il faut "gagner" la guerre contre le terrorisme au Sahel', *Le Figaro*, 13 Dec. 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/12/13/97001-20171213FILWWW00169-macron-il-faut-gagner-la-guerre-contre-le-terrorisme-au-sahel.php>.

⁴¹ For example, she said about France's campaign in Syria and the presence of French foreign fighters there: 'We are fighting terrorism whatever the passport of the terrorists. And we could not care less about the fact that they are French or Syrian, or whatever. They are terrorists, they are threatening us': Florence Parly, speech at Global Leaders Forum, CSIS, Washington DC, 20 Oct. 2017, <https://www.csis.org/events/global-leaders-forum-he-florence-parly-minister-armed-forces-france>.

⁴² In principle, these values include support for human rights, international law and democracy; joined with the principle of national autonomy, they provide France with a distinct vision. How far and with what means these values must be upheld, of course, are matters that have been and continue to be debated in French foreign policy and intellectual circles. See e.g. Thomas Gomart and Clément Tonon, 'Le futur d'une ellipse: le vain débat français de politique étrangère', *Hérodote* 170: 3, 2018, pp. 43–56; Hubert Védrine, Pascal Boniface and Christian Lequesne, 'La politique étrangère de la France en débat', *Esprit*, no. 3, 2018, pp. 103–16; Justin Vaïsse, 'Le passé d'un oxymore: le débat français de politique étrangère', *Esprit*, no. 11, 2017, pp. 75–91.

⁴³ 'Bachar, ce n'est pas notre ennemi, c'est l'ennemi du peuple syrien'. See 'Emmanuel Macron au Figaro: "L'Europe n'est pas un supermarché"', *Le Figaro*, 21 June 2017.

a result of the 'Yellow Vests' movement, Macron started to bring elements of the 'missionary' rhetoric into his statements, calling France an 'exceptional nation',⁴⁴ engaged in a 'unique and exemplary project',⁴⁵ and complimenting the armed forces for defending 'France's universal values'.⁴⁶ This rhetoric has not diminished the dominance of the 'national interest' frame, but illustrates that, in France, 'missionary' references never completely disappear from the political debate, and further helps to explain the persistent tensions that underpin contemporary French strategic thinking and action.

In this ideational context, the French response to terrorism has been primarily focused on the military dimension. In the Sahel, this security-orientated approach is perceived as a necessary complement to the improvement of governance and ultimately economic development.⁴⁷ The other theatre in the fight against terrorism has been the national territory, with the ongoing Operation Sentinelle launched a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in January 2015. Sentinelle has seen between 7,000 and 13,000 troops mobilized on French territory at any given time during the past three years—three times as many as are deployed in the Sahel region. Given its scale and duration, Sentinelle has taken a considerable toll on French military resources, affecting the availability and readiness of the country's armed forces for other deployments.⁴⁸ Consequently, it has also had a negative impact on the morale of the military.⁴⁹ As such, Sentinelle—whose military effectiveness has been debated, and whose terms of engagement have gradually been revised⁵⁰—has contributed to the military overstretch that France currently faces.

It is in this context of multiple commitments that France has had to respond, alongside its NATO allies, to Russia's annexation of Crimea, destabilization of eastern Ukraine, and maritime, air and 'hybrid' incursions into NATO's territory and periphery since 2014. France has participated in NATO's refreshed deterrence and defence posture, under the rubric 'Enhanced Forward Presence', as part of the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia in 2017 and 2019, and a German-led battlegroup in Lithuania in 2018. France has also committed itself to reinforcing its posture and its capabilities against cyber attacks and information manipulation campaigns.⁵¹ It is clear, however, that when it comes to troop deployments, the 'eastern flank' has not been France's priority: there are only so many French forces that are available

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Macron, 'Voeux 2019 aux Français', speech, Elysée Palace, and written statement, 31 Dec. 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/12/31/voeux-aux-francais-2019>.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Macron, 'Lettre aux Français', written statement, 13 Jan. 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/01/13/lettre-aux-francais>.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Macron, 'Voeux aux armées', speech, Toulouse, France, 17 Jan. 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/01/17/voeux-aux-armees-2019>.

⁴⁷ Briefing by Gen. Bertrand Toujouse, Head of International Affairs, Direction Générale des Relations Internationales et de la Stratégie (DGRIS), Ministère des Armées, at Center for a New American Security, Washington DC, 3 Oct. 2018.

⁴⁸ Tenenbaum, 'La Sentinelle égarée?', pp. 27–31.

⁴⁹ Nathalie Guibert, 'Le quotidien des soldats, talon d'Achille des armées', *Le Monde*, 30 July 2017.

⁵⁰ Pierre Alonso, 'L'Opération militaire Sentinelle, cible des critiques', *Libération*, 9 Aug. 2017, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/08/09/l-operation-militaire-sentinelle-cible-des-critiques_1589158; Tenenbaum, 'La Sentinelle égarée'; Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2017), p. 73.

⁵¹ Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique*; Centre d'Analyse de Prévision et de Stratégie and Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, *Information manipulation: a challenge for our democracies*, report, 4 Sept. 2018.

for deployment beyond the two priority tasks (homeland security and the stabilization of the Sahel).

Recasting the role of allies: necessity is the mother of invention

‘We need to find support everywhere we can,’ said Parly during a conference at Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies in October 2017.⁵² Informing its choice of partners are three key lessons that France has derived from its battlefield experiences over the past decade: first, the centrality of the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom; second, the useful but circumscribed role of regional security organizations, namely the EU and NATO; and third, the need to get European partners to engage in expeditionary missions. These observations have been translated into policy most recently by President Macron, who has sought to recast the role of allies in France’s military strategy in a novel way, which can be summarized in a single brief phrase: necessity is the mother of invention.

Identifying strategic partners

As indicated in the previous section, France has been engaged on many fronts since the Afghan campaign, and even more so since 2013. The 2017 *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*—the latest French defence and security white paper, hereafter referred to as the Strategic Review—actually notes that France has exceeded the ‘operational contract’ initially planned for its armed forces, which has raised difficulties in terms of training and support:⁵³ in 2017 France had 30,000 soldiers deployed across the globe (adding together pre-positioned forces in sovereign territories or as part of France’s defence agreements with third countries, and forces in operations, including Sentinelle).

In this context, allies and partners have been considered essential in conducting military interventions, gathering intelligence and developing capabilities. As noted above, the United States in particular has played a central role since 2013 in supporting France’s operations. Since Afghanistan, and then in Africa, US–French cooperation on intelligence and special forces operations has been key to operational success.⁵⁴ As a result, first President Hollande, and then President Macron, have made particular efforts to persuade the United States to remain engaged in the Sahel, and have sought to sustain the relationship politically.⁵⁵ Britain’s support has also been considered essential, not least because of the ‘political and symbolic importance’ of its contribution.⁵⁶

⁵² Parly, speech at Global Leaders Forum.

⁵³ Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique*, p. 28.

⁵⁴ Chivvis, *The French war on Al Qaida*, p. 41.

⁵⁵ Joint statement of intent by Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defence of the French Republic, and the Honorable Ashton Carter, Secretary of Defense of the United States of America, signed in Washington DC, 28 Nov. 2016, p. 1; ‘President Macron on relations with the US, Syria and Russia’, Fox News, 22 April 2018, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/5774694243001/>.

⁵⁶ De Galbert, ‘After the Paris attacks’.

Thus the 'P₃' cooperation format, comprising the United States, the United Kingdom and France, remains strategically central for Paris. In summer 2013, after the revelation that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against the Syrian population, and before the consequent strikes were called off by America and Britain, there were daily phone calls between the US, British and French defence ministries to discuss the situation and exchange plans for strikes.⁵⁷ The scene was played out again in spring 2018 when yet another use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime was reported, this time leading to limited, coordinated strikes against chemical weapons storage facilities and research laboratories.⁵⁸ These strikes demonstrated the continued relevance of the P₃ as the core circle of allies to deal with major international security challenges.

The coordinated strikes in Syria drew on the work undertaken since 2011 to bring the three air forces of the US, the UK and France closer together, as part of the Trilateral Strategic Initiative (TSI). The TSI was launched in October 2010,⁵⁹ shortly before the intervention in Libya, and the operation there strengthened the case for more coordination between the air forces, both before and during interventions, leading to an extension of the project.⁶⁰ This cooperation is centred on a network of officers from the military staffs and liaison officers, and involves workshops and exercises organized at regular intervals. As evidence of the added value of this type of trilateral work, agreements were signed by the three naval chiefs of staff in March and June 2017 to work on improving interoperability, including in areas such as naval aviation groups and anti-submarine warfare.⁶¹

There is nevertheless a tension between the quality of the operational cooperation and the political context in which it takes place. The risk of US disengagement is perceived to be greater since the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency: in the 2017 Strategic Review, Parly noted that 'we can no longer be certain to count, everywhere and always, on our traditional partners'.⁶² Similarly, relying on Britain as the main European partner has appeared problematic in view of an apparent intervention fatigue in London since around 2013, resulting from the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, a diminishing British defence budget, and the all-consuming Brexit negotiation process.⁶³ Nevertheless, the French position

⁵⁷ Authors' interviews with members of the Defence Staff, UK Ministry of Defence, London, Nov. 2013 and March 2014.

⁵⁸ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Ben Hubbard, 'US, Britain and France strike Syria over suspected chemical weapons attack', *New York Times*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-attack.html>.

⁵⁹ André Adamson and Peter Goldfein, 'The Trilateral Strategic Initiative: a primer for developing airpower cooperation', *Air Space and Power Journal* 7: 1, Spring 2016, pp. 5–13.

⁶⁰ Norton Schwartz, Stephen Dalton and Jean-Paul Paloméros, 'Opinion: Libyan air ops showcase French, UK, US partnership', *Jane's Weekly*, 12 March 2012.

⁶¹ J. Richardson, P. Jones and C. Prazuck, 'Trilateral maritime talks', US Navy, 27 March 2017, www.navy.mil/view_image.asp?id=234012&t=1; US Central Command, 'UK, France and US sign trilateral submarine agreement', 5 June 2017, www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1202609/uk-france-and-us-sign-trilateral-submarine-agreement.

⁶² Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique*, p. 10.

⁶³ Alice Pannier, 'The Anglo-French defence partnership after the "Brexit" vote: new incentives and new dilemmas', *Global Affairs* 2: 5, 2017, pp. 481–90; Alice Pannier, 'UK–French defence and security cooperation', in Meijer and Wyss, eds, *The handbook of European defence policies and armed forces*, pp. 425–39.

is that Brexit makes it more than ever imperative for France to keep the UK on board in respect of European security.⁶⁴

All these factors have prompted the French government to try to anchor the UK militarily in Europe while also diversifying its own partnerships, to choose those partners on the basis of political willingness and military ability, and to help raise their awareness about current and future security challenges in areas of concern to France. A key issue for France has been that its global presence, its national intelligence capabilities and its quick decision-making process have made it easy for successive governments to use military force, but harder for them to involve partners at all stages of the process. Indeed, the rapid French deployment and limited European participation in Mali showed the need for the 'leading nation' to create consensus, which implies that the legitimacy of the strategic objective be shared.⁶⁵ General Lecointre, Chief of the Defence Staff, has emphasized that this requires a change in approach for France, in that the country needs to accept that partners may take the lead in certain aspects or areas of a given operation.⁶⁶ Indirectly, this is an acknowledgement of the tension between France's preference for autonomy and the necessity of integrating new partners, which brings with it a number of political and operational constraints.

In response to these factors, President Macron has defined a new strategy for engaging European allies in out-of-area operations, which he first outlined in his speech on Europe at the Sorbonne in September 2017.⁶⁷ He explained that Europe should have a 'common strategic culture' within a decade, founded on a common doctrine and using common budgetary instruments, with the ultimate goal of achieving 'strategic autonomy'. France then worked for almost a year to get eight chosen European partners on board for its European Intervention Initiative (Ei2) project, conducted outside NATO and EU frameworks. The aim of the Ei2 is to avoid replicating the misunderstandings, European reluctances and eventual French strategic isolation that characterized the operations in Mali and the CAR in 2013. The goal is to foster exchanges among the most 'willing and able' Europeans on strategic foresight, scenario planning, lessons learned and doctrine.⁶⁸ The Ei2 is by design a 'minilateral' endeavour, and nine countries (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom) signed a letter of intent officially launching the initiative on 25 June 2018, while a tenth country, Finland, signed up in November 2018.⁶⁹ In practice, the Ei2 is in

⁶⁴ Multiple interviews by authors at French Embassy in Washington DC and at the Ministère des Armées, DGRIS, Paris, April–Dec. 2018.

⁶⁵ D'Evry, 'L'Opération Serval à l'épreuve du doute', p. 39.

⁶⁶ Gen. Lecointre, 'Tous ensemble, cela ne veut pas dire tous derrière nous', interview, Bruxelles2, 20 Sept. 2018, <https://club.bruxelles2.eu/2018/09/tous-ensemble-cela-ne-veut-pas-dire-tous-derriere-nous-general-lecointre/>.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Macron, 'Initiative for Europe' (official translation), speech, Paris, 26 Sept. 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/english_version_transcript_-_initiative_for_europe_-_speech_by_the_president_of_the_french_republic_cle8de628.pdf.

⁶⁸ Briefing by a representative of the Elysée at the German Marshall Fund, Paris, June 2018.

⁶⁹ The letter of intent is available at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/international-action/l-ie2/initiative-europeenne-d-intervention>. We can set the boundaries of 'minilateralism' between two and ten participants, although arguably, the *intention* of a limited number of participants is more useful to set the boundaries. See Alice Pannier, 'Le minilatéralisme: une nouvelle forme de coopération de défense', *Politique*

the first instance about ‘opening up the French military’ to European partners by sharing intelligence ‘based on reciprocal effort’.⁷⁰ Initially, the focus is thus likely to be on French priorities in Africa, but the Eiz group can in principle deal with any topics the participants want to discuss, and help them prepare collectively for any type of mission, whether at the higher end of the military spectrum or at the lower end—such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, or non-combatant evacuation operations.⁷¹ While the Eiz is eventually expected to have its own budget, for the present it relies on a small secretariat in Paris, a network of liaison officers, and regular ministerial meetings and staff talks.

While in principle geared towards those partners that are already politically willing to use military force, the Eiz is also perceived as a way to cooperate with Germany and try to shape its strategic thinking.⁷² Following a sense of disappointment with the Anglo-French Lancaster House treaties,⁷³ Paris has turned back to its old European partner in Berlin. This longstanding defence cooperation, institutionalized by the 1963 Elysée Treaty, is, however, marked by a structural disagreement. Germany generally disapproves of France’s interventionist practices, and Paris considers that Berlin does not take defence seriously. As a consequence, Franco-German defence cooperation has always been imposed by political leaders rather than driven by proximity in operational conceptions. Given the rapidly evolving political and strategic context in Europe, the two countries once again seem eager to increase their defence cooperation, as illustrated by the ambitious agenda agreed upon in July 2017.⁷⁴ At this point Paris and Berlin agreed to collaborate on a number of defence projects, including a future air combat system, as well as a joint indirect fire artillery system and a new major ground combat system. Both countries also pledged to push ahead with the Eurodrone programme and agreed on cooperation in the field of cyber security.⁷⁵ This renewed operational cooperation has been cemented by the new Aachen Treaty signed in January 2019, which reaffirms the importance of the Franco-German relationship and calls for more consultation on and convergence of their defence and security policies.⁷⁶ While this strengthening of the Paris–Berlin axis is taking place, Germany is also becoming a ‘security hub’ in Europe, developing strong integration and partnerships with smaller countries such as the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands and Romania.

Etrangère, 1/2015, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Briefing by a representative of the French government during a high-level workshop, German Marshall Fund, Paris, 5 June 2018.

⁷¹ Briefing by Gen. Bertrand Toujouse, Head of International Affairs, DGRIS, Ministère des Armées, at Center for a New American Security, Washington DC, 3 Oct. 2018.

⁷² Briefing by a representative of the Ministère des Armées at CSIS, Washington DC, July 2018.

⁷³ Alice Pannier, *France’s defence partnerships and the dilemmas of Brexit*, policy brief no. 022 (Washington DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 30 May 2018), <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/frances-defense-partnerships-and-dilemmas-brexit>.

⁷⁴ 19th Franco-German Defence and Security Council meeting, press conference, Paris, 13 July 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/01/09/conference-de-presse-du-president-de-la-republique-lors-du-conseil-des-ministres-franco-allemand>.

⁷⁵ Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, ‘France, Germany, and the quest for European strategic autonomy: Franco-German defence cooperation in a new era’, *Notes du CERFA/IFRI*, no. 141, 2017, p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Traité entre la République française et la République fédérale d’Allemagne sur la coopération et l’intégration franco-allemandes*, Aachen, 22 Jan. 2019, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/traite.aix-la-chapelle.22.01.2019_cle8d3c8e.pdf.

Given the geographical location and institutional configurations of France's recent military interventions (carried out in coalition, with the participation of local forces, and with UN and EU involvement in security sector reform, training and development), the role of NATO in the French strategic mindset has remained fairly limited.⁷⁷ While France has contributed to NATO's reassurance and deterrence activities in eastern Europe, and remains involved, for example, in the effort to reform the alliance, it retains a traditionally minimalist vision of NATO. The alliance is conceived of as a military, rather than a political organization: a tool that should be used only where it adds value, namely in ensuring the territorial defence of Europe and the interoperability of allies. Moreover, France's involvement in NATO's activities is conditioned by the country's multiple commitments elsewhere, which mean that it cannot afford to station large numbers of troops in eastern Europe. France nonetheless supports NATO's burden-sharing agenda and increased European defence budgets, and it has committed itself to reaching the 2 per cent of GDP target by 2025. French officials also argue that France's deployments, military capabilities and budgets, and initiatives such as the Eiz, contribute, albeit indirectly, to NATO's security.

France and the future of war: juggling autonomy and cooperation

Over the past few years, France has produced a number of conceptual documents that have helped to articulate and present its official doctrine on its security environment and the future of conflict. A key example is the 2017 Strategic Review, which maps the current and future security environment.⁷⁸ The armed forces have also been thinking about the future of warfare, with each branch developing its own operational conceptions. The army is the most advanced in outlining its understanding of future conflicts (at least in open sources), with general guidance set out in a detailed document entitled 'Future land action',⁷⁹ but the other branches too have laid out their vision through various outlets, including specialized military journals. Finally, other papers have reflected on several official and unofficial lessons learned from recent conflicts which also guide the perception of future conflicts. In all these documents, the tension between an aspiration to autonomy and the need to cooperate with partners in order to offset France's limited power is explicit. The Strategic Review identifies two main threats: on the one hand, jihadist terrorism and state instability on France's southern shore; and, on the other, the return of 'open warfare' on Europe's territory. Compounding these two main strategic trends, a number of 'challenges' are identified: notably, a migration crisis, persistent vulnerability in the Sahel–Sahara region and enduring instability in the Middle East. This combination is perceived to be challenging the cohesiveness of the EU, thus destabilizing the French security environment. All these developments are taking place in the context of a gradual disaffection, at the global level,

⁷⁷ This paragraph is based on multiple interviews by the authors at the French Embassy in Washington and at the Ministère des Armées, DGRIS, Paris, April–Dec. 2018.

⁷⁸ Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique*.

⁷⁹ Armée de Terre, *Action terrestre future* (Paris, 2016).

towards multilateral mechanisms, which follows a gradual redistribution of power in the international system, leading some countries to be much more assertive (for example, Russia in gradually dismantling the European security architecture). Finally, France is also concerned by rising tensions in Asia, which could challenge established partnerships and freedom of navigation.

In military terms, the Strategic Review notes the increasing intensity of conflicts across the whole spectrum of warfare and identifies a number of threats. First, jihadist terrorism is identified as ‘the most immediate and enduring threat’ because of its direct challenge to the safety of French citizens on French territory.⁸⁰ The Strategic Review notes the return of military power in world politics and the gradually increasing competition in most domains: sea and air, but also exo-atmospheric space and cyberspace. Therefore, the operational environment is marked by a certain ‘ambiguity’, since actors have more and more opportunities (and technological capabilities) to conduct aggressive actions with a veneer of plausible deniability and are thus able to craft integrated strategies of coercion. Taking this together with the gradual hardening (*durcissement*) of warfare, the Strategic Review concludes that escalation risks have increased. In that context, the document exemplifies the tensions in France’s defence policy. On the one hand, it calls for a French ‘strategic autonomy’ backed up by a strong military and strong diplomacy. On the other hand, mindful of the limitations of France’s power, it wishes to extend the goal of autonomy to the EU—which is consistently viewed in France as a power multiplier⁸¹—and clearly locates France’s actions in the context of partnerships with the US, the UK and Germany,⁸² without explicitly articulating the relationship between these two dimensions.

In 2016, the army published its own vision for the future operational environment. The document’s main contribution is the establishment of eight ‘factors of operational superiority’ which should guide the doctrine, training and procurement of the army, namely: understanding, cooperation, agility, mass, endurance, moral strength, influence and command performance. Overall, the army envisions a hardened battlefield, in which mass and command performance will be of critical importance in achieving military superiority and human factors will, as always, determine the final victory. Actors who can integrate new technologies to facilitate command, cooperation, understanding and influence will have the edge in this operational environment. Illustratively, a key transforming programme for the French Army, ‘Scorpion’, aims at improving the fighting capabilities of the army through the acquisition of new intermediate combat vehicles, a digitalization effort to improve battlefield awareness and fire coordination, and a new programme of operational readiness. ‘Scorpion’ is designed to evolve, with the addition of new equipment and capabilities such as tactical drones, combat support

⁸⁰ Ministère des Armées, *Revue stratégique*, p. 37.

⁸¹ Adrian Treacher, ‘Europe as a power multiplier for French security policy: strategic consistency, tactical adaptation’, *European Security* 10: 1, 2001, pp. 2–44.

⁸² Alice Pannier, ‘Between autonomy and cooperation: the role of allies in France’s new defense strategy’, *War on the Rocks*, 2 Nov. 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/between-autonomy-and-cooperation-the-role-of-allies-in-frances-new-defense-strategy/>.

vehicles, protection against cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, and land robots. The concept is supposed to facilitate the army's transition towards an era of new sensors and AI-enabled military capabilities, by incrementally preparing the forces for the introduction of such capabilities. Finally, the army acknowledges that French forces are unlikely to generate sufficient mass alone, and thus need a form of 'external balancing' through partnering with local forces, the use of private security companies and intervention in a coalition framework. The need to generate mass will thus compel the French forces to cooperate with other actors, again compromising the objective of 'strategic autonomy'.

The air force and the navy have not yet developed open-source documents comparable to the army's, but it is possible to grasp their vision from a variety of interviews granted by commanding officers and more or less 'authorized' publications in military journals. The air force envisions the end of the hitherto undisputed western air supremacy through a combination of two factors: first, the development and diffusion of fourth- and fifth-generation fighters, able to compete with western planes; and second, the development of air defences, particularly new radars and new surface-to-air missiles.⁸³ In this context, maintaining military supremacy could require a 'system of systems' of manned and unmanned vehicles linked together in a strike package:⁸⁴ such thinking runs through the current analyses of the future air combat system (*Système de combat aérien futur*—SCAF) for which operational requirements are currently being laid out. The SCAF is currently being developed in cooperation with Germany, with Spain expected to join the partnership in 2019, again illustrating the French balancing act between strategic autonomy and international cooperation. The navy envisions a future in which undersurface (from submarines and mines) and anti-ship (from naval missiles) threats are quickly proliferating, and in which electronic warfare is a key capability in achieving operational superiority.⁸⁵ A way to tackle these challenges is gradual automation, including the use of drones: by 2030, all French ships are expected to have an on-board drone capacity.

When it comes to cyber security, the tension between autonomy and cooperation is again explicit in the French approach. It must first be acknowledged that in cyberspace, instruments used to gather intelligence or inflict damage are extremely difficult to identify.⁸⁶ This feature limits the potential for cooperation: states will not risk sharing too much access with partners, since the temptation to exploit such access for intelligence purposes would be very strong. French official documents therefore emphasize the development of autonomous capabilities in

⁸³ Corentin Brustlein, Etienne de Durand and Elie Tenenbaum, *La suprématie aérienne en péril: menaces et contre-stratégies à l'horizon 2030* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2014); Philippe Steininger, 'Vers un durcissement des conditions d'engagement des forces aérospatiales', *Revue Défense Nationale* (Salon du Bourget), 2017, pp. 77–81.

⁸⁴ Thierry Anger, 'Penser l'armée de l'air de demain: le système de combat aérien futur (SCAF)', *Revue Défense Nationale* (Salon du Bourget), 2017, pp. 93–6; David Pappalardo, 'The future of the French air force: a future combat air system as a strategy to counter access denial', *Over the Horizon*, 5 Feb. 2018.

⁸⁵ Marine Nationale, *Plan Mercator* (Paris, 2018).

⁸⁶ Ben Buchanan, *The cybersecurity dilemma: hacking, trust and fears between nations* (London: Hurst, 2016).

cyberspace,⁸⁷ including through the conduct of offensive cyber operations.⁸⁸ Yet the French approach also considers that cyber security is reinforced by regulatory mechanisms, and thus explicitly aims at imposing French standards at the EU level, which will necessarily require a degree of cooperation with other European countries.⁸⁹

In an effort to square the circle of changing military requirements, new technologies and the need for international cooperation, in September 2018 the French Ministry of Armed Forces created an 'agency for defence innovation' to 'bring together all the actors of the ministry and all the programmes that contribute to defence innovation', including civilian research.⁹⁰ Headed by a civil servant specialized in artificial intelligence and military simulation, it aims to 'guarantee France's strategic autonomy and the military superiority of armed force'.⁹¹ At the same time, the agency is meant to be outward-facing and 'turned towards Europe'.⁹² Europe, indeed, is increasingly becoming a locus of defence innovation, research and development, through the European defence industrial development programme (EDIDP), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The EU will increasingly facilitate and fund cross-border projects to increase its capacities in crisis management as well as internal security.⁹³ This opens up possibilities for the EU to develop tools to deal with counterterrorism, hybrid threats, trafficking and organized crime,⁹⁴ which could match with French priorities. The same holds for PESCO projects. France is already participating in projects under this umbrella such as the development of a modular unmanned ground system, MALE (Medium Altitude Long Endurance) drones, a cyber-threat intelligence-sharing platform and 'rapid response' teams, and the improvement of the Tiger attack helicopter.⁹⁵ In its pursuit of national priorities at the European level, the French government has pushed for a strict definition of the eligibility criteria for companies applying for EDIDP or EDF funding,⁹⁶ and supports a restrictive definition of the European Defence and

⁸⁷ Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information, *Défense et sécurité des systèmes d'information. Stratégie de la France* (Paris, 2011); Secrétariat Général à la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale, *Revue Stratégique de Cyber-défense* (Paris, 2018).

⁸⁸ Ministère des Armées, *Éléments publics de doctrine militaire de lutte informatique offensive* (Paris, 2019).

⁸⁹ Guillaume Poupard, 'Le modèle français de cybersécurité et de cyberdéfense', *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, no. 110, 2018, pp. 101–108; François Delerue, 'Stratégie juridique pour la cyberdéfense française', *Les Champs de Mars*, no. 30, 2018, pp. 297–306.

⁹⁰ Direction Générale de l'Armement, 'Création de l'Agence de l'innovation de défense et nomination d'Emmanuel Chiva au poste de directeur', 5 Sept. 2018, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dga/actualite/creation-de-l-agence-de-l-innovation-de-defense-et-nomination-d-emmanuel-chiva-au-poste-de-directeur>.

⁹¹ Acteurs publics, 'Comment va fonctionner la nouvelle Agence de l'innovation de défense', 15 Nov. 2018, <https://www.acteurspublics.com/2018/11/15/comment-va-fonctionner-la-nouvelle-agence-de-l-innovation-de-defense>.

⁹² Direction Générale de l'Armement, 'Création de l'Agence de l'innovation de défense'.

⁹³ EU External Action Service, *Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy* (Brussels, June 2016).

⁹⁴ Daniel Fiott, *EU defence capability development: plans, priorities, projects*, brief (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2018), p. 4.

⁹⁵ European Council, 'Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) updated list of PESCO projects—overview', 19 Nov. 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/37028/table-pesco-projects.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Multiple interviews by authors with French officials and defence industrialists, Paris and Brussels, May–June 2018.

Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB) as a way to protect its national defence industry, a key element of its own 'strategic autonomy'.

Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted some tensions in France's strategic situation: engaging in combat on multiple fronts of different natures, with counterterrorism taking the most attention, while also having to prepare for potential future inter-state conflict; balancing national strategic autonomy and cooperation with allies; and keeping up with technological development in a financially constrained environment. These challenges are far from specific to France, yet the way France deals with these various issues is quite unlike the route taken by any other country. Moreover, because of its military resources and expertise on the one hand, and its institutional relations with European bodies as well as the UK and the US on the other, France will be the most important European military power for the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is important to conclude by highlighting some further tensions and dilemmas that could affect French defence policy in the future.

Politically, a key uncertainty is the evolution of national populism in the United States and United Kingdom. If those two countries continue firmly down this path (and/or if France joins them in doing so), the gap between the political context and the hitherto close operational cooperation with Washington and London could become too large to bridge, which would force a major shift in French defence policy. In such a context, the shape of the relationship with Germany will be critical for the evolution of French and European security policy: thus the future of French defence policy also lies in its past, in a balancing act involving Washington, London and Berlin.

Strategically, the French perception of a dichotomy between threats on the 'southern flank' (terrorism and instability) and on the 'eastern flank' (Russian assertiveness), with priority accorded to the former, is gradually being challenged by Moscow itself: first, through offensive cyber operations of espionage and subversion; second, through its participation in military operations in the Middle East and gradually increasing influence in sub-Saharan Africa. These developments may force France to readjust its strategic outlook and adopt a 360-degree analysis of its security environment, which may in the end lead to a recategorization and reprioritization of the threats. Moreover, France has also recently taken steps to increase its presence in the Asia-Pacific region, developing strategic relations with India and Australia and deploying force in the South China Sea. The degree of this commitment (including potential overstretch) remains to be seen.

In operational terms, France will have to tackle the challenges of integrating emerging technologies into its armed forces; and it will be important to compare the French decisions in this respect with those of both its partners and its adversaries. Nevertheless, the issue of generating sufficient mass to confront the current operational environment will remain, and it is unclear whether the identified solution of a mix of 'internal balancing' (improving firepower through AI-enabled detec-

tion and targeting systems) and ‘external balancing’ (multinational military operations and cooperation with proxy forces) will be sufficient. In seeking to meet this challenge of generating relevant military power, France will not be alone.