

Franco-German deterrence exercises and defence cooperation planning

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On 17 July, Nörvenich Air Base in Germany hosted a meeting of the Franco-German Defence and Security Council, co-chaired by President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Friedrich Merz. The meeting took place ahead of the joint session of the French and German Cabinets in Brühl. The conclusions reaffirmed the two countries' shared position on the wars in Ukraine and Iran and included commitments to deepen military cooperation, including joint exercises involving the Franco-German Brigade and the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, as well as defence-industrial cooperation, for example on long-range ballistic strike capabilities under the ELSA project. These commitments reflect the need for European states to assume greater responsibility for NATO's collective defence. The two sides also pledged to develop capabilities in the space and cyber domains, including through the Joint Early Warning for a European Lookout (JEWEL) initiative and the use of French launch vehicles to place German satellites into orbit.

Nörvenich also hosted the first Franco-German exercises conducted under Macron's forward deterrence concept, announced in March this year (see *'Sovereign, yet forward-oriented towards Europe: the evolution of France's nuclear deterrence doctrine'*). The exercises involved two French Rafale fighter aircraft, two German Eurofighters and an Airbus A330 MRTT aerial refuelling aircraft. They were planned by the Franco-German Nuclear Steering Group, established in March. The exercises did not simulate the use of nuclear weapons, but focused solely on aerial refuelling.

The broad agenda of the bilateral consultations aimed to ease tensions in Franco-German relations following the decision to abandon the joint fighter aircraft programme under the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project. At the same time, both sides reaffirmed their political commitment to continued military and defence-industrial cooperation despite conflicting commercial interests between French and German defence companies.

Commentary

- **Germany plays a central role in France's forward deterrence concept, as Paris believes the evolution of Berlin's position is essential to the success of a more autonomous European role in the future security architecture.** In the French view, Germany's longstanding reliance on US security guarantees and the American nuclear umbrella has hindered the development of a more independent European defence policy. Germany's participation in the forward deterrence concept is meant to signal a shift in Berlin's

approach, with the German government increasingly viewing cooperation with France as an important complementary security guarantee (see '[Germany and nuclear deterrence: dialogue with France while preserving US guarantees](#)'). France also hopes that implementing the forward deterrence concept will reduce calls for independent national nuclear deterrents in European states, particularly Germany.

- **Diverging interests among French and German defence companies continue to hinder closer defence-industrial cooperation.** The joint multirole fighter aircraft programme under the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project was cancelled due to Airbus and Dassault's failure to reach an agreement. Meanwhile, further integration within KNDS, formed by France's Nexter and Germany's KNDS Deutschland (formerly KMW), is tied to the company's planned stock market listing. This is expected to coincide with the abandonment of the flagship project for which KNDS was created: the next-generation tank under the bilateral Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) programme. Rather than developing a single joint tracked platform, Berlin and Paris have agreed to focus on eight technological areas, including ballistic protection, sensors and gun systems, enabling each country to integrate these technologies into its own vehicles in the future. To help overcome the difficulties in bilateral defence-industrial cooperation, France and Germany have also agreed to hold annual consultations.
- **Franco-German defence cooperation is likely to remain overshadowed by persistent mutual grievances.** France criticises Germany for making unilateral procurement decisions, including the planned purchase of Tomahawk missiles and, previously, the acquisition of the Arrow 3 missile defence system. In Paris's view, these decisions undermine Germany's credibility as a partner in joint defence projects. Berlin, for its part, accuses France of being unwilling to make concessions or compromise, arguing that Paris consistently seeks to maximise the use of French technologies and prioritise French operational requirements.
- **The framework for continued Franco-German defence cooperation is intended to signal the continuity of both countries' strategic course, even if the National Rally (RN) candidate wins next year's French presidential election.** At the same time, the declaration contains few commitments from which a future French president could not subsequently withdraw. France's nationalist right views many aspects of Berlin's policy, including in the security sphere, as running counter to French interests. The RN remains highly sceptical of further development of the EU's security policy and is critical of programmes supporting the defence industry. It also opposes joint defence initiatives, arguing that they could undermine French sovereignty in favour of European partners.