

European strategic autonomy or European pillar in NATO? Germany's stance on French initiatives

Justyna Gotkowska

In February this year, at the École de Guerre in Paris and at the Munich Security Conference, France's President Emmanuel Macron again reiterated the need to strengthen European autonomy in foreign and security policy and presented yet another proposal in this area. This time he offered to launch a strategic dialogue on the role of the French nuclear deterrence in Europe's collective security. Although the proposal is addressed to all of France's European partners, the most important response will come from Germany. Official reactions in Berlin have so far been consistent with the German approach to French defence initiatives – Germany declared it is ready for such a dialogue but remains cautious about its goals. Berlin does see the need to boost Europe's role in foreign and security policy and recognises Paris as its most important partner in this field. However, Germany's approach differs considerably from that of France. Berlin prefers to strengthen the EU's security and defence policy and the European pillar in NATO, rather than build European strategic autonomy under French leadership. At the same time it does not necessarily have the required political will and military means to back up its own rhetoric.

With regard to nuclear deterrence Germany's stance on the French proposal might not be the most important challenge Berlin is currently facing. The upcoming decision on the replacement of the aged German Tornado combat aircraft, able to carry nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, might be much more significant for the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe.

French initiatives

On 7 February, in his speech on the French defence and deterrence strategy delivered at the École de Guerre in Paris, President Macron proposed to develop a strategic dialogue with France's European partners focused on the role of the French nuclear deterrence in Europe's collective security. Countries which are willing to take part in it can be associated with the exercises of French deterrence forces.

According to Macron, such strategic dialogue could contribute to developing a true strategic culture among Europeans, which – in academic literature – is understood as cluster of norms, ideas, ways of behaviour, that are anchored in the identity and that shape the choice of possible options for action.

Macron's proposal is another French initiative which in the long term is expected to contribute to developing European strategic autonomy in



foreign and security policy and in the defence industry, under French leadership. Paris argues that Europe should strive for sovereignty in international politics in the face of an increasing strategic competition between great powers (the US and China) and of mounting differences in how Europe and the US view values and interests. Since 2016, France has been the driving force in the EU promoting the development of defence initiatives such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund. Paris (alongside Berlin) has also initiated two armaments projects which will be of key importance for the development of the European defence industry. Within the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project a 6th generation jet fighter and complementary unmanned systems will be developed. A next generation main battle tank will be the outcome of the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) project. Both FCAS and MGCS are to enter service by around 2040. In 2018, France established the European Intervention Initiative outside of EU structures with the goal to develop “a shared strategic culture, which will enhance our ability, as European states, to carry out military missions and operations under the framework of the EU, NATO, the UN and/or ad hoc coalitions.” Paris has begun to increasingly involve its European partners in French military operations in the EU’s southern neighbourhood (Operations Barkhane and Takuba in the Sahel, the EMASOH maritime mission in the Strait of Hormuz). Islamic terrorism in Africa and the Middle East are viewed in Paris as the biggest threat to French and European security. Therefore, according to Paris, Europe should primarily counter threats coming from the southern neighbourhood and develop military capabilities for crisis management operations.

The French vision of European strategic autonomy is to be complemented by a strategic dialogue with Russia. To date, Paris has not explained what this dialogue should bring and what it should consist of. The only concrete proposal is to start talks between Europe and Russia on the consequences of the end of the INF treaty, so far discussed within NATO. It seems that France views developing a strategic dialogue with Russia as something that would gradually make the de-

fence and deterrence policy on the Eastern flank less relevant. Nevertheless, for Paris European strategic autonomy is in the long run not feasible without a European nuclear deterrence. The point is not so much to boost collective defence against Russia, as to emphasise Europe’s sovereignty as an equal player in the international arena. This is why Paris is ready to open a dialogue on the European dimension of French nuclear weapons while maintaining its full sovereignty over decision-making. Although France has emphasised the European dimension of its nuclear deterrence since the end of the Cold War, the strategic dialogue proposed by Macron is something new in the current international context which makes the French concept of European strategic autonomy more popular in Western Europe.

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At present, France has less than 300 nuclear warheads, which was confirmed by Macron in his speech at the École de Guerre. They are carried by M51 missiles launched from four French ballistic missile submarines, and by ASMPA medium-range air-to-ground missiles launched from Rafale fighter jets. The French military nuclear programme started in the 1950s in face of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and in order to gain strategic autonomy from the United States. Due to its efforts to maintain its independent nuclear deterrence, France remains outside the Nuclear Planning Group – the senior body on nuclear matters in NATO, which groups all the remaining NATO member states. France’s nuclear arsenal is to defend vital French interests, although Paris has for some time now stated that these are not limited to France’s territory. At the summit in Ottawa in 1974, NATO officially recognised that the nuclear forces of European member states (the United Kingdom and France) contribute to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance. This was once again confirmed in the currently valid NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept.

Germany's responses

Official reactions from Germany to Macron's proposal appeared during the Munich Security Conference (14–16 February). Germany's President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) supported Paris's proposal to develop a strategic dialogue on nuclear deterrence in Europe. Also Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) reiterated Germany's readiness to start talks on this issue. However, she also raised the question regarding the aim of such a dialogue and stressed that NATO guarantees nuclear deterrence relies on the US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and the nuclear sharing arrangements that Germany is taking part in. In line with these arrangements, the US B61 nuclear bombs are stored in bases located on the territory of several European allies which do not have their own nuclear potential (at present these include Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and most likely still Turkey). The decision to use these nuclear weapons remains with the US President. The European allies provide dual-capable aircraft (DCA) for carrying B61 bombs during NATO nuclear exercises and missions.

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The German response to Macron's proposal is essentially in line with Berlin's stance on French defence initiatives since 2016. Germany agrees with France in seeing the need to boost Europe's role in foreign and security policy in the face of changes in the US foreign and security policy and of the transformation of the international environment. However, Germany differs from France in its views on how this process should be shaped. Firstly, Berlin does not want the enhanced European security and defence policy to undermine NATO, as it is aware of the US role in guaranteeing Europe's security. At the Munich Security Conference none of Germany's representatives referred to "European strategic autonomy"; each of them

mentioned strengthening the "European pillar in NATO". Secondly, Berlin views the European Union as the main framework for deepening military cooperation and is sceptical about France's unilateral initiatives outside the EU. Thirdly, Germany views inclusiveness as the overriding principle of enhancing European security and defence policy. The perspective of Central and Eastern European states should not be disregarded in this process (as emphasised by President Steinmeier in Munich) even if for Germany France is the main, albeit very difficult, partner (the UK needs to be included as well).

Since 2016, Germany has thus diluted the French plans aiming to develop an exclusive PESCO format aimed at facilitating military interventions. It has supported a broad, integration-oriented approach to military cooperation within the EU. Berlin continues to be sceptical about the European Intervention Initiative, even though it is a participant, and would like to include this format in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Germany does not participate in the French-led operations in the Sahel (unlike e.g. Estonia, Denmark, Belgium and the Czech Republic) and prefers to be involved in the UN and EU missions in Mali (a total of more than 1,000 Bundeswehr soldiers). It criticises France for focusing on the military and neglecting a comprehensive, political and economic approach to crises in the southern neighbourhood. Germany has also so far refrained from participation in the French-led EMASOH maritime mission in the Strait of Hormuz and the defence minister is making the Bundeswehr's participation in this operation conditional upon obtaining a European Council mandate for forming a European coalition of the willing, since there is no consensus to launch an EU operation. Germany is France's main partner in the FCAS and MGCS projects, but Berlin is frustrated by France's intransigence and the striving to dominate the industrial cooperation. This may be the reason behind the conditional and cautious approach of the Bundestag to allocating funds for the next stages of both projects. To date, Berlin has also failed to offer official response on France's proposals regarding the review of European security architecture and strategic dialogue with

Russia. At the same time, regardless of the tensions with France, Germany is facing a fundamental credibility problem in promoting a narrative that emphasises the need to enhance Europe's role in security and defence. The current German government (and possibly also the next one) is not able to increase Germany's military engagement abroad due to the lack of consensus within the ruling coalition, domestic problems, and the public opinion. Moreover, due to bureaucratic, technical and personnel problems it is unlikely that the Bundeswehr would be able to meet considerably greater international commitments.

Germany will most likely prefer to link the French initiative with NATO's nuclear deterrence policy, even if it has expressed readiness to develop a strategic dialogue with France. However, there are voices in Germany in favour of developing European nuclear deterrence as tensions rise in transatlantic relations. In Germany's opinion this would however involve a 'Europeanisation' of the French (and possibly British) nuclear potential, which would mean transferring the decision-making responsibility for the use of nuclear weapons to the European level and creating relevant structures within the EU or NATO. This, in turn, is totally unacceptable to Paris. Prior to Macron's speech, this option was supported by Johann Wadephul (CDU), one of the deputy chairman and by Florian Hahn (CSU) responsible for European issues in the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag. However, these proposals have come under criticism not only from the parts of the CDU/CSU which support nuclear deterrence within NATO, but also from the Greens and the SPD which are either fundamentally opposed to nuclear weapons or sceptical about the concept of the EU as a nuclear power.

Germany and nuclear deterrence in NATO

The way Germany responds to the French proposals might not be the biggest problem Berlin is currently facing with regard to the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe. The German Defence Ministry is about to make a key decision on the

choice of the successor to Tornado fighter jets, which serve (among other tasks) as dual-capable aircraft in the German Air Force within NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. These and US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe demonstrate the ultimate US security guarantees and at the same time enable risk and responsibility sharing with the European allies. They give the European member states influence on NATO's nuclear policy, planning and consultation procedures. Berlin's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing is of key importance to transatlantic relations.

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The 40-year-old German Tornado combat aircraft should be retired from service in 2025. The German Ministry of Defence had long delayed the procurement of its successor due to political divisions on this issue. Parts of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party favour a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from German territory and the end of Germany's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing. They have thus been against the purchase of new dual-capable aircraft. Since 2017 the German Ministry of Defence has been however evaluating possible replacement options. Three companies submitted their offers for replacing the present 85 Tornado fighter jets: Eurofighter (Eurofighter Typhoon), Boeing (F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and EA-18G Growler) and Lockheed Martin (F-35A). Due to pressure from Paris, among others, the ministry, then under Ursula von der Leyen, decided to exclude the F-35A 5th generation combat aircraft from further analyses. France views Germany's possible purchase of F-35A as a potential threat to the FCAS project and argues that the high cost of purchasing the US aircraft could compromise the funding of the French-German project and cause delays in its implementation. Paris is also sceptical about Germany purchasing the F/A-18E/F and highlights the need for European strategic autonomy, including in the industrial dimension. There is also equal pressure coming from

the German defence industry and trade unions warning that German jobs and technological expertise may be lost, should the US offer be selected. On the other hand, the German Air Force preferred the F-35A due to: (1) it being the most modern system planned to be in service in the US Air Force for a long time; (2) its stealth capability, which would be of importance when performing nuclear missions against an enemy using advanced air defence systems; (3) it being designed as a carrier for tactical nuclear weapons.

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Since the beginning of 2019, the Ministry of Defence has been taking into consideration only two options: the purchase of additional Eurofighters and their certification to the DCA role or the purchase of F/A-18E/F jets. Both options have come under criticism for their outdated design (they are 4th generation combat aircraft) and for their necessary upgrade and certification to carry nuclear weapons which will be difficult to achieve by 2025. The of F/A-18E/F is additionally criticised for being currently phased out from service in the US Armed Forces.

The choice of the Tornado successor will not be made purely along military lines since it also has serious political implications. In practice, it is an element of the choice between the concept of European strategic autonomy on the one hand, and the European pillar in NATO and maintaining close security ties with the US on the other. Two analyses published in February this year by the German think tank DGAP revived the debate on this issue. Their authors emphasised the importance of Germany's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing and of maintaining the US nuclear deterrence in Europe and proposed a compromise solution. This involves: (1) the re-inclusion of F-35A in the analyses and their potential (partial) purchase for the DCA role; (2) the support to the German defence industry in the development of the Eurofighter to the SEAD role (Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses) performed to date by the Tornado jets; (3) the full commitment to developing and building the FCAS together with France. Considering the mutually conflicting political, industrial and military goals and interests, as well as Germany's fragile political situation, the final decision of the German Defence Ministry is difficult to predict. The further postponement of the decision should also not be ruled out; this may equally call into question Germany's ability to take part in NATO's nuclear sharing after 2025.