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France's Place Within NATO: Toward a Strategic *Aggiornamento?*



Guillaume GARNIER

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Focus stratégique

Resolving today's security problems requires an integrated approach. Analysis must be cross-cutting and consider the regional and global dimensions of problems, their technological and military aspects, as well as their media linkages and broader human consequences. It must also strive to understand the far-reaching and complex dynamics of terrorism or post-conflict stabilization. Through the ***Focus stratégique*** series, Ifri's Security Studies Center aims to do just this, offering new perspectives on the major international security issues in the world today.

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Executive summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was built up over three historical periods.

- Created following the Treaty of Washington of 1949 on initial impulse from France and the United Kingdom, NATO was initially characterized by its defensive posture. Under the Fourth Republic, NATO had a substantial presence on French territory, totaling for example 70,000 American soldiers. Faced especially with American and British reluctance to join a "three-way board" involving France, General de Gaulle decided in 1966 to leave the integrated military structure but without calling into question France's military solidarity with its allies.
- With the fall of the USSR, NATO entered a period of "existential crisis". This time was marked first and foremost by the enlargement of the Alliance to include the former Warsaw Pact countries. This began in 1997 with the accession of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. It was also characterized by a more expeditionary posture, with peacekeeping and stabilization operations in the Balkans. The Afghanistan engagement reinforced the Alliance's interventionist image, at the expense of its defensive nature.
- From 2008 onwards, NATO gradually refocuses on collective defense, initially shy, when Russia launched an offensive against Georgia, which had expressed with Ukraine its wish to join the Alliance. At the same time, France was forging closer ties with NATO, culminating in its reintegration into the integrated military structure under President Sarkozy in 2009. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the hybrid conflict led by Moscow in the Donbas, reimposed the centrality of the Eastern flank, while France contributed to the forward presence posture in the Baltic States.

In 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to a major *aggiornamento* for NATO.

- The Strategic Concept, published following the Madrid summit in June 2022, reaffirms the collective defense mission as a priority and designates Russia as the most important and the most direct threat. The vigilance posture is strengthened in the East, increasing in the short time from four joint task forces (GTIA) to eight. Beyond that, the whole of NATO's posture in the East needs to be largely re-evaluated, with substantial organic consequences.

- The Alliance's strategic horizon is broadened with the mention of China presented as a "challenge", while threats on the southern flank persist.
- The Strategic Concept 2022 finally advocates better cooperation with the EU, described as an essential partner. The Strategic Compass published the same year by the European Union goes in the same direction, pointing out in addition that NATO remains the foundation of the collective defense of the members of the European Union.

Today, NATO's new direction offers an opportunity for France to "make better use" of the Alliance and increase its influence within it. To do this, it must focus on :

- Greater investment in its existing levers of influence and systematic and sustained promotion of French contributions, such as its commitment on the Eastern flank via the French battalion deployed in Romania. Paris has a number of strengths: its army model is almost complete and it is continually engaged in military operations. France is also an endowed nuclear power, a country with a solid defense technological and industrial base (DTIB), and is listened to on issues relating to Africa or the Indo-Pacific.
- There are two possible scenarios for reinventing its role within NATO:
 - A sub-optimal role where France is confined to "guarding the southern flank" of the Alliance. France would probably be marginalized if a major crisis occurred on the eastern flank.
 - France assumes more extensive responsibilities on the Eastern flank. It actively participates in the global deterrence and defense posture. The south-eastern flank could provide an opportunity for France to become a framework nation, at this regional level. Already involved in Romania, Paris could find another advantage in this geographical area in that it borders the Mediterranean. The French Navy has a greater presence in the southern area than on the seas adjacent to the northern and eastern flanks; the Air Force and Space Force know the area well, having intervened there regularly, and two countries (Greece and Croatia) now have Rafales.
- Assuming greater responsibility within NATO would generate additional influence that would allow France to put forward once again its aspiration to build a "European pillar" within the Atlantic Alliance. This ambition is all the more legitimate given that the Americans may feel that Europe must now take over and ensure the core of NATO posture in the face of a Russia that is seen as dangerous but weakened.

Résumé

L'organisation du traité de l'Atlantique nord s'est construite au cours de trois séquences historiques.

- Créée à la suite du traité de Washington de 1949, sur impulsion initiale de la France et du Royaume-Uni, l'OTAN est d'abord caractérisée par sa posture défensive. Sous la IV^e République, la présence de l'OTAN sur le territoire national est conséquente, totalisant par exemple jusqu'à 70 000 soldats américains. Devant notamment les réticences américaine et britannique d'un « directoire à trois » impliquant la France, le général de Gaulle décide en 1966 de sortir de la structure militaire intégrée, sans remettre en cause la solidarité militaire française vis-à-vis des alliés.
- À la chute de l'URSS, l'OTAN entre dans une période de « crise existentielle », d'abord marquée par un élargissement de l'Alliance aux anciens pays du pacte de Varsovie. Il débute en 1997 avec les entrées de la Pologne, la Tchéquie et la Hongrie. Il est également caractérisé par une posture plus expéditionnaire, avec des opérations de maintien de la paix et de stabilisation dans les Balkans. L'engagement en Afghanistan renforce une image interventionniste de l'Alliance, au détriment de sa nature défensive.
- Depuis 2008, l'OTAN opère graduellement un recentrage vers la défense collective, d'abord timide, lorsque la Russie lance une offensive contre la Géorgie, laquelle avait exprimé avec l'Ukraine son souhait de rejoindre l'Alliance. En parallèle, la France exerce un rapprochement avec l'OTAN, aboutissant à sa réintégration du commandement intégré sous la houlette du président Sarkozy en 2009. L'annexion de la Crimée en 2014, ainsi que le conflit hybride mené par Moscou dans le Donbass, réimpose la centralité du flanc Est tandis que la France contribue à la posture de présence avancée dans les pays baltes.

En 2022, l'invasion russe de l'Ukraine annonce un *aggiornamento* majeur pour l'OTAN.

- Le Concept stratégique, publié à l'issue du sommet de Madrid de juin 2022, réaffirme la mission de défense collective comme prioritaire et désigne la Russie comme la menace la plus importante et la plus directe. Le dispositif de vigilance est renforcé à l'Est, passant dans l'immédiat de quatre groupements tactiques interarmes (GTIA) à huit. Au-delà, c'est l'ensemble de la posture otanienne à l'Est qui doit être largement réévaluée, emportant des conséquences organiques substantielles.
- L'horizon stratégique de l'Alliance s'élargit avec la Chine présentée

comme un « défi », tandis que les menaces sur le flanc Sud persistent.

- Le Concept stratégique 2022 prône enfin une meilleure coopération OTAN-UE, qualifiée de partenaire incontournable. La Boussole stratégique publiée la même année par l'Union européenne va dans le même sens, signalant en outre que l'OTAN demeure le fondement de la défense collective des membres de l'Union européenne.

Aujourd'hui, le tournant à l'œuvre de l'OTAN offre une occasion pour la France de « mieux utiliser » l'Alliance et d'y accroître son influence. Pour cela, elle doit se concentrer sur :

- Un investissement accru dans ses leviers d'influence existants et une valorisation systématique et appuyée des contributions françaises, comme par exemple son engagement sur le flanc Est *via* le bataillon français déployé en Roumanie. Paris dispose de nombreux atouts : son modèle d'armée est quasi complet et continuellement engagé dans des opérations extérieures. La France est également une puissance nucléaire dotée, un pays jouissant d'une solide base industrielle et technologique de défense (BITD), et elle est écoutée sur les sujets relatifs à l'Afrique ou à l'Indo-Pacifique.
- Pour réinventer son rôle au sein de l'OTAN, deux scénarios sont envisageables :
 - Un emploi sous-optimal où la France est cantonnée à « la garde du flanc Sud » de l'Alliance. Une probable marginalisation française aurait lieu si une crise majeure survenait sur la façade orientale.
 - La France assume des responsabilités plus étendues sur le flanc Est. Elle participe activement à la posture globale de dissuasion et de défense. Le flanc Sud-Est pourrait offrir l'opportunité pour la France d'être nation-cadre, à cette échelle régionale. Déjà engagée en Roumanie, Paris peut trouver un autre avantage à cette zone géographique dans le sens où elle jouxte la Méditerranée. La Marine nationale est davantage présente dans l'espace méridional que sur les mers adjacentes aux flancs Nord et Est ; l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace connaît bien la zone pour y être régulièrement intervenue et deux pays (Grèce et Croatie) sont désormais dotés du Rafale.
- Une plus grande prise de responsabilité au sein de l'OTAN générerait un surcroît d'influence qui autoriserait la France à remettre en avant son aspiration de construire un « pilier européen » au sein de l'Alliance atlantique. Cette ambition est d'autant plus légitime que les Américains pourraient estimer que l'Europe doit désormais prendre le relais et assurer l'essentiel de la posture otanienne face à une Russie considérée comme dangereuse mais affaiblie.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	10
NATO, A CHAMELEON BORN FROM THE COLD WAR.....	13
The Cold War: A Delicate Balance Between Solidarity and Sovereignty	13
<i>The Baptismal Font of the Atlantic Alliance.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>The 1966 Withdrawal: A Rupture, but not Such a Straightforward One..</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Winning the War Without Fighting it: NATO's Real Victory.....</i>	<i>19</i>
The Post-Cold War Era: A Chain Reaction of Transformations	20
<i>Enlargement and Relations with Russia</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>The Era of Crisis Management</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>For France, the Question of Interoperability</i>	<i>23</i>
The Return of Peril	24
<i>In The East, Renewed Motivation for Collective Defense</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Destabilization of the Southern Flank: A 360-Degree NATO?.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>A Test of Internal Cohesion</i>	<i>28</i>
NATO'S AGGIORNAMENTO AND ITS EFFECTS ON FRANCE.....	32
The Strategic Concept: Back to Basics.....	32
<i>Strategic Rupture in the East.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>A Stronger Position on the Eastern Flank.....</i>	<i>33</i>
An Ever-Expanding Strategic Horizon.....	37
<i>China, a Systemic Challenge</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>The Southern Flank, a Topic on the Wane</i>	<i>39</i>
The NATO-EU Relationship: Much Discussed, Little in Evidence?	41
<i>Constantly Reaffirmed Complementarity</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>A Project: Combating Hybrid Threats</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>An Opportunity: Prevention on the Periphery</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>An Imperative: Complementarity in the Classic Military Field</i>	<i>44</i>
MAKING BETTER USE OF NATO: OPTIMIZING INFLUENCE	46
Underestimated Levers of Influence.....	47
<i>An Unprecedented Effort on the Eastern Flank</i>	<i>47</i>

<i>Ensuring Better Publicity for Actions</i>	49
<i>Leveraging Intrinsic Strengths: Influence Based on Tangible Assets</i>	50
A Role to Be Reinvented	53
<i>Building A Land-Based Aggregation Capability: the Army Corps Level</i>	54
<i>Aggregation Capabilities in Existence in Other Environments, but in Need of Strengthening</i>	57
<i>Two Scenarios for One Ambition</i>	59
A European Pillar within NATO	64
<i>What is the European Pillar?</i>	64
<i>The American Variable</i>	65
<i>The European Variable</i>	66
CONCLUSION	69

Introduction

With a rapidly deteriorating security environment, a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, internal disputes exploding into public view, and questions being raised about the scope of its security responsibilities, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seemed to be in dire straits at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The new Strategic Concept,¹ agreed at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, is intended to act as a response to this major turning point and represents the culmination of a process of introspection following President Emmanuel Macron's comment in an interview with *The Economist* describing the organization as "brain dead". The Strategic Concept document sees the Alliance updating both its political and strategic goals. The repercussions of this *aggiornamento* for France's defense policy and its armed forces tend to be somewhat underestimated by Paris.

Rather than examining the relationship between France and NATO, a subject already widely covered elsewhere, the aim of this study is to dissect the concrete aspects, primarily military but also political, that stem from this systemic shift within NATO and to analyze its potential consequences for the French defense apparatus. How should France handle these changes, and how can it take advantage of them? The central element of the 2022 Strategic Concept is the return of NATO to its primary function: the collective defense of member states on the eastern flank against its traditional rival, Russia, in respect of both conventional and nuclear threats. Without neglecting other aspects of the concept, it is therefore primarily in relation to the future "deterrence and defense (DDA)" posture,² which will be denser and more responsive, that France needs to position itself. For the internal balances within NATO will be radically altered, in a European context where, despite significant disparities, defense budgets are on the rise again, and indeed accelerating in the case of Eastern European and Nordic countries. These financial and military contributions determine the level of responsibility, and therefore the political weight, attributed to each Ally.

What role can France play in this context? France has a great many military assets it can bring to bear within NATO: tried-and-tested armed forces, a responsive force structure, expertise in all fields of defense, and a

1. *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, NATO, 2022, available at: www.nato.int.

2. DDA (*Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area*) is the classified concept document that details NATO's deterrence and defense posture.

capacity for strategic analysis of issues that extend beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. Its structural weight in the organization is also substantial, often placing it second only to the United States depending on the criteria used. However, France does not always seem to take optimal advantage of these levers of influence. It does not always succeed in building solid internal coalitions and lacks any established club of military affiliates.

Given what is at stake in the transformation of NATO currently underway, it is vital that France should be able to exert its influence to the full. For it is a question here of the defense of the continent—and the possibility of a high-intensity conflict has become a far more tangible prospect since the invasion of Ukraine. It is also a question of NATO's role as a driving force in defining the norms and standards that enable American and European armed forces to operate in concert. Yet, however fundamental these issues may be, they are not the only ones that must be taken into account: France also has other responsibilities beyond the Euro-Atlantic area (overseas departments, regions, and collectivities, defense agreements, strategic partnerships). Any proposal for a national strategy of influence within the organization must therefore take account of this difficulty, which may however also prove to be an opportunity.

Beyond national considerations, the question of France's place within NATO must be weighed up against more global concerns: the attitude of the United States and its future strategic priorities, increasingly turned toward the Indo-Pacific, and the collective effort that European countries in turn may agree upon in order to ensure their defense, with the possible shaping of a more or less structured "European pillar" within the Alliance. In this context, France's positioning must be comprehensible to its allies, and therefore coherent and credible, i.e., based on an assumption of responsibility, the level of which will depend upon the military resources pledged. At a time when the new 2024–2030 Military Programming Law (LPM) is making difficult choices as to the allocation of resources,³ it is clear to see how NATO's *aggiornamento* collides with some serious national dilemmas for which there is no easy solution.

To understand what is at stake in this *aggiornamento*, we must look back at NATO's history so as to understand the nature of the organization, its successive transformations, and the way in which its relationship with France has also changed. This historical review should shed light on a certain "normalization" of France in recent years, even though the country retains its singularity (I). We must then place the 2022 Strategic Concept into perspective, gauging its potential repercussions on France, in respect of both the "eastern flank" and other issues (China, the southern flank, NATO-EU relations, etc.) (II). Finally, following a diagnosis of France's various levers

3. É. Tenenbaum, "La loi de programmation militaire propose un échantillonnage des moyens qui n'est soutenable qu'en temps de paix", *Le Monde*, May 27, 2023.

of military influence, we shall clarify its role within NATO, not losing sight of its specificity but instead highlighting its strengths. In the absence of a clear, systematic assumption of military responsibility, there is a real risk of France being marginalized within the Alliance, which in the event of an interstate crisis or conflict on the continent could lead to it playing a secondary role, which, paradoxically, runs quite contrary to the Gaullist spirit (III). This return of war, a prospect considered unlikely before the advent of the Ukrainian conflict, is something that must be taken into consideration now that the taboo has been broken, inducing a general disinhibition with regard to the violent use of armed force.

NATO, a Chameleon Born from the Cold War

French collective memory of NATO has long remained focused on de Gaulle's decision to withdraw France from the integrated military command in 1966, with the Alliance often portrayed as a foreign organization that threatens national sovereignty, forgetting that France was a founding member of the organization. Following France's rejoining of the integrated military structure in 2009 and the Védrine report of 2012,⁴ "(re)exiting" the organization is no longer seen as an option by the political and military authorities, although France's membership continues to provoke currents of radical opposition.⁵ Beyond the appearance of a relationship of mutual distrust, which is sometimes overstated, two elements of continuity can be detected. On the one hand, operational ties have remained close throughout NATO's seventy-year history, as dictated by the necessities of the security challenges facing the Allies.⁶ On the other, France's solidarity with the Alliance has never actually wavered, either in intent or in deed.

The Cold War: A Delicate Balance Between Solidarity and Sovereignty

The Baptismal Font of the Atlantic Alliance

At the end of the Second World War, France and the United Kingdom found themselves isolated, too weak to ensure their own security, and feared that the United States might be tempted, as it had been at the end of the previous global conflict, to disengage from Europe and demobilize the large number of troops it had deployed on the continent. Renewing the Entente Cordiale of 1904, the two great Western European allies signed a treaty of alliance and mutual assistance at Dunkirk in 1947, which was subsequently extended to the three Benelux countries (Treaty of Brussels, 1948). Germany, temporarily drained and demilitarized, was initially at the center of French preoccupations, but London saw very early on the threat from the Soviet

4. H. Védrine, "Report for the President of the French Republic on the Consequences of France's Return to NATO's Integrated Military Command, on the Future of Transatlantic Relations, and the Outlook for the Europe of Defence", November 14, 2012, available at: <https://otan.delegfrance.org>.

5. This option was mentioned by eight out of twelve candidates in the 2022 French presidential election. See: www.lemonde.fr.

6. On this little-known aspect of the military ties between France and NATO, see C. Franc, "L'Otan : De la chute du mur de Berlin à la guerre en Ukraine (I) De la chute du Mur au Kosovo", *Revue Défense Nationale*, No. 850, 2022, p. 121–24.

Union, the only country capable of posing an existential threat, and which had already carried out numerous power grabs (Greek Civil War, Prague coup, Berlin blockade) and subversive activities (insurrectionary strikes in France, major influence in Italy) across Europe. There was then little doubt that only the United States had the power to guarantee the collective security of the “free world”.⁷

This time, therefore, it was imperative to involve Washington in European security affairs. However, the United States had never before accepted a binding treaty, especially one concerning the deployment of its armed forces. London and then Paris had to use their full political weight to convince Washington, and the Senate in particular, of the need for this break with diplomatic tradition. Aware of the danger posed by the Soviet Union, Congress finally overcame its reluctance and allowed itself to be persuaded, after some skillful maneuvering orchestrated by Secretary of State Dean Acheson.⁸

The Washington Treaty, which founded the Atlantic Alliance, was signed on April 4, 1949. It was conceived as a defense treaty for transatlantic mutual assistance, the crucial point of which was to be found in Article 5, which stipulates that “an armed attack against one or more of [the Parties] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all [...]. [Each member] will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith [...] such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force [...]”.⁹

Following the signing of the treaty, a permanent integrated politico-military structure was developed as the principal instrument of the Alliance: NATO. This was because it was militarily more effective to have a joint command structure in place in peacetime. The centerpiece of this structure, SHAPE,¹⁰ is intended to take command only in the event of war, but it handles day-to-day planning, thus ensuring that forces from several countries are “ready for deployment”. The integrated structure is placed under the political direction of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), which brings together the various Allies to take sovereign decisions on a consensus basis.

This brief summary of the conditions under which the Alliance was born reminds us that, contrary to how things are sometimes perceived in French domestic political debate, NATO is by no means a Machiavellian American creation designed to secure dominance over Western Europe, but rather the result of an explicit Franco-British appeal for security.

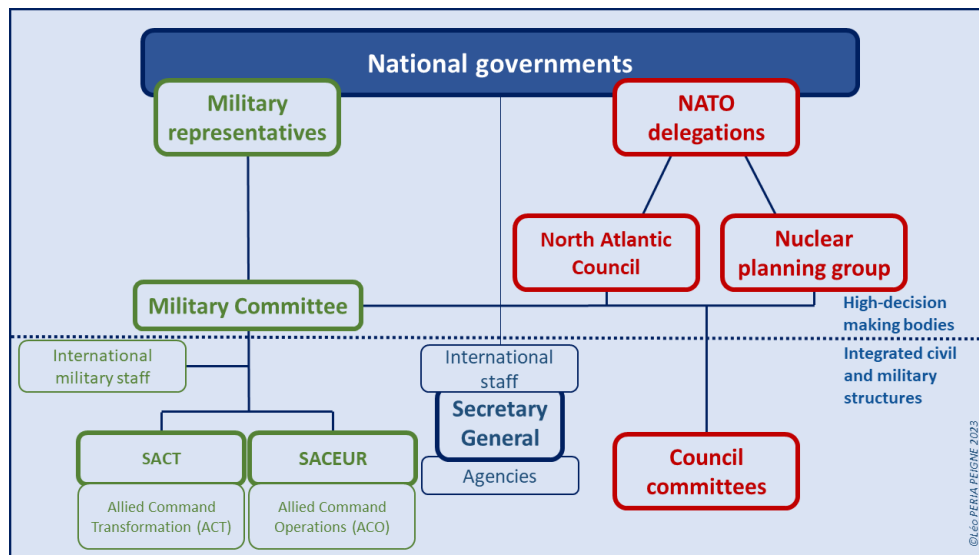
7. O. Kempf, *L'OTAN au XXI^e siècle : La transformation d'un héritage*, Paris, Éditions du Rocher, 2010.

8. E. Mathey, “L'OTAN : Transformation et plasticité. Une organisation de défense collective conçue pour être évolutive et adaptable”, IRSEM, Research note 129, June 30, 2022.

9. On the spirit of Article 5, see C. Zorgbibe, “Une brève histoire de l'OTAN jusqu'à la fin du XX^e siècle”, *Questions internationales*, No. 111, 2022.

10. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe.

Figure 1: Simplified diagram of the politico-military structure of NATO



Source: NATO website, "What Is NATO?"

As a founding member, France initially played a leading role, and NATO's physical footprint on French territory was substantial during the Fourth Republic. Although it is hard to imagine today, the Palais de Chaillot in Paris's 16th arrondissement housed the Alliance's headquarters in 1952, before it moved to the building now used by Paris-Dauphine University in 1959. SHAPE was established in Rocquencourt, near Fontainebleau.¹¹ The number of American military personnel in the country reached 70,000 in 1957,¹² with barracks, airbases, and logistics depots throughout France, which was ideally situated geographically and well-equipped in terms of infrastructure. The United States also planned to stockpile nuclear weapons in France¹³: initial reluctance on the part of the French government, followed by the arrival into power of Charles de Gaulle, put an end to negotiations on this matter.¹⁴

The 1966 Withdrawal: A Rupture, but not Such a Straightforward One

This image of France as an exemplary member of NATO should not, however, mask the various divergences that emerged in the 1950s. On the domestic front, the American presence aroused reservations. Among the French public, the slogan "US go home!" conjured up the idea of an occupying army,

11. It is now located in Mons, Belgium.

12. C. Calmels, "La France à l'OTAN: Un allié influent?", *Diploweb*, March 29, 2020, available at: www.diploweb.com.

13. Today, five countries host NATO nuclear weapons stockpiles (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Turkey).

14. P. Facon, "Les bases américaines en France (1945–1958): Entre les nécessités de la sécurité et les impératifs de la souveraineté nationale", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, No. 29, 1992, p. 31–32.

an image promoted in particular by the French Communist Party (PCF), then at the height of its influence. A “peace camp” bringing together communists and certain Christian groups developed a discourse hostile to nuclear weapons and to NATO, described as an alliance likely to drag France, and the rest of the world, into an apocalypse. The Suez Crisis of 1956, and the United States’ disavowal in the midst of the storm, provoked a crisis of confidence in Paris, with the realization that France would lack strategic autonomy so long as it did not have its own nuclear weapons.

Finally, there was a recurring debate around the governance of the Alliance. From the outset, France had sought to promote the idea of a tripartite “directorate” with the United States and the United Kingdom, a view that was not subscribed to either by the “smaller nations” or by the “Anglo-Saxons”, as they were known in Paris. The refusal of such an arrangement led de Gaulle to withdraw from the integrated military structure in 1966. This was a spectacular political decision, sparking a number of immediate and very concrete military consequences, such as the withdrawal of American troops,¹⁵ the relocation of NATO bases (to Belgium in particular), and the withdrawal of French forces from the integrated commands.

When examined in detail, however, this decision was not so straightforward. First, France remained part of the political structure, the Alliance, and as such retained its seat on the North Atlantic Council. While developing its nuclear doctrine as the cornerstone of its national independence, it nevertheless refused membership in the Nuclear Planning Group, founded shortly afterward in December 1966, since this committee was political in nature. Second, France pragmatically accepted its military responsibilities, signing the secret Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreements¹⁶ in 1967 to maintain close cooperation with NATO.¹⁷ Indeed, in addition to the creation of several “French military missions” within numerous NATO bodies for liaison and coordination purposes, technical-operational arrangements were negotiated concerning the use of the French 2nd Army Corps stationed in Germany alongside the Allies in the event of a Soviet offensive.¹⁸ The key difference from the previous situation was that France reserved the right to assess the situation itself, and its military commitment was therefore not a given.¹⁹ These 1967 agreements were reinforced in 1974

15. Amounting to 26,000 American soldiers when they left in 1966–1967. See the article in *Le Monde*, March 9, 1966, “Les États-Unis entretiennent en France 29 bases et dépôts et 26 000 hommes”.

16. Named after the chef d’état-major des armées (CEMA) (chief of defense staff of France) and SACEUR (the NATO commander of SHAPE, always an American national).

17. F. Bozo, “De Gaulle, l’Amérique et l’alliance atlantique : Une relecture de la crise de 1966”, *XX^e siècle. Revue d’histoire*, No. 43, 1994, p. 63–64.

18. A.-H. Budan de Russé, “L’OTAN et la culture militaire française depuis 1949”, *Focus Stratégique*, No. 22, Ifri, 2010, p. 14–15.

19. Clearly, the aggression must have been provoked by the USSR. Given the defensive nature of the Alliance, this would always have been the case, and France, in this configuration, would have shown de facto solidarity.

by the Valentin-Ferber agreements, which this time concerned the commitment of the entire 1st Army in West Germany and enabled operational plans to be drawn up accordingly.²⁰ Functionally speaking, the 1st Army, closely associated with the Force Aérienne Tactique (FATAC) (Tactical Air Force),²¹ served as a theater reserve for the NATO apparatus. The national strategic concept of the time can be summed up as follows:

- To participate in collective defense according to the “forward defense” principle adopted by NATO to prevent any Soviet conquest of West German territory;
- In the event of a breach in the forward lines, to engage the “nation’s field forces”²² with the mobilization of “all resources combined” to demonstrate a determination to defend territorial integrity;
- If the adversary is not stopped, to buy time to enter into final negotiations with the threat of the use of nuclear weapons;
- If this is still not enough, to carry out a “pre-strategic” nuclear strike (with Pluton missiles from 1973) as a final warning;
- Finally, to execute strategic nuclear strikes when vital interests are directly at stake.

There was therefore a tightly choreographed coordination between conventional air-land forces, de facto associated by force of circumstance with the NATO apparatus, albeit as a second line, and strictly sovereign nuclear forces: the former serving to absorb the initial armored-mechanized shock of the Warsaw Pact and lend credibility to the threshold for the use of the latter.

20. C. Franc, “La Première Armée française avant la chute du mur de Berlin”, *G2S dossier*, No. 26, “Haute Intensité”, November 2020. To give some idea of the order of magnitude of manpower at the time, the First Army comprised 200,000 men, 1,500 tanks, 400 helicopters, and 500 artillery pieces. About its organization, see: <http://armee-francaise-1989.wifeo.com>.

21. Which includes the bulk of fighter aircraft.

22. Consisting, let us recall, of conscripted soldiers and politically signifying the nation’s firm resolve to defend itself through its youth (the military quota).

Figure 2: Illustration of forward defense (1984)²³

Source: www.cia.gov/library

The effects of the “rupture” represented by France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military structure should therefore be relativized in operational terms, and strategic autonomy did not jeopardize French military solidarity. In fact, NATO may even be said to have benefited, since it now had a genuine theater reserve (the other reserve, the US III Corps, would have had to cross the Atlantic, most likely harassed by Soviet submarines), making it possible to launch a large-scale counterattack in the days following the start of hostilities.

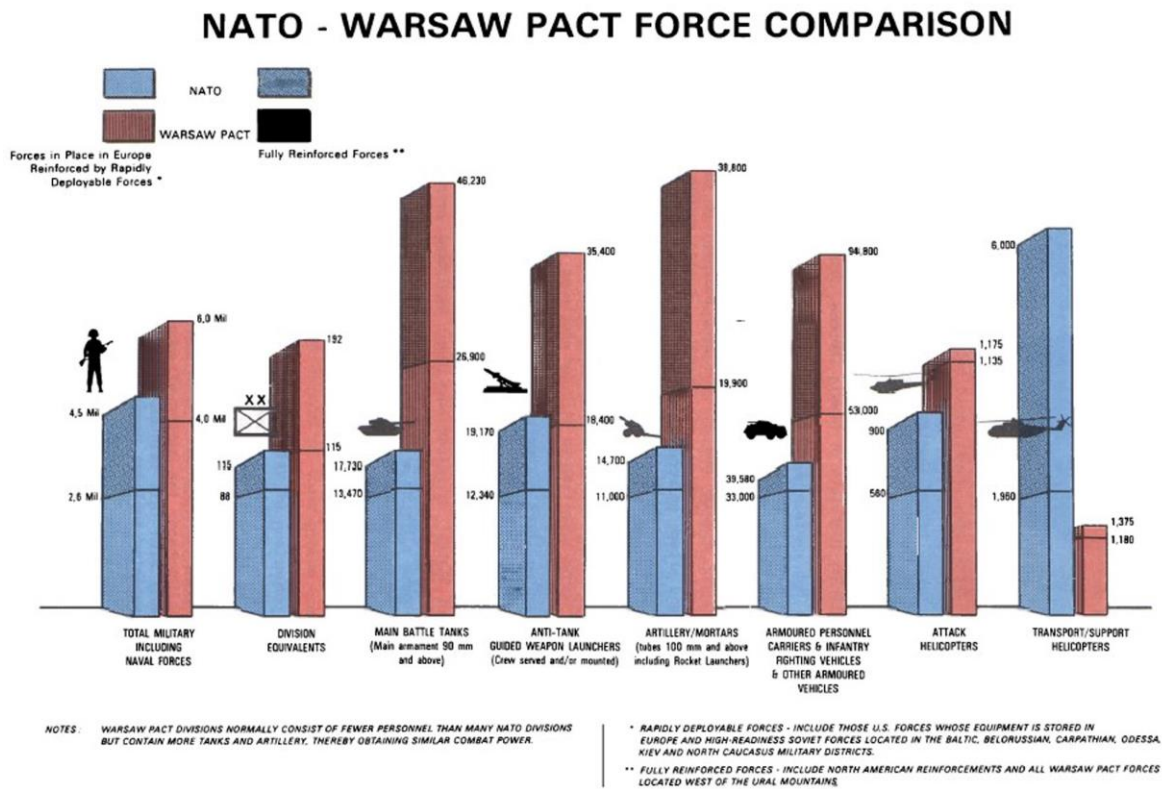
Nonetheless, from the point of view of NATO planners, this posture on the part of the French must have been uncomfortable, implying doubts about any guarantee of French intervention. French national doctrine also raised fears of the premature use of tactical nuclear weapons, by definition without any possible NATO control over the triggering of an escalation mechanism. But the key to this close cooperation between NATO and France was mutual trust—which was never in doubt, and there are no historical records that retrospectively call France’s intentions into question.

23. Note that nine allied army corps were lined up along the West German border, with the French First Army (France and the southwest of the Federal Republic of Germany) as theater reserve.

Winning the War Without Fighting it: NATO's Real Victory

Ultimately, although the Warsaw Pact enjoyed clear conventional superiority, estimated numerically at almost 3 to 1, it never risked launching an offensive in West Germany, since the USSR gauged the NATO apparatus and related mechanisms to be sufficiently robust, and therefore credible, to complicate its cost/benefit calculations and ultimately dissuade it from any such action. In the end, the USSR collapsed, along with the Warsaw Pact, and the apocalypse would never come. “Winning the war without fighting it” would constitute NATO’s major strategic success.

Figure 3: Comparison of forces at the height of the Cold War, in the principal theater (Europe, 1980s)



This brief historical overview highlights how necessary an integrated military structure was to the achievement of this result, so as to increase responsiveness and efficiency (in particular through interoperability) and thus minimize friction upon the outbreak of hostilities, thanks to command structures that were already in place and credible operational plans.²⁴ Here a dilemma arose, from the French point of view: strict military effectiveness in the multinational mode (unified command, delegation of authority of all forces to SACEUR upon the outbreak of conflict, native interoperability of

24. Even if these are inherently imperfect: “No plan survives first contact with the enemy”, as the well-known military *bon mot* puts it.

capabilities) collided head-on with the political question of strategic autonomy and, hence, national sovereignty. While other members of the Alliance could live with the integration of their forces, the Gaullist policy could not subscribe to a form of permanent subordination to the *primus inter pares*, the United States.²⁵ From this perspective, the Valentin-Ferber agreements, guided by pragmatism, seemed to be the best possible compromise for resolving this fundamental political-strategic dilemma.

The Post-Cold War Era: A Chain Reaction of Transformations

The period following the collapse of the USSR and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact necessarily brought NATO's very existence into question. Why preserve it when the reasons for its creation—the Soviet threat to Western Europe—had disappeared? It was an erratic sequence of security crises that decided the matter, prompting the Alliance to proceed through a succession of adaptations, as spelled out in the Strategic Concepts of 1991 and 1999.²⁶ After all, since there was already a structure in place that had long forged close links between the armed forces of member countries, why do away with it? Indeed, NATO remained the only organization capable of generating interoperability between multinational forces, i.e., the ability to act in concert at short notice. As a result, NATO's scope of action would, in fact, expand, moving from the sole aim of collective defense to that of “crisis management”.

Enlargement and Relations with Russia

With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, NATO first had to deal with the evolution of its neighbors to the east. As soon as they were liberated in 1989, the former people's democracies of Central and Eastern Europe expressed their desire to join the Alliance, presenting it with a historic dilemma. It soon became clear that the Alliance could not honor its “historical debt” to the countries of Eastern Europe that had been “kidnapped” in 1945 without jeopardizing its relationship with the new Russia, which at the time was groping its way toward democracy.²⁷ Faced with this dilemma, opinion in the West was divided: as early as 1990, François Mitterrand called for the creation of a “European confederation” to replace NATO, but the former

25. De Gaulle's speech to the Centre des hautes études militaires (November 3, 1959) sums up the spirit of this policy: “The defense of France must be French. [...] If a country like France has to wage war, it must be its own war”.

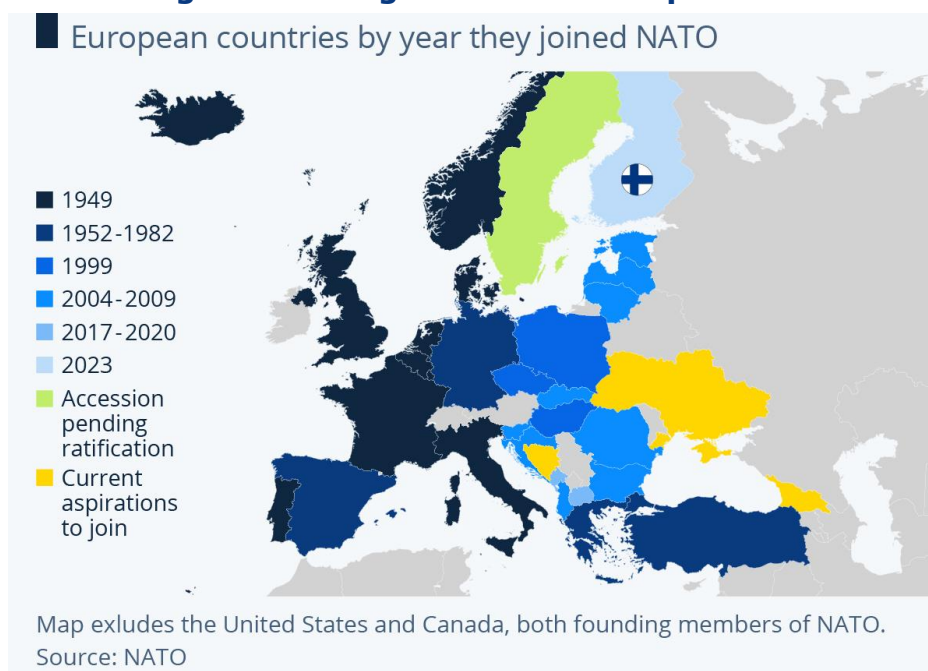
26. O. Kempf, *L'OTAN au XXI^e siècle : La transformation d'un héritage*, op. cit., p. 53–56.

27. M.E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2021.

people's democracies were not interested: after forty-five years under the Soviet yoke, they wanted a transatlantic guarantee of security.²⁸

In order to delay enlargement, NATO set up a policy of partnerships with the former satellites and republics of the USSR (including Russia and Ukraine): the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative (1994). Perceived by the countries of Central Europe as a “waiting room” to accession, the PfP succeeded only in postponing the problem for a few years. Against the backdrop of a renewed role for NATO in the midst of the Balkan crisis, and a new French president, Jacques Chirac, who was less hostile toward the organization, a consensus was eventually reached for an initial enlargement, to include the three countries of the so-called Visegrád Group (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), who were invited to join the Alliance in 1997, while behind the scenes a second tranche including the countries of Eastern Europe, the so-called Vilnius Group, was readying itself for the 1999 Washington Summit.

Figure 4: Enlargement of NATO up to 2023



Source: Katharina Buchholz, Statista

The potential resurgence of the Russian military threat was slight, but not non-existent: the First Chechen War of 1996 caused concern among Russia's neighbors, who feared that they detected a whiff of imperialism. Meanwhile, Westerners were well aware of the growing anxiety that the extension of the Alliance caused within the Kremlin, and in particular for the foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov. In the hope of defusing this resurgence of mistrust or even hostility between the two sides, NATO, under the impetus

28. J. Musitelli, “François Mitterrand, architecte de la Grande Europe : Le projet de Confédération européenne (1990–1991)”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2011, p. 18–28.

of Bill Clinton, Helmut Kohl, and Jacques Chirac, did its best to deepen the relationship of trust with Russia. Hence the signing in May 1997—less than two months before the Madrid Summit, which would validate the first enlargement—of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which established a Permanent Joint Council with Russia.²⁹

The Era of Crisis Management

The generic term “crisis management” covers multiple conditions of intervention, whether coercive or permissive. The 1990s saw NATO carrying out various operations, particularly in the Balkans, where it took on the tasks of peacekeeping and stabilization (in Bosnia with the Implementation Force [IFOR] in 1995 and the Stabilization Force [SFOR] in 1996, and in Kosovo with the Kosovo Force [KFOR] in 1999), as well as aerial “coercive diplomacy” against Serbia. The 2000s further distanced the Alliance from its original role, as Article 5 was invoked for the first (and only) time in the Alliance’s history in the wake of the 9/11 attacks committed by al-Qaeda, a non-state armed group far removed from the generic enemy envisioned when the Washington Treaty was signed.³⁰

It was partly in response to these attacks, and out of transatlantic solidarity with the United States, that NATO justified its involvement in Afghanistan from 2003 onward, where it led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Initially conceived as a post-conflict stabilization mission, this gradually evolved into a counterinsurgency operation. Finally, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the West’s determination not to see a bloody repression of the movement in Libya would lead NATO to commit to an air and sea operation in the name of the “responsibility to protect”.³¹

As a result, NATO’s image was somewhat tarnished, with the perception of its defensive nature replaced by a reputation for interventionism.³² While the functional scope of its military action expanded, particularly in line with the “comprehensive approach” aimed at better coordinating military action with civilian actors, so too did its geographical scope. The “out-of-area” intervention in Afghanistan was far removed from the traditional geographical perimeter of the Euro-Atlantic area. These various shifts in the organization reveal undeniable flexibility, enabling it to respond to an ever-changing strategic context.³³

29. On these aspects, see A. Zima, “L’OTAN”, *Que sais-je ?*, Paris, 2021, p. 72–81.

30. E. Mathey, “L’article 5 de l’OTAN à l’aune des attentats du 11 septembre 2001”, *Brève stratégique*, No. 56, IRSEM, March 10, 2023.

31. For a summary of NATO operations, see O. Kempf, “Les opérations militaires de l’OTAN, de l’aiguillon du changement à la fatigue expéditionnaire”, *Questions internationales*, No. 111, 2022, p.54–63.

32. F. Charillon, “Union européenne ou OTAN ? Le dilemme sans fin des Européens”, *Questions internationales*, No. 111, 2022, p.81–82.

33. E. Mathey, “L’OTAN : Transformation et plasticité. Une organisation de défense collective conçue pour être évolutive et adaptable”, *op. cit.*

For France, the Question of Interoperability

These two decades of change saw France forge ever-closer ties with the organization. Discussions on potential reintegration began under Jacques Chirac's presidency, but they eventually came to a standstill: the main point of contention was the refusal to grant France command of Allied Forces South, based in Naples.³⁴ Apart from this, France's intention had been to promote, within NATO, the idea of a European defense—a guiding principle of French post-Cold War policy, but a goal that does not seem to have motivated anyone other than France itself.

Despite this setback, France made a significant contribution to NATO operations in the 1990s, often as the second-largest contributor. However, in order for its contributions to be operationally coherent, the French military had to rise to the major challenge of interoperability. This term, which has come to mean many things, covers doctrinal issues, logistics, equipment, staff procedures, and, perhaps most importantly, C2.³⁵ In all of these fields, the various national armed forces must be able to talk to each other and interact.³⁶ If France was to play a significant role in NATO operations, it would need to improve its interoperability with the organization.³⁷ Indeed, interoperability can never be taken for granted: a sufficient degree of interoperability may be achieved at a given moment, but then, as a result of technological developments, industrial choices, and differences in military expenditure between countries, the gap can widen again.

Interoperability therefore acted as a technical-operational attractor for the French armed forces.³⁸ This is borne out by the strenuous efforts that were made to “certify” high-level staff (by putting in place new procedures, infrastructures, and demanding exercises), i.e., to qualify them to NATO standards, in each of the three armed forces.³⁹ Only when thus certified would they be able to command structures within the Alliance such as the NATO Response Force (NRF),⁴⁰ created in 2002 to respond to crisis management scenarios. From 2004 onward, 110 French personnel were seconded into the integrated structure. During this period, then, France was already unofficially part of NATO's integrated structure, but without any

34. A. Zima, “L'OTAN”, *op. cit.*, p.107–108.

35. Command and Control, with its technical corollary, ICS (Information and Communication Systems).

36. See the holistic analysis of interoperability in P. Gros, “Les nouveaux enjeux de l'interopérabilité”, FRS, Observatoire des conflits futurs, 2021.

37. French participation in the 1991 Gulf War was suboptimal, owing to a number of structural factors. These included a lack of interoperability, with the coalition making extensive use of NATO standards, from which France had drifted over time.

38. On NATO's normative power, see G. Lasconjarias, “Une alliance militaire intégrée : L'intégration et ses limites”, *Questions internationales*, No. 111, 2022, p. 46.

39. Certifications including the French MARFOR (naval component) in 2005, the French JFACC (air component) in 2005, and the CRR-FR (land component) in 2007, in all three cases with glowing reviews.

40. Beyond being a warning system, the NRF is proving to be an effective tool, stimulating training and force transformation and forcing France to bring itself up to speed.

influence over the definition of its norms and standards, from which interoperability stems.⁴¹

These technical-operational considerations, which inclined France to develop a greater capacity for influence within NATO, coupled with deeper political motives rooted in the idea of strengthening the “Europe of Defense” through NATO, prompted President Nicolas Sarkozy to take the step of full reintegration in 2009. France gained what had previously eluded it: a position of high command within the structure. It took over Allied Command Transformation (ACT), based in Norfolk, Virginia,⁴² as well as a short-lived operational command, Joint Force Command Lisbon, which was deactivated in 2012. 750 personnel joined the integrated command structure. The three conditions stipulated for this return were once again very much in keeping with the Gaullist spirit and today remain at the heart of the principles governing the relationship between France and NATO:

- Discretion of French national authorities;
- Nuclear independence;
- Freedom of decision on the deployment of French forces.⁴³

Commissioned by President François Hollande following his election in 2012, the report by the former foreign minister and François Mitterrand advisor Hubert Védrine did not question this choice to rejoin NATO,⁴⁴ arguing that (re)exiting would be detrimental to France’s influence.

The Return of Peril

In The East, Renewed Motivation for Collective Defense

In August 2008, Russia launched a coordinated attack on Georgia, just a few months after the Bucharest Summit where Georgia had declared, alongside Kyiv, its desire to join the Alliance but was denied access to a Membership Action Plan—France and Germany having opposed it for fear of antagonizing Moscow. Although this aggression served as an initial warning, it was not taken seriously by all Alliance members. By contrast, the “hybrid” power grab against Ukraine, which by 2014 had led to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of the Donbas, came as a shock to NATO. The threat to the eastern flank, long warned of by Central and Eastern European member states, finally became obvious to all—even if the stabilization of the conflict

41. A.-H. Budan de Russé, “L’OTAN et la culture militaire française depuis 1949”, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

42. See www.act.nato.int.

43. O. Kempf, *L’OTAN au XXI^e siècle : La transformation d’un héritage*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

44. Védrine writes in his report (November 14, 2012), p. 9–10: “Strategic and global contexts and conditions in America and Europe are nothing like they were in the period from 1958 to 1966”, and, just below: “France’s (re)exit from the integrated military command is not an option”, available at: <https://otan.delegfrance.org>.

led some to minimize the extent of the rupture.

From Paris's point of view, the right balance had to be sought between a firm stance that was sufficiently credible to dissuade Russia from orchestrating further maneuvers "below the threshold of open conflict" within the area covered by Article 5, and a mechanism that would not lend itself to a logic of escalation. A mutual misunderstanding could have provoked escalation without premeditation on either side. This delicate balance was worked out at the 2014 Wales Summit and the 2016 Warsaw Summit. It was also during these summits that the Allies made a collective commitment to devote 2% of their GDP to defense expenditure by 2024, 20% of which would be devoted to equipment procurement.⁴⁵

A "Readiness Action Plan" was drawn up in 2014, aimed at reassuring Allies immediately contiguous with Russia, namely the Baltic countries and Poland. This "reassurance" involved an increased military presence in the region on an intermittent basis, through exercises but mostly through "air policing" and naval deployments in the Baltic Sea, given that the Baltic countries lacked the appropriate resources. The NRF was strengthened and a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)⁴⁶ was created within it.⁴⁷ An even more remarkable shift in the orientation of collective defense came in 2016 with the introduction of "enhanced Forward Presence" (eFP), a preventive system involving the rotational deployment of a Combined Arms Tactical Group (Groupement tactique interarmes, GTIA),⁴⁸ i.e., a multinational battalion, for each Baltic country and Poland.

45. For both statements, see: <https://otan.delegfrance.org>.

46. On five-day standby, its land component is the size of a brigade (5,000 men). The NRF can comprise up to 40,000 men; see <http://www.nato.int>.

47. A. Zima, "La Présence avancée renforcée de l'OTAN (eFP) dans les pays baltes et en Pologne : Apports et limites de la dissuasion conventionnelle multilatérale", *Research Note 131*, IRSEM, October 11, 2022.

48. The size of a large battalion, around 1,000 men.

Figure 4: The forward presence posture on the eastern flank and the four framework nations



Source: *International Military Staff website, March 2022*

The political intention here was to physically demonstrate the Alliance's solidarity with these countries. The modest size of the NATO forces involved, and their impermanence (six-monthly rotations), had the advantage of immediately quelling Russia's inclination to denounce it as an escalation. In terms of posture, the "tripwire" principle was adopted.⁴⁹ The presence of troops on the ground did indeed serve to greatly complicate Moscow's politico-military calculations if it were to decide on an armed intervention, however limited. Such a move would de facto bring it into conflict not only with the country being attacked but also with the countries that had deployed their forces there—lending a very human reality to the solidarity envisaged in Article 5. The potential death of troops would become a major political problem for all nations concerned, and hence for NATO as a whole.⁵⁰ What is more, the three nuclear-armed countries were all members of the eFP, further complicating the cost/benefit equation for Russia as a result of the "shadow cast by nuclear deterrence". Finally, the eFP was complemented by a lighter apparatus for the southeastern flank as part of a "tailored Forward Presence" (tFP).

France's positioning in this context opened up a major dilemma: its military stature ought to have implied that it would have the status of a framework nation for one of the four GTIAs, thus consolidating its influence within the organization but also strengthening bilateral ties with the countries in the area, including the Scandinavian countries. However, this NATO reinforcement came at the exact moment when the French Army was engaged not only in the Sahel but also on national territory as part of

49. C. Calmels, "France in NATO: An Evolving Gaullian Agenda", *NDC Research Paper*, No. 26, 2022, p. 38–40.

50. For a description of this deterrence mechanism, see É. Tenenbaum, "Le rôle stratégique des forces terrestres", *Focus stratégique*, No. 78, Ifri, 2018, p. 41–42.

Opération Sentinelle. Paris's decision was therefore something of a half-measure: to contribute alternately to the British GTIA in Estonia and to the German GTIA in Lithuania, with only one tactical subgroup, predominantly heavy arms (Leclerc tanks and VBCIs).⁵¹ This offered the armed forces new possibilities for high-intensity training in a rugged environment and a return on investment, with Estonia repeatedly deploying up to fifty personnel in the Sahel, representing a substantial effort for the country.⁵² However, as France remained a provider of resources rather than a leader, it found its political visibility somewhat diminished.

Destabilization of the Southern Flank: A 360-Degree NATO?

By the end of 2014, the deteriorating security context was also affecting the southern flank. Here it was characterized primarily by the jihadist threat of Daesh, which had set itself up as a proto-state in the Syria-Iraq zone against the backdrop of the multifaceted crisis in the Levant and was spreading to various points on the southern flank via *wilayat* allegiances. For their part, the NATO states to the south, primarily Italy and Spain, subject to the migratory pressure resulting from these crises and feeling that their concerns were being insufficiently taken into account, expressed their frustration. This combination of factors led NATO, at the Warsaw Summit in 2016, to step up its efforts on the southern flank in parallel with adaptation measures to the east.

It was in this context that the concept of “projecting stability” for the South was put forward, based essentially on a preventive approach and seeking to exploit partnerships. NATO has a number of partner countries on its southern flank, grouped under the umbrellas of the Mediterranean Dialogue⁵³ and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.⁵⁴ On the operational front, two new initiatives were launched: Operation Sea Guardian (OSG) in the Mediterranean in 2016, and NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), aimed in particular at training Iraqi army officers, starting in 2018. Each contributed in its own way to the fight against terrorism. Finally, NATO lent its support to the coalition against Daesh by making available its electronic warfare aircraft. The expression “360-degree NATO” was used to demonstrate that the organization has an “all-round” vision and capacity for action, both geographically and thematically.

51. Beyond the context, which was certainly not the most favorable, this limited participation in the eFP was also due to a low appetite for political-military action in Paris, at least initially. See C. Calmels, “France in NATO: An Evolving Gaullian Agenda”, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

52. Participation in Barkhane and later Takuba with its special forces (nearly 100 personnel).

53. Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan.

54. Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait.

France's position on this increased involvement in the South was ambiguous. On the one hand, the call for a rebalancing between East and South was a position that had historically been advocated by France within NATO, alongside Italy and Spain. On the other hand, as far as prevention is concerned, France believed that NATO was not structurally the best-equipped organization, as the scope of a comprehensive prevention strategy goes far beyond military aspects alone and requires financial resources significantly greater than those that NATO could devote to it. The NATO budget for military cooperation is around 6 million euros per year,⁵⁵ compared with up to 1 billion euros per year for the European Peace Facility⁵⁶ of the European Union (EU). What is more, NATO initiatives may well duplicate actions carried out bilaterally or by the EU, which is becoming increasingly involved in the particular field of training (EUTM missions).⁵⁷ Paris gradually came to adopt a pragmatic stance, considering that NATO had a place on the southern flank so long as its added value was clear and its projects did not compete with those of other actors already involved, in accordance with the principle of non-duplication.

A quick comparison of the eastern and southern flanks leaves little doubt, however, as to both the dissymmetry and the added value that the Alliance brings to each respective zone. On the eastern flank, it is the only organization capable of reacting and setting up a dissuasive, and if need be defensive, military apparatus. This is in line with its history and the extension of its know-how. On the southern flank, it is merely one actor among others, and not necessarily the best placed, so the benefits of its action must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

A Test of Internal Cohesion

In addition to the deteriorating security situation around the perimeter of the Euro-Atlantic area, the same period saw the emergence of acute issues of internal cohesion that tested solidarity between the Allies. While some had been at loggerheads in the past—Greek-Turkish tension being a recurrent theme throughout the Cold War—this time there was no longer any common existential threat to bind the Atlantic community together. The United States itself, in the person of President Donald Trump, denigrated the Alliance as “obsolete”, publicly questioning the benefits his country derived from it.⁵⁸ While these remarks were made with Trump's characteristic outrageousness,

55. Source: interview with IMS/NATO officer.

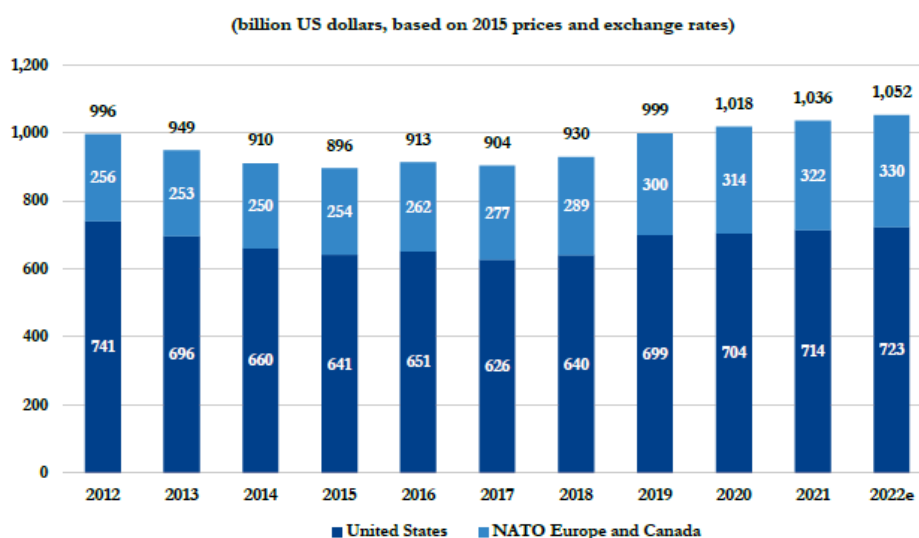
56. To be more precise, the annual ceiling will rise from 420 million euros in 2021 to 1.132 billion euros in 2027. Initially, the scope of the EPF was roughly comparable to that of NATO's military cooperation. This has become less true since the invasion of Ukraine, with the EPF financing the military aid provided there. See www.consilium.europa.eu.

57. European Union Training Missions (today including Mali, Somalia, CAR, and Mozambique).

58. “We are defending Europe and, at the same time, they are ripping us off, ripping us off very, very seriously”, Donald Trump, quoted in “Donald Trump déclare avoir menacé les alliés de l'Otan de ne pas les protéger de la Russie”, *Le Figaro*, April 22, 2022.

some of the arguments nonetheless reflected structural frustrations, in particular around the issue of “burden-sharing”, which had appeared as early as the 1950s.⁵⁹ The spending gap, absolute and relative, had widened steadily since the 1990s, with Europe reaping the “peace dividend” far more fully than America.⁶⁰ Adopting his usual unabashedly transactional logic, Trump openly complained that the United States was paying too much and the Europeans too little.⁶¹ Washington was looking for a better return on its industrial and financial investments.

Figure 5: Defense expenditure within NATO



Notes: Figures for 2022 are estimates. The NATO Europe and Canada aggregate from 2017 onwards includes Montenegro, which became an Ally on 5 June 2017, and from 2020 onwards includes North Macedonia, which became an Ally on 27 March 2020.

Source: NATO website, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2022)”

As for Turkey, it adopted an uncooperative stance, unilaterally launching an unprecedentedly large offensive against the Syrian Kurds (the PYD),⁶² whom it considered to be closely associated with the PKK. The United States’ reaction was muted given that it had chosen to largely withdraw from this theater. From France’s point of view, Turkey was attacking its main partner, which had acted on the ground against Daesh and was still indispensable in containing the potential resurgence of jihadism, while from Ankara’s point of view, it was its Western allies who were actively

59. See Rapport d’information de la Commission des affaires étrangères et de la défense, “Amis, alliés mais pas alignés : Pour des relations transatlantiques équilibrées”, No. 764, July 6, 2022, p. 7.

60. On these American frustrations, which emerged long before Trump, see F. Charillon, “Union européenne ou OTAN ? Le dilemme sans fin des Européens”, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

61. It is true that the United States alone accounts for around 70% of NATO expenditure (a proportion that has remained stable over recent years). In his memoirs, John Bolton, Trump’s former national security advisor, mentions that the option of leaving NATO was seriously considered if Trump were to be reelected in 2020. See: www.washingtonpost.com.

62. Operation “Peace Spring” in October 2019 against the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces, mostly Kurds belonging to the PYD, combined with Arab movements).

supporting an organization it considered to be terrorist and just as threatening, if not more so, than Islamic State.

Turkey was also reaching an unexpected rapprochement with Russia, purchasing S-400 surface-to-air missile systems that were obviously not interoperable with NATO, something for which it would pay directly by being excluded from the F-35 program. In the Mediterranean, Turkey provoked tension, acting against the interests of other Allies: military intervention in Libya, maritime claims against Greece and Cyprus, and the exertion of pressure via gas exploration off Cyprus.⁶³

Deploing this growing lack of solidarity within the Alliance, French President Emmanuel Macron voiced his concerns in an interview with *The Economist*, describing NATO as “brain dead”. These comments shook the organization and caused rumblings in most member state capitals, as they raised fundamental questions about the Alliance’s strategic goals and the ways and means by which it intended to achieve them. On the French side, the complaints were manifold, but they primarily concerned resourcing, as denounced by the French minister of the armed forces, Florence Parly, who pointed out that “NATO’s solidarity clause is Article 5, not Article F-35”.⁶⁴ Indeed, for Paris, which had been striving since the 1990s, and even more so after Macron came to power in 2017, to bring about the emergence of a more or less sovereign European Defense Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), NATO all too often seemed like a vehicle for exporting American equipment.

Because of the United States’ predominance in both doctrinal and military terms, to Paris NATO looked like a relay for a strategy of establishing irreversible industrial control over European countries in the field of armament. In other words, the standards defined by NATO and the quest for efficiency through interoperability had become the pretext for the systematic purchase of American equipment—at least for the most costly and/or most structurally important items, such as fighter aircraft and resources for theater missile defense. This logic had several adverse effects. First, it drained a substantial share of European countries’ equipment budgets. Second, the purchase of certain American equipment, such as the F-35, raised other types of sovereignty issues, such as the control of data flows (logistical or tactical) and dependence upon incremental technological evolutions of technical components and the associated “cloud”.⁶⁵ How could any kind of European strategic autonomy develop in such circumstances?

63. In the summer of 2020, Florence Parly, French minister of the armed forces, declared: “The Mediterranean must not be a playground for the ambitions of certain nations [...]”.

64. “Otan : Paris veut des assurances de Washington sur son engagement”, *Le Figaro*, March 18, 2019. In the same speech, Parly also thanked the United States for the “European Deterrence Initiative”.

65. See T. Schumacher, “F-35 & Big Data : Épée de Damoclès pour la France et l’Europe ?”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, No. 810, 2018, p. 35–40.

These arguments, and President Macron's approach, were not, however, heeded by the European Allies (at least not officially), who saw in them above all the risk of accelerating America's distancing from Europe—as much out of Trumpian frustration as out of the strategic choice of a pivot to Asia, which was the subject of bipartisan consensus on the other side of the Atlantic. This European fear of American disinterest carried far more weight than the French president's concerns.

This difficult period, which imperiled the Alliance's cohesion, nevertheless had the effect of putting back on track the work of fine-tuning and reassessing the Alliance's fundamental values, initiated by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and approved by the Allies. NATO would draw up a new Strategic Concept (the previous one dated from 2010). As mentioned above, the “brain dead” episode triggered a whole sequence of events, beginning with a “reflection process”⁶⁶ and followed by the “NATO 2030” project, which aims to thoroughly review the Alliance's goals, improve the way it operates, and assess how to meet the challenges it faces.

Since then, other internal crises of the same order as those described above have affected the Alliance's day-to-day life—in particular the AUKUS crisis⁶⁷ and the United States' uncoordinated departure from Afghanistan, leading to chaos on the ground and the hasty and humiliating end of the Resolute Support Mission (RSM).⁶⁸ It is now urgent that the Allies learn the lessons from these troubling episodes.

66. A group of ten experts, including Hubert Védrine, was commissioned to draw up its assessment. See “Secretary General Appoints Group as Part of NATO Reflection Process”, NATO, March 31, 2020, available at: www.nato.int.

67. Although not a crisis of NATO, it once again raises the question of political trust between three major Allies, with far-reaching repercussions within the Alliance. (N.B., Australia is a NATO partner country.)

68. This followed the end of the ISAF mission; the feeling of failure was compounded by the length of the NATO presence and the substantial human and material resources committed over the period.

NATO's *Aggiornamento* and its Effects on France

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a major strategic rupture on a continent that had not seen any large-scale interstate conflict since 1945. However, this rupture was not what triggered work on the 2022 Strategic Concept.⁶⁹ As we saw above, its aim was also to iron out the many differences of opinion between the Allies. These reflections and this internal bureaucratic process, largely under the influence of the member nations, led to the 2022 Strategic Concept, approved at the Madrid Summit in June 2022.

The Strategic Concept: Back to Basics

While hardly a Copernican revolution, the new Strategic Concept does alter NATO's order of priorities. Whereas the previous concept document stated that "the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace", the 2022 text includes a sentence explicitly stating the opposite (§6). The collective defense mission is reaffirmed as a priority, but with a new acuteness, with Russia now referred to as "the most significant and direct threat". Other issues deemed less crucial are also mentioned: China is becoming a concern, while crisis management (and thus the southern flank) is a topic of declining importance. As for NATO-EU relations, the vocabulary is voluntarist, but ambiguities remain. The most important aspect is the practical application of this strategic *aggiornamento*: the operationalization of the concept led the Chair of the Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, to call it "the biggest overhaul of our military structures since 1949".

Strategic Rupture in the East

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the culmination of more than a year of escalating tensions. Since April 2021, large-scale Russian exercises (involving 100,000 to 150,000 troops) on the borders of Ukraine raised fears of a possible limited offensive, even though at the time this was deemed rather improbable.⁷⁰ The aim of these exercises was to exert political and military pressure on Kyiv and to perfect the logistical coordination measures required to concentrate such a mass of troops. Armaments depots were also deposited in Belarus.⁷¹ Against this, it was highly doubtful that NATO would be able to concentrate a similar level of ground forces in such a short space

69. "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept", NATO, June 29, 2022, available at: www.nato.int.

70. V. Dorman, "L'armée russe se retire de la frontière ukrainienne, et alors ?", *Libération*, April 22, 2022.

71. From a logistical point of view, they would support the offensive of February 22.

of time (around two weeks), as the relevant know-how had not been put into practice for many years.⁷² In hindsight, these Russian maneuvers seem like a final rehearsal, especially since concentration movements were once again observed near Ukraine from November 2021. They culminated in the midwinter and were only the prelude to the “special military operation” launched on February 24.

In the context of the development of NATO's new Strategic Concept, this rupture, however dramatic its effects, had the merit of bringing the Alliance closer together. Vladimir Putin's decision further reinforced current thinking on strengthening the eastern flank. Now that the veil has been lifted, NATO is more resolutely committed to a posture reminiscent of the Cold War era—albeit on a much smaller scale⁷³—through what is emerging as a new form of forward defense.⁷⁴ In addition, Sweden and Finland, longtime partners of the organization but hitherto insistent on their non-alignment, have taken the plunge and applied for membership. This enlargement will bring greater geostrategic coherence to NATO's posture on its northern and eastern flanks. In terms of capabilities, European countries are finally becoming aware of their intrinsic weaknesses resulting from decades of underinvestment: they are demonstrating their intention to increase military spending, which has gradually begun to rise in recent years, especially in the case of Poland and the Baltic states.

A Stronger Position on the Eastern Flank

Although the process was initiated before the outbreak of war, the ultimate aim of the 2022 Strategic Concept was obviously to respond to the deteriorating security situation on the eastern flank. Of the three core tasks defined by NATO—deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security—priority is clearly given to the first. The nuclear aspect of the Alliance is strongly reaffirmed: it is “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance” (§29). This was an essential point for France, which had noted a dangerous waning of collective nuclear thinking.⁷⁵ The independent British and French nuclear systems are also mentioned as contributing to the overall security of the Alliance.

According to the concept document, the deterrence and defense posture is based on a coherent combination of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities. On the conventional front, the notion of forward defense is mentioned (§21). Unsurprisingly, it states that the posture will be

72. Many units devoted to “movement support” for large units (division to army corps level) have been disbanded in European armies, beginning with France (movement control regiments). The last large-scale movement exercise dates back to 1987 (the “Moineau Hardi” exercise, under air cover, involving 20,000 French soldiers from the Force d'Action Rapide [Rapid Action Force] along with 55,000 Germans).

73. Involving forces ten times smaller; see Figure 3.

74. See B. Tertrais, “Back to the Future? NATO after Madrid”, Institut Montaigne, July 7, 2022.

75. *Ibid.*

reinforced to prevent any aggression. Already apparent is the subsequent need for readjustments, or even transformations:

- Revision of defense plans;
- Development of force structures: organizational changes to fluidify and densify the reinforcement of the forward presence curtain in the event of an attack;
- Rationalization of command structures for greater integration;
- Definition of new capability targets to be assigned to states as part of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP)⁷⁶;
- Accentuated logistic pre-positioning (depots).

The implementation of the Strategic Concept kept the organization busy for many months, given the scale of the changes envisioned.⁷⁷ A fundamental divergence among Allies was immediately apparent between those, including the United States and France, who favored a limited reinforcement in the east in return for a greater responsiveness of forces, and those who wanted a permanent and robust defensive apparatus on their own territory—the countries of the eastern flank. This debate is of prime importance for France, whose force structure is based on flexibility and responsiveness to cope with multifaceted crises. Admittedly, in the Ukrainian context, the eastern flank carries the greatest risk, with Russia remaining the only actor likely to pose an existential threat to the area. This dominant risk does not, however, rule out other crisis scenarios that would require armed intervention. For Paris, committing to an irreversible effort in the East would jeopardize its freedom of action elsewhere. The reasoning is similar for the United States, with the addition of the China question, which the US considers more structurally significant than Russia.

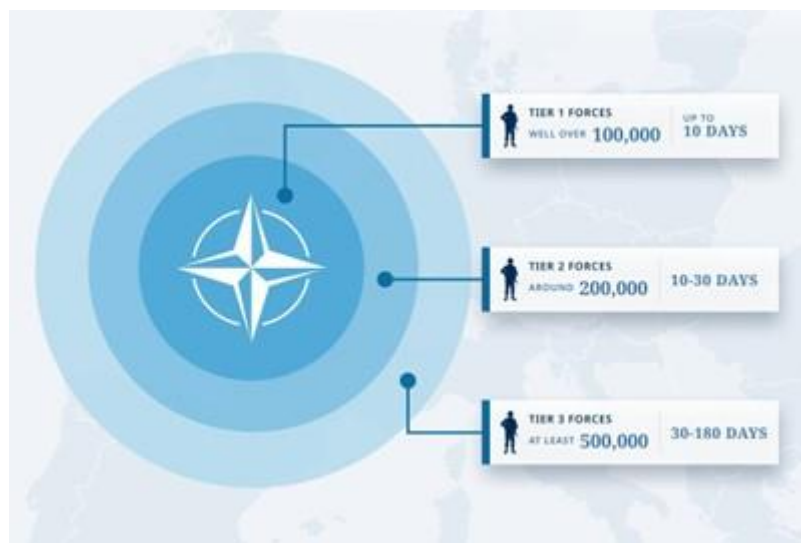
As far as we can tell, then, at present there is no question of returning to the Cold War posture, tying up considerable military resources in a robust defensive apparatus fixed in peacetime. On the contrary, the “New Force Model” project,⁷⁸ the principle but not the details of which were agreed in Madrid, aims to increase the volume of forces available at short notice in the event of a crisis or conflict in the east: up to 100,000 men within 10 days (tier 1), reinforced by 200,000 (tier 2) within 10 to 30 days, then by a further 500,000 within six months (tier 3). This is a substantial and highly ambitious amassing of forces compared to the previous situation, if we consider the NRF’s maximum capacity of 40,000 soldiers.

76. A process in which NATO assigns capability targets to individual states (after negotiation with them), which are then translated into Political Guidance (the latter, reviewed every four years, was adopted in February 2023 and sets a new level of capability ambition for the Alliance). EMA (defense staff of France) interview.

77. NATO RMD interview (Military Defense Representation to NATO).

78. Or “NATO Force Model”; the two terms are used interchangeably.

Figure 6: The new force model adopted in Madrid



Source: NATO website, "New NATO Force Model"

This new model adds depth to a forward layout that is also evolving.⁷⁹ The idea is no longer to rely on four NATO-led BGs as part of an enhanced forward presence, but on eight BGs (one for each country on the eastern flank), each constituting the precursor to a brigade level that can be mobilized at short notice if required.⁸⁰

Figure 7: The enhanced vigilance system in the east



Source: NATO website, "NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence—Map".

79. On immediate measures to reinforce the eastern flank from March 2022, see A. Zima, "La Présence avancée renforcée de l'OTAN (eFP) dans les pays baltes et en Pologne : Apports et limites de la dissuasion conventionnelle multilatérale", *op. cit.*, p. 17–18.

80. EMA interview.

Behind this new posture, a new logic is emerging, with consequences in terms of logistics, C2 organization, and force preparation. These eight BGs will no longer simply signal a collective determination but will constitute structures for receiving subsequent reinforcements in the event of a crisis or conflict. Their high-intensity training activities with units from the host nation will be intensified, and greater interoperability will be sought. Precursor elements of a brigade command post (CP) can be provided in addition to each BG. Deployed in this way, this nucleus can then be rapidly upgraded to the brigade level.⁸¹

The details of these posture arrangements have not yet been finalized, but they should be laid out at the Vilnius Summit in July 2023.⁸² For their part, the states on the eastern flank would like to see at a minimum the permanent presence of eight brigades and are therefore rather disappointed by the proposed guidelines.⁸³ However, if adopted, they could be interpreted positively, since the logic of responsive reinforcement places an obligation upon each contributor. Acting on short notice requires an agile, well-trained, perfectly interoperable force structure, and therefore a substantial volume of “highly responsive” forces. This comes at a cost. The quality of each Ally’s forces must meet these demanding criteria. The greater flexibility of this arrangement also means that NATO can concentrate on more varied points on the eastern flank in the event of signs of crisis. The credibility of this posture must be beyond any doubt if it is to truly act as a deterrent. All of these criteria lie at the heart of the imperatives that accompany deployability-based force structures such as those of France, the United States, and the United Kingdom.⁸⁴

This overhaul of the DDA posture necessarily entails an adjustment of the entire NATO technostructure.

- A review of the strategic architecture of Plans (SACEUR’s Area of Responsibility-Wide Strategic Plan, SASP)⁸⁵ had already been initiated before the invasion of Ukraine. This is broken down into several regional plans at the operational level, according to classified geographical breakdowns, the nature of the threat (Russia or “terrorist groups”), areas of combat (land, air, sea, cyber, etc.), and the type of scenario (contingency plans).

81. “Amis, alliés mais pas alignés”, 4.

82. NATO RMD interview.

83. On this sensitive subject, we can see how carefully the words were chosen in the declaration of the Madrid Summit in June 2022: “Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required [...]”.

84. Over and above being a force structure that can be used for operational planning, the New Force Model seems to be moving toward being a “transformation” instrument, like the NRF in its day, to improve the quality of forces, first and foremost their level of responsiveness. Source: NATO RMD.

85. *SACEUR’s Area of Responsibility-Wide Strategic Plan*, available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk>.

- Upstream of Plans, NATO's command structure itself will undergo organic changes. Forces training policy will be readjusted, not only to focus on high-intensity operations involving larger volumes of forces, but also because exercises are an essential means of political-military signaling in day-to-day posture management. Depending on the location, the number of countries involved, the level of complexity of the processes worked on/simulated, and the nature of the resources deployed, major exercises communicate a political message and are useful instruments for managing a crisis upstream or downstream, for deterrence (demonstration of competence) or de-escalation purposes.⁸⁶
- Finally—and this is a highly politically sensitive issue—NATO is likely to revisit the conditions surrounding collective political decision-making in the event of a major crisis. The dilemma here is between political control—imperative for France, but not only France—and the delegation of authority to be granted to SACEUR at different stages of a crisis, in other words, the level of subsidiarity and autonomy granted to the commander-in-chief of NATO forces. At what point should the transfer of authority take place, and according to what criteria (threat level, in particular)?

In an era of high-velocity weapons systems, when the advance notice allowed by intelligence can be very short, it is very difficult to arbitrate on this major issue. Political deliberation generally takes time, especially when it comes to reaching a consensus in a context of high tension or ambiguity. Military effectiveness, on the other hand, may require decisions to be made very quickly to order the interception of hypervelocity missiles fired in salvo, for example, or risk incurring significant damage. The Alliance is working to resolve this delicate equation through the NCRS (NATO Crisis Response System),⁸⁷ a complex, classified process listing various scenarios and the politico-military procedures that should be implemented to deal with them.

An Ever-Expanding Strategic Horizon

China, a Systemic Challenge

In 2022, a NATO Strategic Concept document specifically addressed China for the first time. At first glance, one might wonder what justifies such a development, given that China is located on the other side of the world to the Euro-Atlantic space. Naturally, it was the United States that insisted on it.⁸⁸ With China now identified as the defining strategic challenge of the century, the United States is seeking to mobilize all of its allies on this subject. While

86. See J. Bachelier, H. Fayet, A. Jonnekin, and F. Renaud, "Le signalement stratégique : Un levier pour la France dans la compétition entre puissances ?", *Focus stratégique*, No. 114, Ifri, 2023.

87. See www.defencesynergia.co.uk, 42, 43.

88. P. Haroche and M. Quencez, "L'OTAN face à la Chine : Réponses et adaptations", joint IRSEM and GMF memo, February 2022.

its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, all of whom are also NATO partners (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) are the most concerned, Washington is making sure that NATO does not shy away from the issue altogether. This approach is also motivated by China's exponential rise in power, which is generating a growing number of interactions with European countries in a wide range of security-related areas: influence on the immediate periphery, maritime security, competition over disruptive technologies, resilience of critical infrastructures, actions in the information field or in the space and cyber environments, etc.⁸⁹ On all of these points, the Strategic Concept views China with mistrust, recalling its strategic partnership with Russia (§13). However, it does not use the term "threat", which means in practice that the organization is making no plans for a military confrontation with China, and consequently that the force architecture and C2 will not undergo any significant organizational changes in relation to this issue. The main threat remains Russia, while China poses "systemic challenges"⁹⁰ owing to the coercive modes of action it employs—often described as "hybrid" modes.⁹¹

The trade-off involved here was a key point for France and Germany, as well as for countries on the eastern flank, who feared a dispersal of resources. The latter, however, had to be more discreet on this subject to avoid offending the United States. For France, it was not a question of underestimating the risks posed by China's machinations, but of clearly marking out those that fall within NATO's remit, those where the EU might prove the most appropriate instrument—for example, those involving the normative principles governing the development of critical technologies, or the protection of strategic industries—and finally, those that fall strictly within the remit of sovereignty (protection and resilience of infrastructures, counterespionage, counterintelligence, for example).

Since the Strategic Concept remains evasive on how to respond to the challenge posed by China, open questions remain.⁹² First of all, many types of potential hybrid aggression may take place without any particular geographical point of application in the traditional sense of the term, thus calling into question the very notion of a "treaty area". Examples include cyber threats, "discreet" aggression in outer space, or the possibility of cutting a submarine cable 50 or 5,000 km off the coast. Then there is the question of Sino-Russian relations. Opinions differ on the precise nature of the relationship on the military level. The notion of a lasting strategic

89. Environments more conducive to discreet aggression that is difficult to attribute. Ambiguous means of aggression are often used, as they are by nature dual-use (civilian or military), as well as clandestine means.

90. A semantics echoed in President Macron's press conference following the Madrid Summit.

91. That is, aiming to achieve political results by exerting pressure, mainly below the threshold of armed confrontation, and with a combination of various means, military or otherwise, conventional or otherwise. See the definition of hybrid strategies proposed in "L'actualisation stratégique 2021", Ministère des Armées, 2021, p.19, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

92. T. Tardy, "NATO's New Strategic Concept", *NDC Research Paper*, No. 25, 2022, p.11.

partnership seems to be taking shape. Should this trend be confirmed and take a more militarized form in the years to come, NATO will have no choice but to factor this into its operational equation. Finally, the nature of Sino-American relations will influence NATO's thinking, depending on the degree of animosity between the two superpowers. The greater this animosity, the more Washington will be tempted to involve its allies in this rivalry in one way or another.

As will be appreciated, we have only just begun to deal with the China question. France is concerned in more ways than one and will have to closely follow the progress of the issue in NATO: as a nation bordering the Indo-Pacific, because of its presence in Africa, as a nuclear power, and quite simply as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Germany, and the EU more generally,⁹³ are also implicated, since their prosperity is based on highly outward-looking economies, which are therefore dependent on the free circulation of goods by sea between East Asia and Europe. The issue of China as it affects NATO undoubtedly calls for greater cooperation between NATO and the EU, particularly to counter hybrid modes of action.

The Southern Flank, a Topic on the Wane

The southern flank is given rather a secondary treatment in the 2022 Strategic Concept. It appears in diluted form in the sections devoted to the other two core tasks of crisis management and cooperative security. The 360-degree approach is reaffirmed, a way of indicating that the eastern flank cannot be NATO's sole preoccupation, and thus giving a pledge to the southern Allies. The Concept also recalls the instruments available to NATO to contribute to preventive action on the southern flank. NATO has a large number of partners in the south who are seeking assistance (see above), and over the years it has developed tried-and-tested tools, such as Defence Capacity Building.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, as mentioned above, NATO's role in the region comes far less naturally than in the east. Apart from the fact that it does not have the full range of resources required to implement a comprehensive strategy for action on governance (links with internal security forces, "justice" advisors, customs, etc.), another stumbling block lies in its difficulty in defining its objectives and the threats it seeks to counter.

Of course, "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations" is the second-biggest threat identified by NATO after Russia. It is the main, but not only, security issue on the southern flank, in view of the competition between powers there. It is also worth noting that the term "terrorism" is not associated with any particular qualifier. The enemy therefore remains

93. Or in any case, countries whose economic model is based on the export of manufactured goods (mainly Northern Europe).

94. DCB, essentially a training and consulting tool, consists of a package of training or assistance actions tailored to the beneficiary's needs. See "Mission d'information sur les enjeux de défense en Méditerranée", rapport de la Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, No. 5052, 2022, p. 65.

unspecified.⁹⁵ The political reason for this is well known: for Turkey, the terrorist threat emanates from the PKK, including its Syrian branch (the PYD and, by extension, the SDF); whereas for the other Allies it refers to jihadist-inspired terrorist groups. How, then, can NATO develop a coherent military plan when the SDF are the West's key partners in containing the jihadist threat in Syria, while Turkey sees them as a major threat? Accordingly, for the most part, NATO only engages in *à la carte* actions on behalf of selected partners, often through training or advisory initiatives. It is also involved via NMI and OSG (see above).

Unlike the eastern flank, the security environment of the southern flank does not appear as a major common threat that calls for unflinching cohesion. Aside from jihadist terrorism, the other risks are more diffuse (proliferation of small arms, trafficking, etc.) or more evanescent (chronic instability).⁹⁶ Turkey's maritime claims on Greek and Cypriot territory further complicate any action on NATO's part, generating strong bilateral tensions in which France has decided to take a significant role by resolutely standing by Greece.⁹⁷ Finally, while the Mediterranean Allies agree on the need for NATO to get involved in the south, at least in terms of prevention and intelligence, they differ as to what kinds of initiatives might improve the situation. Spain and Italy often seem to be competing to play a leading role and to attract NATO infrastructures to their soil.⁹⁸ There is therefore no real "southern bloc" as there is in the east.⁹⁹ These examples illustrate how structurally difficult it is for the Alliance to deal with security issues on its southern flank.

Nevertheless, to reject on principle any military involvement by NATO on the southern flank beyond modest preventive actions could prove imprudent. Indeed, scenarios such as the collapse of a peripheral state, an interstate conflict, or the resurgence of a jihadist proto-state—in Africa, for example—might require a large-scale collective response backed up by robust military resources. Should all regional or international players fail to resolve the crisis, NATO, or an ad hoc coalition employing some of its resources (C2, intelligence, logistics), might prove the only credible solution. Given the chronic instability of the crisis arc, the likelihood of a strategic shock is non-negligible. The subject of the "south", rather low on the list of priorities in the 2022 Strategic Concept, could therefore make a sudden return without warning.

95. On the importance of characterizing the enemy or being unwillingly designated as the enemy, see J.-Y. Le Drian, *Qui est l'ennemi ?*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2016.

96. Interview with IMS/NATO and NATO RMD officer.

97. See: <https://gr.ambafrance.org>. France also organized several exercises and air-sea deployments around Cyprus in 2020 (with Italy) and 2021 for reassurance purposes vis-à-vis Turkey.

98. Interview with IMS/NATO officer.

99. See "Mission d'information sur les enjeux de défense en Méditerranée", *op. cit.*, p. 65.

The NATO-EU Relationship: Much Discussed, Little in Evidence?

The relationship between NATO and the EU is the focus of considerable French attention. To date, the idea that European countries must take on greater responsibility for the defense of their own continent has hardly been shared by the European side of the partnership, who would rather rely on the intangible nature of the American security guarantee, which exonerates several of them from having to increase their own military investment.¹⁰⁰ That being said, as mentioned above, the accessions of Finland and Sweden (the latter still pending) will reinforce the “dual membership” nature of NATO, as twenty-two (and probably soon perhaps twenty-three) of the twenty-seven EU member states will also be members of NATO.¹⁰¹

Constantly Reaffirmed Complementarity

Having failed to convince the Europeans to move toward more autonomous defense, France is calling for greater NATO-EU cooperation and complementarity between the two organizations,¹⁰² an idea echoed in Western European capitals with the exception of London. The 2022 Strategic Concept contains some strong statements on this subject, and there is no ambiguity about the centrality of this bipartite relationship. The EU is described as “a unique and essential partner for NATO” (§43), and there is a willingness to enhance the strategic partnership.

In a similar vein, the EU's Strategic Compass, published in March 2022, states that “NATO [...] remains the foundation of collective defence for its members”.¹⁰³ More recently, after several postponements, a third joint declaration on NATO-EU cooperation was signed in January 2023, the two previous ones dating from the Warsaw Summit of 2016 and the Brussels Summit of 2018. Beyond the desire for cooperation stated in these declarations, it is important to understand their concrete nature: the two previous declarations announced forty-two and seventy-four cooperation measures respectively, which led to very few tangible outcomes.¹⁰⁴ Cooperation has mainly taken the form of the strengthening or institutionalization of ad hoc consultation formats.

100. This remark does not apply to Poland and Greece, which have continually made a major investment in their defense (Greece especially). The Baltic and Nordic nations have stepped up their efforts more recently.

101. Three of the non-EU European Allies aspire to EU membership: Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

102. See “Revue nationale stratégique de 2022”, §151, p. 41, available at: www.sgdsn.gouv.fr.

103. “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade”, Council of the EU, March 21, 2022, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

104. M. Dubuy, “La recherche d'une coopération effective entre l'UE et l'OTAN contre les menaces sécuritaires (piraterie maritime, terrorisme, cyber-menaces)”, *Civitas Europa*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2020, p. 237–57.

Several factors are holding back the operationalization of this relationship, one of the main ones being obstruction by Turkey. The free exchange of sensitive information, a sine qua non for cooperation, is impeded by Ankara, which is making every effort to prevent the transmission of classified information to Cyprus, an EU member.¹⁰⁵ This techno-bureaucratic criterion is one of the levers used to block most NATO-EU initiatives where such exchanges are concerned. In practice, this amounts to ostracizing Cyprus from the EU membership, which is politically unacceptable. As NATO operates on the basis of consensus, the subject under discussion therefore remains unapproved, eternally on hold.

Similarly, NATO and the EU have overlapping scopes of action on certain security issues, particularly at the lower end of the spectrum of conflict (military advice and training, humanitarian operations), on more recent cross-cutting issues (resilience, cybersecurity, energy security), and even on forward-looking subjects such as capability development.¹⁰⁶ The efforts of both parties can thus complement each other,¹⁰⁷ which is an optimistic perspective, given that the sociology of organizations tends to show that they are generally jealous of their areas of competence and seek to expand them.

These stumbling blocks highlight the difficulty of putting the relationship into practice, beyond the good intentions expressed. If progress is to be made with the relationship, France will have to devote permanent energy to it, in conjunction with its closest partners. However, one of the characteristics of the current period is the plasticity of security issues, the scope of which often includes both pure defense issues and broader security issues, with competitors seeking to operate in the interstices between these different categories. It is here that NATO and the EU appear complementary and that genuinely combining their respective advantages would improve the level of collective security. France thus has a number of concrete points on which to argue in favor of greater NATO-EU cooperation, while at the same time, it has the domestic resources to lend credibility to any proposals it may put forward.

A Project: Combating Hybrid Threats

Hybrid threats are characterized first and foremost by ambiguity, both in order to hamper the identification of the aggressor and to complicate the interpretation of the facts, and thus the underlying political intent. NATO and the EU can combine their intelligence efforts—military for the former,

105. A. Zima, "L'OTAN", *op. cit.*, p. 110. Ankara relies on the absence of a security agreement between NATO and Cyprus, which is indeed the case. However, it is careful to block any change.

106. Interview with officer attached to EUMS. It should also be noted that the United States, along with the United Kingdom and Turkey, is lobbying to be included in European capability projects of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) type, in the name of a necessary "inclusivity".

107. See "Revue nationale stratégique de 2022", §112, p. 33 and § 179, p. 48.

interagency for the latter—to anticipate, understand, and attribute attacks. This is a sovereign political act, but one that could benefit from being communalized on a case-by-case basis. Hybrid attacks deliberately use environments characterized by their opacity, in which the activities carried out may be dual, civilian or military (space, cyber, seabeds, etc.). NATO has considerable military leverage here, while the EU can act on a much more general level (investment monitoring and control; coordinated policies on critical infrastructures; regulatory or economic retaliation for dissuasive or punitive purposes).

Organizing a comprehensive resilience policy would appear to be one of the essential responses. Apart from the purely national-level aspects, this is a matter for the EU, not NATO.¹⁰⁸ NATO and the EU can nevertheless be mutually supportive. For example, NATO can help the EU to identify and prioritize sensitive or critical infrastructure for any large-scale military activity.¹⁰⁹ Finally, resilience is not just a material issue, but also one of perceptions (subversive strategies, interference): here too, the EU would appear to be the most legitimate actor, complementing national responsibilities. Both politically and in security matters, it may prove essential to put forward a common NATO-EU position and then to develop a counter-discourse highlighting the subterfuges used, thanks to joint efforts.

All these reasons—and the list is not exhaustive—argue in favor of genuine complementarity, going beyond consultation and the sharing of views on hybrid strategies. With its expertise in many of these areas (space and cyber resources in particular, and recognized multidisciplinary intelligence services),¹¹⁰ France can play a leading role. To put it plainly, each of the two organizations has a part of the panoply to counter hybrid threats: France can work with its closest allies to get them to make better use of their comparative advantages and thus create a more impenetrable safety net. On the subject of China in particular, the United States would have everything to gain from greater joint effectiveness.

An Opportunity: Prevention on the Periphery

NATO and the EU have developed military cooperation tools to help their partners improve their military capabilities. These partners are mostly shared, both to the south (Tunisia, Mauritania) and to the southeast (Ukraine, Bosnia, Moldova, Georgia, etc.). Their tools are similar in principle (EUTM missions, NMI, DCB packages, etc.), but procedures may vary in practice. The EU has incomparably greater financial resources (see above)

108. “Mission d’information sur la préparation à la haute intensité”, Rapport de la Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, No. 5054, February 17, 2022, p. 103–104.

109. An interesting illustration on the subject of energy security: M. Ozawa, “Energy Security in the Baltic Region: Between Markets and Politics”, *NDC Policy Brief*, No. 1, 2019, p. 4.

110. The “first circle” comprising the seven intelligence services (CNRLT, DGSI, DGSE, DRSD, DRM, DNRED, TRACFIN).

and generally enjoys a better image in the South. It can complement its training with initiatives relating to other sovereign functions, including internal security. NATO has powerful mechanisms at its disposal (DCB packages; the ability to design, conduct, and evaluate all types of “ready to use” exercises; tested procedures for certifying units for interoperability).¹¹¹ Here again, there are interesting, albeit more technical, comparative advantages. Both organizations working with the same partner should not necessarily be considered duplication.

While it is France's role on the southern flank that immediately springs to mind when thinking of its bilateral cooperation, we must not forget that it also maintains close cooperative relations in the southeast (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova). Here, too, France can propose a better reconciliation of the comparative advantages of NATO and the EU, first and foremost for the benefit of those partners most at risk of destabilization by Russia,¹¹² where both organizations' efforts are crucial in order to avert risks and threats. Another example is the future post-conflict situation in Ukraine, where it would be ideal for both organizations to work together to help Ukraine reestablish its security apparatus. The stakes here are immense.

An Imperative: Complementarity in the Classic Military Field

In 2003, the Berlin Plus arrangements launched military cooperation between NATO and the EU.¹¹³ They gave the EU the possibility of using NATO's planning capabilities for its own benefit and defined the terms for information exchange. Used on only two occasions,¹¹⁴ they are now being implemented as part of the EU's Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. No arrangement of similar scope has been agreed since. On the contrary, in strictly operational terms, there is a tendency toward regression. For example, while there were mechanisms for sharing sensitive information between the maritime operations Sea Guardian (NATO) and Sophia (EU), a similar type of exchange between Sea Guardian and Irini—Sophia's successor—is currently being blocked by Turkey.¹¹⁵

Military mobility is a major operational issue for both NATO and the EU.¹¹⁶ It covers all the parameters governing the mobility of forces on the

111. Operational Capability Concept - Evaluation & Feedback (OCC-EF) mechanism enabling units from partner countries to take part in NATO or NRF operations.

112. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Bosnia, described as “partners at risk” within NATO. See: www.csis.org.

113. See: www.nato.int.

114. A. Zima, “L'OTAN”, *op. cit.*, p. 109–110.

115. See “La France face au jeu des puissances en Méditerranée”, Rapport d'information de la Commission des affaires étrangères et de la défense, No. 899, September 27, 2022, p. 117.

116. In concrete terms, the EU has developed a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on this issue, coordinated by the Netherlands and recently joined by non-EU NATO Allies. See: www.consilium.europa.eu. On the NATO side, the Joint Support & Enabling Command (JSEC) in Ulm, Germany, deals specifically with these issues, and Germany is very attached to it.

European continent and affects the collective capability for internal projection. It determines the speed with which the first curtain of forces can be reinforced against attack from the east, and thus the credibility of conventional deterrence itself. Military mobility is not just a matter of logistics, however; it is also affected by the regulatory, fiscal, and customs domains (administrative conditions for crossing borders depending on the nature of the products/equipment, gauges of railroads, classes of bridges, maximum authorized axle loads,¹¹⁷ etc.), all of which are potential points of friction, or worse, blockage, in the event of a massive projection.

This area of cooperation clearly requires NATO and the EU to work together to define a common *modus operandi* and, as far as possible, to standardize logistics standards, while taking into account the complexity of the regulatory maze (EU). Military mobility has been discussed since the 2016 summit, but it has seen only minor progress. Although it may appear technical in nature, its consequences are strategic. France's geographical position could give it a major advantage. Its numerous ports conveniently placed on the Atlantic Seaboard and in the English Channel, as well as its land and airport infrastructure, create a desirable network for NATO. France could also attract part of NATO's common funding to optimize a given national infrastructure. Beyond these practical opportunities, a significant breakthrough in military mobility, stimulated by France, would be a double coup on several levels.

117. For an example of these techno-regulatory hazards, see www.opex360.com.

Making Better Use of NATO: Optimizing Influence

France has recognized know-how, experience, and numerous military assets to bring to bear within NATO. Given that influence has been designated the sixth strategic function,¹¹⁸ and that the desire for greater influence within the structure was behind France's 2007 decision to rejoin NATO's military command structure, it is essential to examine the efforts made in this area and the levers that could be further exploited. As this study focuses on military matters, influence will be defined here as the ability to carry weight by demonstrating an ability to command, to think, and, above all, to act, thus going beyond a human resources-based conception of influence to which it is often reduced.¹¹⁹ This "tangible" influence is the one that allies observe, and it remains intrinsically linked to military capabilities,¹²⁰ which are therefore its true measure.

Once this examination has been completed, the question that arises is how France can play a core role and why it should do so. The return of interstate warfare to the European continent is changing internal balances. In terms of military influence, certain states will gain considerable importance—such as Poland, thanks to its vast acquisition program—while those that invest less will see theirs automatically diminish. Finally, at a time of strategic uncertainties, one of the most important of which is the role of the United States in the defense of the continent, France has an opportunity to be the driving force behind a more capable European military pillar. To achieve this, however, it needs to devise its own role within NATO and a specific task organization of its forces.

118. See "Revue nationale stratégique de 2022", §11, p. 8, available at: www.sgdsn.gouv.fr.

119. Influence is often measured by how many positions are held within an organization, especially at higher levels. This is a necessary condition, but far from sufficient. Moreover, holding a large number of management positions without sufficient intermediaries (those who actually organize the drafting/reflection work, validate it in the first instance, guide the solutions initially proposed, and so on) remains unsatisfactory. Generating HR influence is therefore a fine art.

120. The term "capabilities", in the French doctrinal sense, reflects not just equipment but the entire ecosystem that enables its efficient use, according to the French acronym DORESE (*Doctrine, Organisation, Ressources humaines, Équipements, Soutien des forces, Entraînement*, or Doctrine, Organization, Human resources, Equipment, Support for forces, Training).

Underestimated Levers of Influence

An Unprecedented Effort on the Eastern Flank

While the involvement of the French armed forces on the eastern flank was rather timid between 2014 and 2017, they have made a greater contribution to the Alliance's position since fall 2021 and the start of the Ukrainian conflict. This decision to make a major contribution was not opportunistic—it was taken well before hostilities broke out. At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, France was the second-largest contributor to NATO's intelligence gathering activities, deploying numerous naval, air, and satellite platforms, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, to provide electromagnetic and imagery intelligence.¹²¹ An entire national intelligence maneuver is thus being organized to contribute to NATO situation assessment. Consideration is also being given to direct involvement in reinforcing the southeastern flank, with a view to assuming the role of framework nation this time, with Romania having been approached.¹²²

In the meantime, having played a major role in the NRF in 2022, commanding the land and air components and being heavily involved in the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), France is in the front line to reinforce the eastern flank when NATO decides to activate this force.¹²³ It was in this capacity that a French battalion of 500 soldiers was dispatched to Romania as the spearhead of the VJTF, within the tight deadline of fewer than five days from February 28, 2022. It was later reinforced by 300 Belgian soldiers and on May 1 became an enhanced Forward Presence multinational battalion (see above), with France this time acting as a framework nation.

121. An open-source illustration: www.opex360.com.

122. See Rapport de la Commission de défense nationale et des forces armées, No. 5054, p. 115.

123. Prior to this, the NRF had only been activated twice, for humanitarian missions (the earthquake in Pakistan and Hurricane Katrina) involving a modest volume of resources. This time, the activation of the NRF is linked to the activation of NATO's Graduated Response Plans (GRP), a far weightier political decision.

Figure 8: French contribution to the NRF 2022

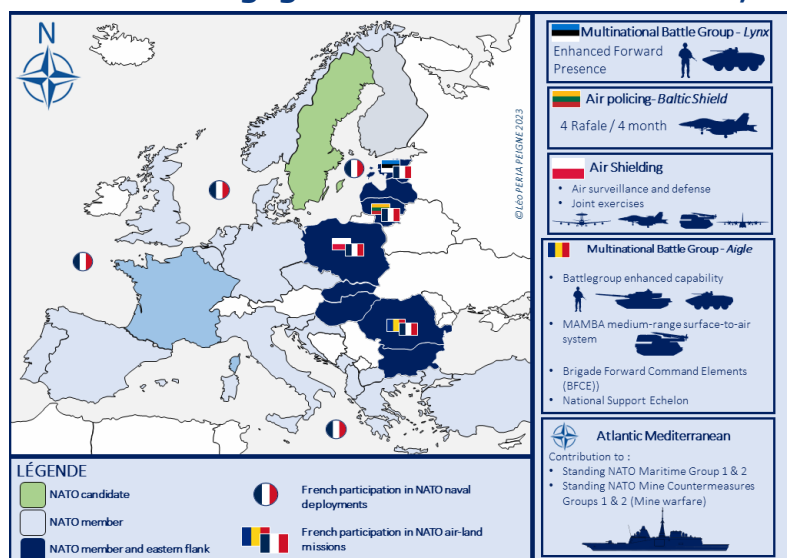


Source: Website of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces

The Aigle mission (as it is known in France) was, highly unusually, reinforced a few days later by a MAMBA surface-to-air defense system and its technical environment. In parallel with the deployment of this land-based system, repeated missions by significant French naval (deployment of the carrier battle group in the Mediterranean) and air (enhanced Vigilance Activities over Poland and the Baltic states) resources demonstrate French solidarity. All this is being achieved without sacrificing French participation in Mission Lynx in Estonia, as the armored combined arms tactical subgroup (SGTIA) remains in place. In total, more than 8,000 French military personnel will have been on NRF alert during 2022.¹²⁴ This provides evidence of France's reliability, its solidarity, and the responsiveness of its forces.

124. See Brigadier General Gougeon's fuller update, taken from the EMA press briefing of December 8, 2022, available at: www.forcesoperations.com.

Figure 9: French engagements on the eastern flank, 2022



Source: Website of the Chief of Defense Staff of France, January 2023

Ensuring Better Publicity for Actions

As a result of a national military culture that places little value on multilateral deployments,¹²⁵ France's commitment to NATO is not always fully appreciated by its forces, which in turn leads to underappreciation abroad. As well as pride in carrying out tricky operations using only one's own resources or by training one's closest partners, thus ensuring leadership, there are also historical reasons for this state of affairs. However, the success of the mission to reinforce France's posture in the East was not a foregone conclusion. But in the public's view, activities carried out for the benefit of NATO are of relatively little importance compared with commitments in other theaters, in Africa in particular.

NATO does not stir emotions, particularly not within the land forces. A fear of being submerged in a mass directed by a bureaucratic apparatus, of seeing national military culture erased in order to adapt to NATO standards, of participating in a static "Maginot Line" type of arrangement rather than dreaming of the "overseas adventures" all play a part in this indifferent or even negative perception of the Alliance. Many officers in the land forces can spend their entire careers without ever having to deal with NATO, and most of France's top military commanders have never held a post in the integrated structure, which would be unthinkable for most other Allies.

It is difficult to improve public perception of French contributions to NATO when the value they add is not fully perceived or appreciated at home. This negative feeling seems to be changing little by little, however, perhaps under the pressure of events. As other countries are quick to emphasize their

125. Budan de Russé, "L'OTAN et la culture militaire française depuis 1949", 23–29

positive contribution to the collective, France has recently been conducting a stronger-than-usual communication campaign, both politically and militarily.¹²⁶ To generate influence, it is important not only to do the right thing but also to ensure that people know about it—but without going overboard, if one wants to remain credible.

This perception bias also manifests itself in a defensive attitude toward NATO. Its initiatives are often viewed with suspicion.¹²⁷ Other Allies, who feel more comfortable in the organization, think first about how they might benefit from it. Here, too, things are slowly changing. Clearly, having a negative bias toward an initiative from the outset does not help in determining how it could be turned to one's advantage. Getting to know NATO intimately takes time. The French armed forces have already begun this maturation phase, where projects can be viewed more positively from the outset, without abandoning positions that are often critical. Moreover, choosing one's battles is a better way of defending the essentials than firing in all directions, at the risk of garnering reactions of incomprehension and being labeled a troublemaker.

Leveraging Intrinsic Strengths: Influence Based on Tangible Assets

Although no longer a great power, France remains an important military power, and for the time being it is still number one in Europe, just ahead of the United Kingdom. This determination to preserve its rank despite the cuts of the last thirty years has enabled France to maintain a quasi-complete army model, even if it has some weaknesses. This necessarily gives France a special importance within NATO which itself could become a lever of influence, if used well.

First of all, the French armed forces are active: unlike the majority of the other European Allies, it has been continually engaged in operations and deployments over the last thirty years. It is therefore regarded as credible, primarily by the United States.

Second, it achieves the capability targets assigned to it under the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). This rigorous process makes it possible to measure the capability efforts actually made, making a merciless assessment by the integrated structure. The NDPP is, in some respects, a yardstick for military "seriousness". Several countries are failing to meet their targets, which is necessarily detrimental to their reputation.

France has another advantage in being an active participant in the doctrinal and conceptual debate. The French armed forces have bodies capable of generating a national doctrine, i.e., a distinctive way of

126. Many of the images in this study are taken from the communications site of the EMA.

127. C. Calmels, "La France à l'OTAN : Un allié influent?", *op. cit.*, p.18.

understanding warfare or operations, even if the number of personnel in this function has diminished significantly. By contrast, the majority of Allies rely almost entirely on NATO for military doctrine.

France is also one of the few countries¹²⁸ capable of taking a stand on all topics and giving a reasoned opinion. It is a nuclear power, a space power of long-standing, and a country that has developed a coherent interministerial cybersecurity ecosystem. Having maintained a virtually complete DITB, it can address all capability-related subjects from the industrial and technological perspectives, issues with significant knock-on effects.

In terms of geography, France's voice is listened to when it comes to Africa. It is also capable of thinking autonomously about the Indo-Pacific, having published a national strategy on this issue.¹²⁹ On all these topics, it can therefore take part in NATO debates with solid arguments and develop constructive proposals or put up counterarguments against a flawed project.

All these considerations carry weight on a day-to-day basis, and in an ideal world they can be used for the benefit of the collective, as part of a win-win approach.¹³⁰ For example, France recently created two NATO centers of excellence—one for air operations, the Centre of Analysis and Simulation for the Preparation of Air Operations (CASPOA), at Lyon-Mont-Verdun, the other for space¹³¹ in Toulouse, co-located with the Space Command—which attest to its added value in these fields and demonstrate a collective confidence in France.

Finally, money being the sinews of war, we will provide a quick assessment of France's position in "physical-financial" terms. Leaving to one side the macroeconomic criteria, which are unfavorable to France's influence (the worrying trajectory of public debt since the 2000s, representing 113.7 percent of GDP at the end of 2022¹³²), the budgetary criterion relating to defense expenditure is rather favorable. Contrary to the commitments made in the Defense Investment Pledge at the 2014 summit, many European countries are still far from the 2% threshold, even if a recent acceleration has enabled some to reach this target. Though France has just recently reached this threshold,¹³³ it is distinguished by the quality of its spending, with a share allocated to acquisitions and R&D that is significantly higher than the collective target of 20%.

128. Alongside the United States, of course, but also the United Kingdom.

129. See: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

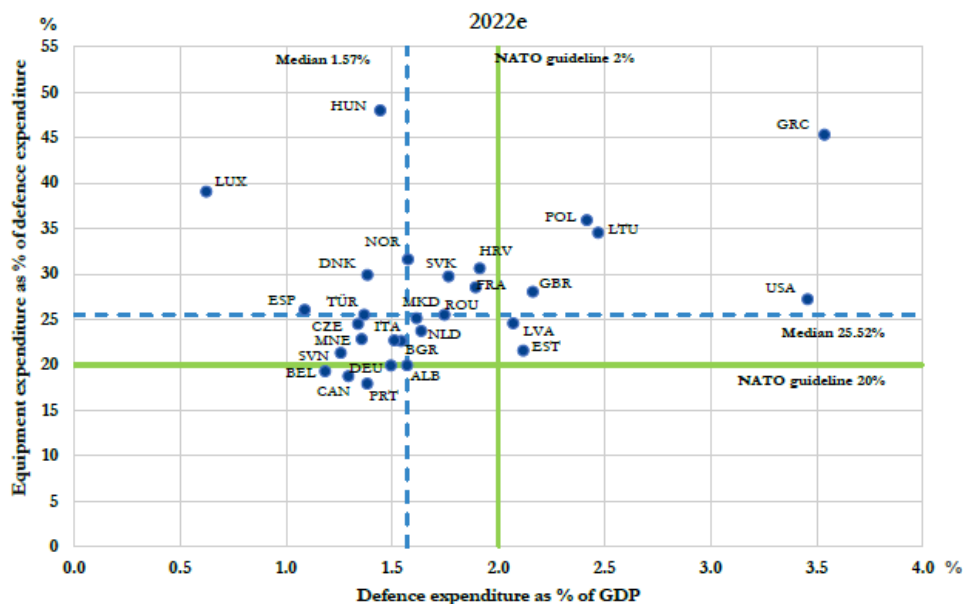
130. C. Calmels, "La France à l'OTAN : Un allié influent?", *op. cit.*, p.22.

131. See: <https://air.defense.gouv.fr>.

132. "À la fin du troisième trimestre 2022, la dette publique s'établit à 2 956,8 Md€", Insee, December 16, 2022, available at: www.insee.fr.

133. France will exceed this threshold during the course of the 2024–2030 LPM.

Figure 10: Quantitative and qualitative levels of defense expenditure, by country and as a share of GDP (2022)



Source: NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2022)"

Since the Madrid Summit, this double threshold of 2%/20% is now to be considered more as a floor.¹³⁴ In terms of contributions to the Alliance's common budget, France is in fourth place, at 10.5% of the total. Friction is to be expected on this topic in the years to come, as the Madrid Summit had an inflationary impact on common funding. France is still committed to budget moderation, both in the spirit of Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which enshrines the individual responsibilities of states in the acquisition of their military capabilities, and with a view to spending efficiency.

This overview of France's levers of influence would be less than honest if it failed to mention two more questionable criteria: participation in NATO operations and the fill rate for positions within the structure.

France has justified its low level of participation in NATO operations by its commitment in the Sahel, which itself contributes to the stability of the Alliance's southern border. This argument is well understood by the Allies. Moreover, since the end of the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, NATO has not been involved in a major operation, thus rendering this criterion meaningless. In short, this criterion is no longer relevant and will certainly be reconsidered in light of operational involvement on the eastern flank.

The low fill rate for NATO posts allocated to France (around 75%¹³⁵) is more bothersome because it is a chronic problem. Here we come up against the human limitations of the French forces model. The integrated structure

134. See "Revue nationale stratégique de 2022", §145, p. 39.

135. Source: NATO RMD.

is very HR-intensive, and the French forces, in addition to their own needs, have numerous commitments outside NATO requiring a relatively similar type of skills, i.e., experienced staff officers. They have to provide staff in overseas France, in Africa, in the Persian Gulf, and within the politico-military structures of the EU, all forms of commitment that other European countries do not have, or not to the same extent. This is like attempting to square the circle. If France wants to generate doctrinal influence, it needs to produce it domestically; at the same time, it needs French intermediaries in the NATO structure, which is voracious in terms of HR. How can France reconcile national needs, which must necessarily be given priority, while at the same time filling enough NATO posts to develop an ability to influence? Without a critical mass of human resources, there is no real solution to this dilemma, except to manage scarcity as best as possible.

This overview of France's potential for influence applies today, but the question is how it will evolve in the context of the return of interstate war in Europe, against a backdrop of nuclear intimidation and widespread competition for power. In the long run, influence is measured above all by actions, the ability to command large land, naval, or air formations, and the ability to convince partners. All of this requires tangible human and material resources, without which influence is just empty words.

A Role to Be Reinvented

The security challenge facing Europe today can be broken down into two imperatives:

- Detering Russia from any aggression in the area covered by Article 5 in the medium and long term, whether Russia loses or wins the current war¹³⁶;
- If deterrence fails, winning any war that might occur, while controlling any escalation that could result.

These two imperatives are NATO's responsibility, with no conceivable alternative.¹³⁷ To reduce the likelihood of open conflict and the possibility of nuclear escalation, it is vital to have both credible conventional capabilities and nuclear deterrence capabilities maintained at the highest level, whether national for France and the United Kingdom, or collective in the form of the extended deterrence provided by the United States. Real politico-military influence is therefore linked to the ability to play an important role in this anxiety-inducing situation, over the medium to long term.

136. In other words, "winning the war before the war", in the spirit of the Strategic Vision of the Chief of Defense Staff, General Burkhard, October 2021, p. 2 and p. 9: www.defense.gouv.fr.

137. See "Revue nationale stratégique de 2022", §139 and §141, p. 39.

Building A Land-Based Aggregation Capability: the Army Corps Level

Given the size of the geographical contact zone to be taken into account, the military problem is primarily air-land in nature. The New Force Model currently being drawn up envisages the engagement of a very significant volume of forces¹³⁸ which would be structured, in the land forces, into large army corps-level units (50,000 to 80,000 personnel), though the army corps is a level very little used by European armies since the end of the 1990s. While current deliberations remain classified, we can estimate empirically that in addition to the “in place” national forces of the country under attack, more or less fixed on the line of contact, around four army corps (AC) would be required as a mass of maneuver to generate the 300,000 personnel stipulated by Tier 2 of the model.

Who would supply these AC? Apart from the Americans with their V Corps, of which only part is deployed in Europe, there are few candidates. On paper, eleven corps-level general staffs exist in Europe,¹³⁹ but beware of optical illusions: these reflect a command capacity at the volume in question but generally have no permanently assigned units. These subordinate units would include not only divisions but also, most importantly, “army corps organic elements” (EOCA), or “corps troops” which bring together scarce support capabilities which allow the maneuver to be carried out (enablers) or mark the “general’s effort” (a heavy combined forces brigade, for example, as an army corps intervention reserve).¹⁴⁰ The role of an AC is indeed to “design and ensure the coherence of the maneuver; [...] it is the level that possesses all the operational functions of air-land action and also coordinates with the other components”.¹⁴¹ It also coordinates actions in the depth of the battlefield (long-range fire, airmobile maneuver, etc.).

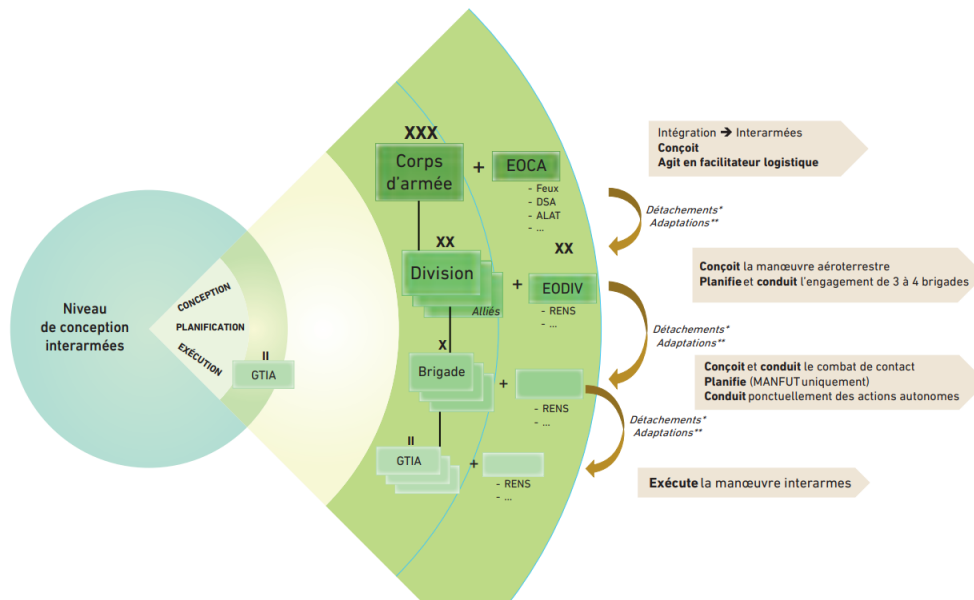
138. 100,000 in Tier 1; 300,000 in Tier 2; and around 800,000 in Tier 3.

139. These are the eleven Graduated Readiness Forces (GRF) HQs, of mixed quality (see: <https://lc.nato.int>). France has one of its own, the Rapid Reaction Corps-France (CRR-FR) in Lille, and is one of the framework nations of Eurocorps in Strasbourg. CRR-FR and Eurocorps are “high readiness” command posts (as are 8 out of the 11 GRF HQs).

140. EMA interview.

141. See “Concept d’emploi des forces terrestres, 2020-2035”, CDEC, September 28, 2021, p. 45–48.

Figure 11: Visualization of the different command levels with their organic elements



Source: CDEC, "Concept d'emploi des forces terrestres 2020-2035"

Most of these specific support capabilities at AC level are precisely those that have been the most severely affected by the peace-dividend cuts over the last thirty years: surface-to-air defense support, engineering equipment for bridging and gap-crossing or breaching, deep fires, movement control for large units, offensive electronic warfare equipment, and so on. Today, across all European land forces, some of these support capabilities are completely absent,¹⁴² while others are present but very scarce.¹⁴³ In addition, more EOCA capabilities are required these days, such as tactical drones, anti-drone systems, and cyber capabilities.¹⁴⁴ There are also gaps at division level,¹⁴⁵ even in the major countries. These choices, which seem regrettable in retrospect, must be seen in the context of a situation where the prospect of a high-intensity conflict was considered very remote, and where Western armies were systematically assured of air supremacy.¹⁴⁶ Finally, the spiral of destruction of capabilities on a continental scale was accelerated by the financial crises of 2008 and 2011.

In light of these observations, no European army is currently capable of putting alone a complete warfighting AC. The countries that will count

142. In France, for example, there are no longer short range surface-to-air armored support capabilities since the Franco-German Roland weapon system was scrapped in 2008.

143. For example, for deep fire, there are only eight MLRS (LRU), and these only have a range of 70 km (Poland has just ordered 300 Korean *Chunmoo* multiple rocket launchers, with a range of 36 to 300 km depending on the munition.)

144. If it is judged appropriate to place them at this level of command.

145. Divisions also have their own organic elements; see Figure 10.

146. See the *Compte rendu* No. 44 from Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, "Mission d'information sur la préparation à la haute intensité", February 16, 2022, p. 6.

militarily, and therefore politically, in the management of possible hard crises, or in the conduct of a war, will be those that can put together such a warfighting corps.¹⁴⁷ Two conditions are required for this. The first is capability-related and entails having the rare capabilities required for supplying the corps troops and then making available at least the equivalent in volume of a complete division subordinate to the army corps.¹⁴⁸ The second condition is being able to aggregate the forces of other European countries to complete this multinational corps.¹⁴⁹

If we examine the present situation, who can meet these two conditions? The candidates that come to mind are Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, perhaps Italy, and very soon Poland, whose spectacular acquisition program should enable it in the short term to have the most powerful land forces in Europe, employed in territorial defense.¹⁵⁰ The challenge nevertheless remains daunting for all of them. The United Kingdom¹⁵¹ and Germany¹⁵² have an organic advantage because since 2014 they have invested in creating a club within NATO for operationally like-minded nations, drawing on the concept of a framework nation heading a “minilateral” coalition: the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) for the United Kingdom and the Framework Nation Concept (FNC) for Germany.¹⁵³ This enables them to improve interoperability with their affiliates and to train together regularly. However, both countries suffer from chronic underinvestment in their land forces, the weaker of the two being the British Army, which was sacrificed in the latest Integrated Review.¹⁵⁴

France does not yet have such a club,¹⁵⁵ but it could set one up. A quick scan reveals several options. France has a very close bilateral military relationship with Belgium, notably through the CaMo program.¹⁵⁶ Its recently strengthened strategic ties with Greece, Romania, and Croatia could find an organic military extension in land forces. The Quirinal Treaty with

147. In other words, designed for high-intensity combat.

148. The report annexed to the 2019–2025 LPM sets out the operational contracts (§2.2.1, see: www.legifrance.gouv.fr). It is clear that France does not have everything required, because while there is undoubtedly a C2 capability at army corps level (CRR-FR), its land forces have many gaps in terms of EOCA. Nor are there any plans to arm a complete division (two brigades out of three or four, but that is still on the drawing board).

149. EMA interview.

150. The Polish rearmament plan appears to be much more secure than its British and German equivalents. On capability targets, see among others: <https://meta-defense.fr>.

151. E. Arnold, “Le *Global Britain* à l’épreuve de l’Ukraine”, *RAMSES 2023*, Dunod, p. 80.

152. Claudia Majorn and Christian Mölling, “Le concept allemand de nation-cadre pour une coopération de défense en Europe”, *SWP*, available at: www.swp-berlin.org.

153. Joint Expeditionary Force (United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway); Framework Nation Concept (Germany and almost all Central and Eastern European states; Germany and the Netherlands also have integrated land forces).

154. For more on this topic, see: www.opex360.com.

155. The European Intervention Initiative (EII), launched in 2017, is not connected with NATO and has a different aim: that of gradually building a common strategic culture.

156. Motorized Capacity, 2019.

Italy would also benefit from operational content, and Spain should not be forgotten, given the strong bilateral relations between the two armies.

The levers therefore exist, but the task will be a demanding one, since it requires France to address its most urgent capability gaps, notably those concerning critical support capabilities, and to strengthen its heavy component. To meet the challenge of bringing together a club of affiliates, one precondition is essential: to inspire confidence by taking one's place in NATO seriously. Finally, it should be noted that should European countries collectively fail to set up real warfighting army corps,¹⁵⁷ the only ones that would exist would be American, if the United States is willing to maintain a significant presence in Europe: all European armies would then play only a subordinate role on their own continent.

Aggregation Capabilities in Existence in Other Environments, but in Need of Strengthening

Land forces, which will play a central role in the future collective deterrence and defense posture, are not sufficient on their own to create influence, nor can they act independently of other components, particularly air forces. Beyond the linear land border, a deterrence posture must be envisaged in the three classic physical environments, as well as in other fields (space, information, cyber). To deter a global power like Russia (which is believed likely to remain a global power, even if it emerges from the conflict weakened), an overall vision of the posture is required, from the functional and geographical perspectives.

With regard to the high-intensity capability segment, the French Air and Space Force and the French Navy appear at first glance to be less constrained than the French Army in terms of a fit between their high-level command capabilities and their associated resources (enablers). As with the French Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters (CRR-FR) and Eurocorps, they have command structures (French MARFOR and French JFAC) that enable them to command complex multinational operations, including high-intensity operations, in their respective environments. They are more accustomed to working with the navies and air forces of allied countries and have capabilities that are inherently geared toward integration.

We naturally think of the carrier battle group, which truly combines all combat functions (escort vessels, submarines) and support functions (supply ships) at sea. An amphibious group centered around a helicopter carrier has the same characteristic, though to a lesser extent. An escort from the carrier battle

157. What if the British Army fell into disarray, or the *Zeitenwende* (epochal shift) were called into question? What if different priorities were set for the French Army, or there were an LPM that did not allow for a real recovery of power? What would probably remain would be a central American-Polish hub (bilateral rather than through NATO?), ensuring the critical parts of the eastern posture with the Baltic states, in which case European solidarity and credibility would be completely eviscerated.

group also generally includes one or more allied escort vessels. As for the French Air and Space Force, apart from the French JFAC, which is natively interoperable with NATO, the existence of the Centre Air de Planification et de Conduite des Opérations (CAPCO) (Center for the Planning and Conduct of Air Operations) demonstrates that it has a rare capability in integrated air C2.¹⁵⁸ Being able to lead a Composite Air Operation (COMAO) also requires a capability to integrate (integrating several types of aircraft ad hoc: aerial reconnaissance, fighter aircraft, electronic warfare, tanker aircraft) and indicates membership of a very select club. The French Navy and the French Air and Space Force are therefore well placed to generate influence within NATO.

Looking at the details, however, it must be noted that their capabilities have also been hollowed out from within, whether through reduced mass or, more perniciously, by under-equipping combat platforms.¹⁵⁹ It also must be admitted that French surface combatant vessels are less equipped than their Italian counterparts. Maintaining the ability to act even in the most demanding situations, and thus develop influence, requires making an investment in increasing mass, as France's allies know how to read a military balance of power.

Future operations will be planned not only as combined forces but will also be multi-domain, covering the three classic physical environments, the exceptional skills of the special forces, and the new areas of confrontation, namely outer space, cyberspace, and the information domain. France can exert its influence in these areas by drawing on its capabilities, particularly in the space sector, but also in terms of doctrine. Multi-domain operations are a recent field of thought, still in its infancy and driven by the United States.¹⁶⁰ They aim to integrate the tangible and intangible domains to deliver new types of effects on the battlefield. The end goal of increasing the options for action and inventing new operational combinations is to create dilemmas for the enemy, complicating its calculations or even causing it to change course or scatter its efforts. Since this is a new way of designing operations, France will have to influence these reflections, as a creative force, but also, if necessary, in order to avoid having a model imposed on it that is in conflict with its own conceptions or simply unattainable.¹⁶¹ This implies having a doctrinal ecosystem with genuine depth, not only for thinking at the national level, but also to be able to assimilate the numerous NATO productions, which can cause saturation effects.

158. See: <https://air.defense.gouv.fr>.

159. Generally speaking, this invisible hollowing-out is reflected in a shortage of critical equipment: Talios laser designator pods and AESA radars for Rafales (see: www.opex360.com), jammers, self-defense resources, and in particular, the number of missile silos for frigates (see: <https://meta-defense.fr>). Certain critical capacities may be absent (SEAD for the Air and Space Force).

160. The French armed forces tend to refer to the concept of "*supériorité multi-milieux et multichamps*" ("multi-milieu and multi-field superiority"). See for example the Strategic Vision of the Chief of Defense Staff, General Burkhard, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

161. On the French adaptation "*multimilieux-multichamps*" rather than "*multidomaines*", see "Intégration multimilieux/multichamps : Enjeux, opportunités et risques à horizon 2035", FRS report, March 2022, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

Two Scenarios for One Ambition

Having set out this overview of national levers of influence, based on existing capabilities or ones that need to be strengthened, we now need to address the concrete question of France's proper place within the general deterrence and defense posture, i.e., one where France has responsibilities in line with its military importance and its interests. Two scenarios are suggested here, one less than ideal, the other more desirable. We do not claim that they exhaust the possibilities. Rather, our aim is to shed light on a debate in which the issues are crucial for the medium to long term. In a synthesis, we endeavor to make the best use of them.

Scenario 1: France continues to "guard the southern flank"

In this scenario, the French armed forces, and in particular the army, remain in their comfort zone. Their operational added value is recognized by the Allies in the area of competence connected with the projection of light and medium forces. The armed forces have been sized accordingly, and their intervention capacity is complemented by preventive cooperation measures. The high-intensity segment exists but is either incomplete (land forces) or lacks density (navy and air).

France is therefore the major contributor to the stability of the southern zone, as no European country currently seems able or willing to assume this role in its place, because the associated political and military risks are numerous. But placing too much reliance on its ability to project itself on the southern flank would compromise France's ability to strengthen the high-intensity capability segment, a solution that is only partly satisfactory, as the gaps previously referred to would only be addressed at the margins. As other European countries decide to devote their efforts to developing the most robust capabilities, the gap between France's ambitions and the reality of its contribution would continue to grow.

France would therefore be unable to play a substantial role in the deterrence and defense posture on its own continent. It would no longer be a question of French singularity within the Alliance, but of probable marginalization in terms of military power and political influence. In the event of a major crisis on the eastern flank, or worse, an open conflict, France would play only a modest role as one contributor among others. Unable to bring together a warfighting army corps, France would not be a framework nation. Land forces (division level at best) would potentially be placed under the command of another European country (Germany or Poland), with no major influence on the conduct of operations and hence on crisis resolution. In a striking paradox, the Gaullist spirit would be undermined by the fact of France taking too little responsibility within NATO.

While it is important for France to keep a watchful eye on Africa and the Middle East, in particular through preventive actions (partnerships), intelligence (situational awareness), and a capacity for intervention that may need to be calibrated with other partners (controlling the escalation of a crisis), it seems a pity that this should be the main thrust of its military strategy. Moreover, while the threat of jihadist-inspired terrorism persists on the southern flank, it is not of the same nature as that represented by Russia's conventional military apparatus, which is far more powerful and closer to home, in direct contact with several Allies.¹⁶² Nor is it existential, in the sense that the theoretical capacity for total (nuclear) destruction does not apply with this type of threat.¹⁶³

At first sight, this scenario seems unrealistic, since the first trade-offs of the 2024–2030 LPM¹⁶⁴ suggest an investment in strengthening capabilities in order to develop a more robust forces model. However, it remains to be seen how these efforts will compare with those made by other European Allies, and above all, how they will be implemented in budgetary terms and over time, as this intention will be set against a backdrop of deteriorating public finances¹⁶⁵ where defense policy will find itself in direct competition with many other public policies. An economic crisis might also occur. The financial crisis of 2008 and its Greek aftershock in 2011 were fatal to the trajectory of the LPMs of the time: these crises destroyed more military capabilities than a conflict would have done,¹⁶⁶ and a sluggish recovery began only in the wake of the 2015 Paris attacks. Wariness must therefore be the watchword, as this scenario may impose itself by default.

Scenario 2: France takes on wider responsibilities

France chooses to become more involved than it has been in the recent past on the eastern flank, intensifying the efforts made since the end of 2021. This implies greater investment in the high-intensity capability spectrum, in order to have the physical resources to exercise more responsibilities. Due to the geography, the land force dimension forms the cement of NATO's posture on the eastern flank. France therefore structures an army corps with its closest affiliates, following a minilateral logic. This corps is capable of playing an important operational role in the New Force Model; it is equipped with

162. Also members of the EU, which implies a double duty of solidarity.

163. Jihadist groups may one day have a "dirty bomb" or some other type of weapon of mass destruction (chemical, bacteriological). At this stage, this is just a possibility. Meanwhile, the Russian arsenal, the second largest in the world, already exists.

164. This is in the process of being examined in parliament. Rather than an increase in size, which seems unattainable, it aims for a targeted increase in capabilities and a more honest approach to the armed forces model (appropriate support, ammunition stocks, operational training, etc.).

165. See "Rapport public annuel 2023", Cour des comptes, No. 15: "Nearly three years after the start of the crisis, France is one of the Eurozone countries with the worst-affected public finances", available at: www.ccomptes.fr.

166. 54,000 jobs were axed under the Sarkozy presidency; 24,000 more job losses were initially planned by the Hollande presidency, but in the end there were fewer than expected.

robust corps troops, which are mainly French¹⁶⁷ (France's partners, for the most part, do not have any), which enables it to be credible in the event of an interstate conflict. France's naval and air resources, which have also been strengthened, complete this © and are capable of bringing together allied forces with the required mass in their respective domains. France participates in the overall deterrence and defense posture, including through its space and cyber resources. This military commitment is accompanied by a clear political stance that does not muddle the message to its allies.

Under these conditions, France inspires confidence, builds political and military unity, brings together its bilateral strategic partnerships operationally, and plays an appropriate role on its continent. Positive cascade effects for France's strategic autonomy may then occur:

- Its DITB and R&D are boosted by the high technological content of the high-intensity capabilities;
- Arms exports to Allies are boosted thanks to trust and credibility, which is virtuous and ensures that France is not overly dependent on the Middle Eastern market;
- Increased influence and the greater number of French weapons in Alliance countries give France greater leverage to influence technical interoperability standards;
- Taking a transactional approach, affiliates could also lend a hand on the southern flank, if necessary;
- Finally, beyond defense issues, but linked to the concept of strategic autonomy, Central and Eastern European countries share a common interest with France on the key issue of nuclear energy,¹⁶⁸ the cornerstone of France's energy independence and its industrial capabilities (controllable energy): here there are ripple effects on the DTIB. A stronger commitment on the eastern flank would strengthen France's relations with this bloc of countries.

The strategic knock-on effects produced by this scenario are clearly greater than in the first.¹⁶⁹

167. This objective is difficult to achieve, but within reach, judging by the acquisition efforts planned in the land sector. See the hearing of General Schill (Chief of Staff of the French Army) at the French National Assembly (July 20, 2022): "Among the capabilities to be strengthened, I will mention surface-to-air defense capabilities, drones, deep fire, information and communication systems, intelligence, and crossing capabilities". These are most of the capabilities that make up the EOCA, which are currently absent or very scarce. See: www.assemblee-nationale.fr.

168. Strategic debates are under way within the EU on the choice of future energies considered to be sustainable and not harmful to the climate. This choice will determine the financing options for each type of energy and will have an impact on the production model. See: www.latribune.fr.

169. On the benefits of developing relations with Eastern European countries, see *Compte rendu No. 48, Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, "Mission d'information sur les enjeux géopolitiques et de défense en Europe de l'Est"*, February 23, 2022, p. 11.

Synthesis: Toward a framework nation concept on the southeastern flank

A forward-looking proposal must also take into account the existing situation, as a military model can only be modified with a non-reducible reaction time, at least in peacetime, the length of this reaction time being proportional to the extent of the desired changes.¹⁷⁰ Both tangible criteria (equipment already in service or already planned) and intangible ones (military culture) are important and cannot be changed at the flick of a switch. In Scenario 2, for example, the French Army will not transform itself into a Polish or German-style armored-mechanized army. It should therefore retain a mix of heavy and medium/light intervention capabilities. It is just the balance of the mix that should change, toward more heavy capabilities, which are currently in short supply.

Once the capability shifts toward a more hardened and robust combined forces model has been achieved, where would it be appropriate to take on responsibilities? France is already partly committed in Romania and has recently signed strategic partnerships (see above) with many of the countries in this region, plus Belgium. On the northern flank (JEF) and the eastern flank (FNC), the place has to some extent already been taken by the United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland, the latter two also benefiting from geographical proximity. That would leave the southeastern flank, which is proportionally further away for France, but which has the advantage of bordering the Mediterranean, with a distant view over the southern flank.

Since—apart from the Black Sea—this southeastern zone is not the one most directly exposed to the return of a Russian coercive threat,¹⁷¹ the forces in charge of this zone could also get involved on the southern flank, at least in part (with a spectrum of missions to be defined: situation monitoring, prevention, or crisis management?). The French Navy has a greater presence in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea than on the seas adjacent to the northern and eastern flanks; the French Air and Space Force is familiar with the area, having intervened regularly (Balkans, Operations Harmattan and Hamilton, etc.); and two countries, Greece and Croatia, are now equipped with the Rafale.¹⁷² In air-sea terms, a federating role for France with more robust capabilities would generate knock-on effects on its partners, giving it an advantage in a Mediterranean area where more anti-access capabilities are concentrated.

170. G. Garnier, "Les chausse-trapes de la remontée en puissance : Défis et écueils du redressement militaire", *Focus stratégique*, No. 52, Ifri, 2014.

171. That said, there are considerable risks in Transnistria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Russia will retain influence in the Balkans.

172. We could also mention Egypt, which is peripheral to the area concerned and a NATO partner. Serbia, also a partner, is a prospect under serious consideration.

As for the land-based aggregation tool, it could be inspired by France's Rapid Action Force (Force d'action rapide, or FAR),¹⁷³ the ultimate creation of the Cold War, which had the advantage of combining robustness (in the event of war, it would have received a mission of counterattack or operational-level blocking action) with good operational mobility.¹⁷⁴ This "FAR Mark 2" would be multinational and enable joint exercises to be organized and interoperability between its constituent members to be improved (a common culture being forged over time). It would offer an interesting balance of capabilities, more robust than the army's current mix, but within its reach in terms of acquisition efforts. Versatile and held, this army corps could thus act as an operational reserve (on the eastern flank) or a strategic reserve (in the event of strategic shock of any kind to the southern flank). It would be capable of leading multi-milieu and multi-field operations. However, this project might compete with Italy, or worse still, meet with Turkey's disapproval. As with any large-scale project, France would need to be persuasive and build the right institutional balance of power within NATO.¹⁷⁵

Within this overall configuration, the French armed forces would play an essential role in the deterrence posture ensuring Europe's safety. The French forces model, made more robust and denser, and given a multinational extension, would provide a mix offering operational flexibility and therefore a larger number of political options in the event of a crisis or conflict beyond the framework for the engagement of national forces alone.

Last but most importantly, in the event of "strategic loneliness", in other words a situation in which France would have to intervene on its own¹⁷⁶ (for example, a threat to an overseas territory, a jihadist proto-state embedding itself in a zone of interest,¹⁷⁷ a conflict involving a state bound by a defense agreement, a breakdown of alliances), its armed forces model would create a more favorable balance of power and greater freedom of action because of the investments in capabilities already made; the French armed forces would be all the more able to act autonomously.

173. An army corps created in 1984, comprising five divisions and boasting considerable aggressive capabilities (Gazelle helicopters armed with HOT missiles, brand-new AMX-10 RCs armed with 105 mm cannon, VAB-HOT anti-tank missile launchers, and an entire artillery brigade as EOCA). For an interesting perspective, read Michel Goya: <https://lavoiedelepee.blogspot.com>.

174. Tested during the "Moineau Hardi" Franco-German exercise; see footnote 72.

175. As a more technical argument, but by no means a less important one, such a project would also have to fit in with NATO's C2 architecture. There is a land-based headquarters covering the southeast: the Multinational Corps South-East (MNC-SE) in Romania. The project under discussion goes beyond land forces, but coordination with the MNC-SE would need to be defined, in particular between it and the CRR-FR. A number of possibilities can be imagined, including a smaller regional footprint if a logic similar to Scenario 2 were to retain the idea of an operational or strategic reserve.

176. General Burkhard, the French chief of defense staff, is considering this hypothesis. See "Audition du Général d'armée Thierry Burkhard, chef d'état-major des Armées, sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2022", Assemblée Nationale, October 6, 2021, p. 15 and p. 19.

177. At its height, Daesh had an operational force of 30,000–40,000 combatants.

Taking on greater, more visible responsibility within NATO would, in any event, generate a surge of influence that would allow France to re-assert its aspirations for a European pillar.

A European Pillar within NATO

The idea of a European pillar within NATO is not new; President Kennedy himself encouraged it.¹⁷⁸ It largely underpinned the reflections on France's return to the integrated structure under the Chirac and Sarkozy presidencies¹⁷⁹: since it was not possible to develop an autonomous European defense, France might as well bring about this much-talked-about European pillar within NATO.

What is the European Pillar?

This has not been clearly defined. Would it include “northern European” and Balkan countries that are not EU members, or just EU member states, or would it be a simple group within the EU like the Bucharest Nine (which today brings together former Soviet satellite states that have joined NATO)? While the general aim, for European countries, is to exercise greater responsibilities within the Alliance, thereby increasing their collective autonomy, there has been no agreement on an outline of the institutional scope of the idea, the mechanisms to be put in place, or the tools to be made available. We propose the following definition: “the sum total of the military capabilities¹⁸⁰ of all European countries”. This sum total represents European countries' capacity to act and defend the continent,¹⁸¹ and it is the variable that drives the resulting political influence. Choosing the sum total of European capabilities also has the advantage of using tangible criteria to measure the effectiveness of the efforts made and the collective willingness to take on responsibilities or not.

The idea of a European pillar is inseparable from France's determination to promote European strategic autonomy. In this respect, the sum total of military capabilities must also be understood in industrial terms, with production capacities and the level of technology achieved entering into the equation. Collective efforts in support of Ukraine and the resulting significant drain on individual countries' equipment and munitions are a stark reminder of this. Given the colossal investments required to stay in the technological race, it seems difficult for the French DITB to be positioned across the entire spectrum. Joint efforts within the framework of a “complete” European DITB

178. M. Lefebvre, “L'identité européenne dans l'OTAN”, *Politique américaine*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2009, p. 53.

179. O. Kempf, *L'OTAN au XXI^e siècle : La transformation d'un héritage*, *op. cit.*, p. 158–159 and p. 175–176.

180. In the DORESE sense.

181. On this topic, see C. Grand, “Strategy, Capabilities, Technology: A Manifesto for New European Defence”, January 26, 2023, available at: <https://ecfr.eu>. His phrase sums this up: “The equation is simple: no capabilities, no defence”.

would support the development of all the disruptive technologies that will form the basis of tomorrow's combat (artificial intelligence, hypervelocity, quantum or space technologies, to name just the most important ones).¹⁸² Not being present in these domains carries the risk of marginalization.¹⁸³ By buying too much from the United States, European countries are squandering precious funds that are not going into the European DITB but rather are indirectly supporting American R&D, with the added bonus for Washington of more competitively priced equipment due to economies of scale. If this process continues in the long term, Europeans will have meticulously built up an irreversible technological dependence.¹⁸⁴

Here the issue of operational capability knocks up against that of industrial capability. For example, if the United States were involved in a war of attrition that monopolized its productive capabilities, what logistic resources (spare parts, ammunition) would be available to European countries equipped with American matériel? Simultaneous conflicts in Europe and Asia-Pacific would be particularly pernicious in this respect, and the experience of the Ukrainian conflict has laid bare the need to ensure autonomous production, for example of munitions. Here again, by demonstrating a collective ability to withstand a long-term conflict and greater resilience, a more industrially autonomous Europe would act as a greater deterrent than a dependent one.

In order for this French project for a European pillar to finally leave the realm of fantasy and become a reality, Europeans and Americans alike would have to be on board. Without being over-optimistic, it would seem that the conditions are more favorable this time.

The American Variable

The American security guarantee in Europe is generally assumed to be permanent.¹⁸⁵ The United States has much to gain from this: ensuring the security of a prosperous zone, the world's largest economic market, provides powerful political leverage when difficult negotiations (on tariffs, technological partnerships, regulatory and energy issues, etc.) pit the two parties against each other. However, at least since President Obama's "pivot to Asia", there have been increasing signs casting doubt on the systematic nature of the

182. To deal with this, new European financing instruments can be devised and implemented: see C. Brugier and P. Haroche, "L'Europe face aux limites des capacités américaines", IRSEM podcast "Le Collimateur", May 16, 2023.

183. Grand, "Strategy, Capabilities, Technology".

184. On the risk of strategic downgrading for Europe and France, see §1.3.2, 26 of "L'actualisation stratégique 2021", available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

185. See Rapport de la Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, No. 5054, p. 97–98.

United States' commitment, whether in Washington's governing circles, in milieus involved in strategic thinking, or in public opinion itself.¹⁸⁶

Rivalry with China is the focus of attention and requires Washington to devote a significant amount of its resources to it. The challenge posed by China's spectacular rise, particularly in the field of technology, the foundation of American power, is incomparably more feared than Russia. A conflict with Beijing in the years to come cannot be ruled out, and in such a situation, as in any serious crisis short of open conflict, Washington would like to retain full freedom of strategic action. Too great an American presence in Europe would hamper this.

While the United States has clearly demonstrated its solidarity with Europe during the Ukrainian conflict, deploying the majority of the forces reinforcing NATO's posture and bringing its total number of soldiers in Europe to 100,000,¹⁸⁷ it may want to speedily withdraw a significant proportion of these resources when the conflict ends, judging that it has delivered on its responsibilities. Above all, the United States might feel that Europe should now take over and ensure virtually the whole of NATO's posture, especially in the face of a weakened Russia. This scenario seems reasonably likely.¹⁸⁸

Another less likely hypothesis, but one nevertheless worth considering, that of withdrawal induced by domestic political difficulties, might impose itself by default.¹⁸⁹ American society appears divided, with polarization on cultural, social, and political issues having increased since the Trump presidency—the assault on the Capitol being the starkest demonstration of this. Looking forward several years, it is conceivable that there could be an isolationist power in Washington that is focused on managing an unstable domestic scene. This possibility could be combined with an exclusive focus on rivalry with China.

The adversary in the Cold War was unquestionably common to both sides of the Atlantic. We can now see that the hierarchy of nightmares is no longer the same on both sides of the pond. A European pillar would make it possible to cover the risk associated with the American variable, which is tending to grow over time.

The European Variable

Should it become involved in a conflict or the management of a hard crisis while the United States is simultaneously occupied with a major military operation, Europe could therefore find itself on its own. A Russia that remains

186. See the podcast "Net Assessment", *War on the Rocks*, "Better Burden Sharing with Allies", March 30, 2023.

187. See Rapport d'information de la Commission des affaires étrangères et de la défense, No. 764, p. 4. Poland is the pivotal country for this reinforcement (more than 10,000 US troops to date, interview with the defense attaché in Warsaw). The United States is the framework nation.

188. See "Net Assessment", *War on the Rocks*, *op. cit.*

189. On America's refocusing on the domestic scene, see Rapport d'information, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

aggressive in the medium to long term could launch an opportunistic offensive or attempt to destabilize a European state, knowing that the situation precludes American involvement. Ensuring that this dire scenario does not become a reality would give meaning to the European pillar: the sum of the capabilities of European countries and the absence of gaps in critical capabilities (enablers) would make it possible to act without the Americans should the need arise. Taken together, these capabilities would ensure the critical mass to produce deterrent effects against Russia, significantly reducing the likelihood of conflict. Indeed, before being an essential requirement for winning a symmetrical war, mass is first used to win peace.

Once European countries (including all EU and non-EU countries, as this is about protecting the continent in the geographical sense of the term) had a coherent set of military capabilities, they could take on more responsibilities and influence within NATO, according to mechanisms to be defined.¹⁹⁰ While these forces would be intended for NATO's deterrence and defense posture, part of them could be used by the EU, as its member countries are expected to provide the majority of units for the New Force Model once it is in place,¹⁹¹ or by an ad hoc coalition for use outside the zone (management of a more or less acute crisis, on the periphery). This would introduce greater political-military flexibility: depending on the nature and geographical scope of the crisis, one existing or ad hoc organization or another will be better suited to intervene. This flexibility could benefit the United States, allowing it to economize on forces, as long as a core group of European countries¹⁹² could become involved autonomously.

The European pillar can only be envisaged if the Europeans want it, which assumes that this time there is a common appreciation of the "American risk" that would arise from the US's departure or substantial disengagement from the continent. For the Europeans, it is not a question of favoring this hypothesis but of collectively reaching the critical military mass, quantitatively and qualitatively, to take charge of their own security should this scenario materialize. They would then have to bear the budgetary cost.¹⁹³ As for the United States, it is only natural that it should seek to take advantage of its leadership. France or any other country would act in the same way if it owned 70% of the military resources of an alliance. Thus, the United States will only accept a sharing of responsibilities under at least two conditions:

- That the Europeans demonstrate their willingness to increase the size and

190. Flexible mechanisms, such as a European "caucus", like the existing consultation frameworks (Quad: US, UK, Germany, France; Quint: Quad + Italy), or more institutionalized mechanisms? On the existing frameworks, see A. Zima, *L'OTAN*, *op. cit.*, p.45-47.

191. S. Biscop, "The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?", *Egmont Policy Brief*, No. 285, 2022.

192. For example, the countries taking part in the EII; see *Compte rendu* No. 44, *Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées*, p. 18.

193. B. Angelet, "The War against Ukraine and European Defence: When Will We Square the Circle?", *Egmont Policy Brief*, No. 292, 2022. See also C. Brugier and P. Haroche, "L'Europe face aux limites des capacités américaines", IRSEM podcast "Le Collimateur", *op. cit.*

effectiveness of their military apparatuses, matching resources with responsibilities, thus emerging as credible allies rather than mere “consumers of security”¹⁹⁴;

- That the Americans see themselves as overall winners in this new sharing-out: greater freedom of action in Asia-Pacific, greater ability to react to a strategic shock outside Europe, greater overall strategic flexibility with more robust allies able to lend a hand.

Of course, European and American gains would not be absolute:

- More uncertainty for the Europeans, who since 1945 have grown out of the habit of shouldering such a burden alone and have been anesthetized by the comfort of American leadership;
- Fewer levers for the Americans to define the interoperability of the Western world, and therefore less technological and operational dominance;
- This would leave a third variable, which is no less important: Turkey's position on the European pillar project, which would probably be hostile and therefore obstructive. The negotiations are likely to take place against a backdrop of internal tensions, as is the case whenever there is a change in the structural balance within an organization the size of NATO.

This assumption of responsibility by Europe would logically lead to an *aggiornamento* of key posts.¹⁹⁵ The NATO and EU capability processes (NDPP and CDP respectively)¹⁹⁶ should be better harmonized to complement each other, a key condition if the forces of the European pillar are eventually to be equally able to act within the framework of a significant NATO, European, or ad hoc operation.¹⁹⁷ France has a long and consistent track record in the pursuit of this politico-military goal and would therefore be a driving force behind its realization. This political advantage would not be enough, however. It would need to be complemented by a military effort that could be inspired by the proposals described above, in other words, taking on more NATO military responsibilities, for example on the southeastern flank, and improving the capability density of its force system.

194. F. Pesme, “European Defence Is Not a Burden – Allies Should Rather Share Responsibilities”, *NATO Briefs Series*, No. 11, FRS, January 20, 2022.

195. We might think about the post of Deputy-SACEUR, originally designed to be held by an EU member country and now held by the UK, which is no longer part of the EU. We might also think about the SACEUR post itself, which requires a substantial European defense effort in order to take on this responsibility. See K. A. Grieco, “Engagement Reframed #3: Appoint a European SACEUR”, Atlantic Council, February 14, 2022. See also S. Biscop, “The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?”, *op. cit.*

196. Capability Development Plan, led by the European Defence Agency. Interview with officer attached to EUMS. See: <https://eda.europa.eu>.

197. That is, in the case of the EU, beyond a 5,000-strong operation (“EU Rapid Deployment Capacity”), as envisaged to date by the Common Security and Defence Policy.

Conclusion

NATO's transformation following the new Strategic Concept is still in its early stages. Each Ally will adapt to it and try to act in its own best interests, which will give rise to healthy competition at best and fierce competition at worst. At the end of the adaptation process, the odds are that some Allies will have gained political and military influence, while others will have lost some of their luster.

With this in mind, France needs to define itself a role that is commensurate with its military importance, in line with its security interests, realistic with regard to its starting situation (the culture of its armed forces, capability planning already completed, existing partnerships), and legitimate in the eyes of its allies so as to be able to draw on the support of its "best friends". The "southeastern flank" solution set out here is only one possibility among several, which would all require in-depth work by military staff, taking into consideration all the variables, some of which are confidential. Whatever it may be, the core role that France assigns itself should be simple in principle, clear to French public opinion and allies, and coherent in political and military terms.

France will only come out on top in this NATO transition if it makes an investment in defense commensurate with the stakes: there is clearly a need to increase the density and robustness of its military capabilities, without which it will be unable to respond to the most demanding conflict scenarios, which are after all NATO's core business. At the same time, there is a need to bring together close partners, not only to set up formations of critical size, but also to create strong military relationships that will have a long-term impact, generating interoperability that could be useful in an ad hoc coalition.

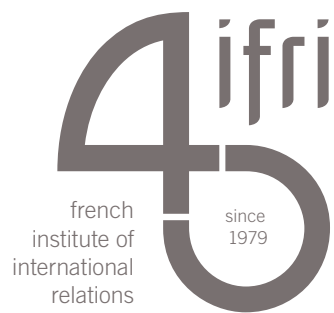
Ignoring these two objectives would be to simply rely on the benefits of a situation based on real advantages, but ones which will inevitably be eroded over time, all the more quickly as other countries develop rapidly. In this respect, the efforts made within NATO, particularly in terms of capabilities, also contribute to responding to crisis situations that do not involve the organization: for example, the capability targets assigned within the framework of the NDPP do not address NATO concerns alone.

It should also be remembered that having a robust and resilient force structure, which therefore has operational mass, is a decisive advantage in winning a symmetrical conventional war, but more importantly, it is a prerequisite for deterring a powerful aggressor and thus keeping the specter of war at bay. France taking a core role in NATO would permit it to

consolidate the “nesting dolls of security” represented by our collective organization; the biggest doll being NATO itself, the middle one being the European pillar, and the smallest being the French armed forces.

In this way, a robust military apparatus with a clear role would enable France to make a significant contribution to the consolidation of NATO, and then to influence the formation of the European pillar, the ultimate insurance policy in the event of American disengagement. In the event of a collective European breakdown, and thus strategic loneliness, the smallest doll would have more autonomy to act, with the potential assistance of a few close NATO friends. Let us not forget that in recent years, the behavior of “friends” has caused some surprises, and that systemic crises, whether financial, political, or otherwise, can override even the most long-established solidarities.

Thus, paradoxically in line with a too-often-simplified Gaullist posture, the ambition to preserve France’s sovereignty—that is, its ability to understand, decide, and then act, even in the face of adversity—should prompt France to involve itself fully in the reorganization of NATO and to seek to assume a responsibility commensurate with its stature. This would place obligations on France, but it would also provide a solid guarantee of its security.



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