



Atlantic Council

FUTURE EUROPE INITIATIVE



SOVEREIGN SOLIDARITY

France, the US, and Alliances
in a Post-Covid World

Jeffrey Lightfoot and Olivier-Rémy Bel

Future Europe Initiative

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Cover: Mediterranean Sea (July 1st, 2012) The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69), foreground, and the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle (R 91) are underway in the Mediterranean Sea. Dwight D. Eisenhower is on a scheduled deployment supporting maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts in the U.S. 5th and 6th Fleet areas of responsibility. Source: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Julia A. Casper/Released 120701-N-RY232-217

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FOREWORD



Two centuries of living history: very few countries can boast of being each other's oldest ally. It is a source of pride for France. Yes, we are proud of our role in supporting the young American democracy in the 1770s, just as we cherish the memory of the hundreds of thousands of Americans in uniform who fell on our soil, from the

Belleau Wood to the beaches of Normandy, in the fight for freedom and the values we share.

But this relationship cannot be reduced to those days, however glorious they may have been. While we face many security challenges in a world full of pitfalls, no one can claim to be able to act alone. As this very informative report points out, bilateral military relations between the United States and France have reached historic levels over the past decade.

As French Minister for the Armed Forces, there have been several nights that I will never forget and that embody the depth of these ties. I remember the sleepless nights I spent on the phone with the US Secretary of Defense just moments before the launch of Operation Hamilton that destroyed the Syrian regime's chemical weapons. I remember that night of horror, the liberation of hostages achieved by French forces with the support of American intelligence, when two brave French soldiers fell to save an American citizen, a South Korean citizen, and two fellow Frenchmen in Burkina Faso, thousands of miles away from home. To say that our personnel are working shoulder to shoulder, this may not be a simple image. The trust that flows from our operational deployments also paves the way for a deeper relationship in new areas such as space, cyber and the Indo-Pacific.

H.E. Florence Parly is the Minister for the Armed Forces of the French Republic

We share more than intelligence, or military capabilities. We share the same values, the same fight against terrorism, for freedom. We have a deep friendship that allows me to say this: the US is needed. Alliances are to be treasured: not as burdensome relics, or as commercial endeavours; but as a web of bonds, of values, of influence, whose collective value far exceeds that of each part. And that means for each of us that we must count with reliable partners. For France and for Europe, there is no question that the US is one of them – second to none.

This cooperation is not only a transactional relationship, it serves our mutual interests. For France, there is no doubt that NATO is the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security and that the United States' role in this alliance is indisputable. At the same time, France brings much to the US. As a nuclear power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a founding member of the EU and NATO, France also contributes to your security through high-level military investments and a global presence.

At this point, I deem it necessary to clarify one thing. France's plea for a strong European defense often triggers scepticism, if not criticism, on the US side. Let's make it clear once and for all: building a more sovereign and autonomous Europe does not mean diminishing the strength of its ties with the United States. Quite the contrary: to respond to legitimate American calls for greater European responsibility in addressing broader security issues, it is crucial that Europe create incentives and tools to support the development of capabilities and, above all, a genuine strategic culture on the continent.

I definitely welcome the opportunity offered by the Atlantic Council and the Future Europe Initiative to repair misperceptions and pave the way for a fruitful debate on the future of this relationship.

FOREWORD

The United States and France have long been closely linked to each other's national destinies. That has been true for more than two centuries, and as this important report entitled "Sovereign Solidarity: France, the United States, and Alliances in a Post Covid World" points out, it will remain equally true in the coming decade and the rest of the 21st century.

The shared sacrifice and solidarity between the American and French people has been a part of my life and career from my earliest days. My parents moved our family to France in the immediate aftermath of World War II, in 1946. As a young Boy Scout in France, our troop would attend large Jamborees in the vicinity of the Omaha Beach cemetery and work on upkeep of the grounds and the headstones of the heroic Soldiers who had fallen in the D-Day invasion. Much later in my life, as Commandant of the Marine Corps, it was my honor to visit Belleau Wood each year to pay tribute to the fallen Marines who achieved worldwide fame for their bravery and fighting spirit in France during World War I. It was there that the German advance towards Paris was halted in 1918.

However, the relationship between France and the US isn't just about history. Throughout my forty-year career in the United States Marine Corps and, at the end, as President Obama's national security advisor, France has always been a valued ally. French troops were important partners during Operation Provide Comfort in 1991 in Northern Iraq, in NATO operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, and in the early days of the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. France was there during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm and has worked with the United States in parts of Africa in the fight against terrorism.

It is not uncommon for French military and civilian officials to see things differently from their American counterparts and to have their own way of doing things. From my personal experience, the French Armed Forces operate at the highest

level of professionalism and bravery, and France today has one of the most capable militaries in the NATO Alliance.

During my time as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (in NATO 2003-2007), the "difficult" political relationship between France, NATO, and the United States began to thaw in practical and symbolic ways. I had the honor to be the first SACEUR to be received by a French President, Jacques Chirac, since President de Gaulle requested the departure of NATO and the US European Command, then in France, and the withdrawal of French Armed Forces from the integrated command in 1966. In 2003, France reinserted officers to NATO's integrated military command and the French flag was raised at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium. In 2009, as National Security Advisor, I attended the Strasbourg-Kehl summit with President Obama to welcome France back into NATO's command structure.

This report helpfully identifies the remarkable ways in which French-American security and defense ties have deepened in the last decade and offers a roadmap for where this alliance can go in the next decade. The United States and its allies will need France's strategic vision, independent thinking, and political will to tackle shared challenges. These will include China's rise and authoritarian ambitions, Russia's opportunistic meddling in various regions, Iran's continued role as the world's premier exporter of terror, instability and opportunity alike on the African continent, and the implications of emerging technologies on our free societies.

The Atlantic Council and its Future Europe Initiative are right to explore the proper place of a complex but very valuable ally like France in America's future foreign and defense policy. Beyond the bilateral relationship, this report offers key insights into the intricacies of alliance management. Decision makers in Paris and Washington will find much to reflect upon in this excellent report.

Very respectfully,



James L. Jones

General, USMC (Ret.)

Executive Chairman Emeritus, Atlantic Council

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What allies does the United States need to compete in the emerging post-COVID geostrategic environment? And how can the United States best engage its allies to advance its national interests in this new environment? These are questions of major importance to a new US administration within a competitive geopolitical environment.

Three consensus ideas are likely to shape not only the US foreign policy debate among experts, but also the political debate in Washington.

- 1** China's rise is the preeminent geopolitical and economic challenge to US power.
- 2** The United States wants to limit and draw down its involvement in so-called "forever" wars, particularly in the Middle East.
- 3** To compete in a great-power competition environment, the United States needs allies. But, for alliances to be strategically useful and politically sustainable, allies must assume a greater share of the security burden.

France offers an interesting case study as the kind of ally that can help the United States address these foreign policy challenges. France brings to bear global ambition, aspirations to international leadership, relatively full-spectrum military capabilities, and the will and decision-making structure to deploy those assets at speed.

Over the last decade, US-France bilateral military relations have reached historic levels. Close collaboration grew in the 2010s through relatively intensive operations against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in the Middle East and Africa. Examples abound: the Charles de Gaulle filled the US carrier gap and assumed command of TF150, the coalition's maritime component; French CAESAR cannons shelled the last ISIS stronghold; and intelligence exchanges were intensified and structured around an interagency Lafayette Committee. Ties formed through this deep operational cooperation paved the way for a deeper relationship in additional domains like space. This movement has also been facilitated by the growing familiarity resulting from France's return to NATO's command structure in 2009 and assuming command of NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) based in Norfolk, Virginia. Franco-American defense cooperation has come a very long way from the interoperability issues that plagued the first Gulf War or the political trauma surrounding the Second Gulf War.

Yet, working with France is sometimes a headache for US policymakers. History reveals more than two centuries of a tumultuous relationship, sometimes marked by deep cooperation and, at other times, marred by mutual suspicion, rivalry, and misunderstanding.

At a deeper level, Franco-US cooperation is hampered by a lack of familiarity and lingering stereotypes on both sides. Precious few US defense officials are deployed to France, in contrast to Germany or the United Kingdom (UK). A mismatch between different decision-making systems generates frustration. Overall, the depth of Franco-US cooperation is often insufficiently known in both Washington and Paris, despite its advocates' best efforts.

In recent years, tense political relations have come to overshadow gains in military cooperation. President Donald Trump's withdrawals from—and attacks against—major multilateral accords and institutions of profound importance to France have deeply harmed the foundations of the relationship. The United States' oft-uncoordinated decisions on its participation in multinational counterterrorism operations around the world—particularly Syria—have eroded trust for it in the French defense establishment. On the French side, President Emmanuel Macron's outreach to Russia, disruptive comments about NATO's "brain death," and pronouncements about strategic autonomy are viewed as neo-Gaullist pretensions in Washington. France and the United States are engaged in highly political burden-sharing debates at NATO that Alliance officials thought were relegated to the past.

However, there is much to gain in deepening the relationship with France at the bilateral and multilateral levels. France is the only US ally that is a nuclear power, a member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, and a founding member of the European Union (EU) and NATO. It is also the only US ally to operate the same type of catapult aircraft carrier as the US Navy, or to track objects in low-Earth orbit. The third-largest NATO force, spending 1.8 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, France has the will and capability to share the security burden outside of Europe. French forces are actively fighting terrorism in the Middle East and the Sahel, while sending ships to the South China Sea (on average twice a year) and the High North. France's high-end military investments, domestic presence in the Indo-Pacific, and wider vision for a sovereign Europe are distinct among US allies in Europe.

Moreover, within the transatlantic space, France's vision for a more sovereign and autonomous Europe can be turned into a potential US asset. France's vision of strategic autonomy has been poorly understood and largely rejected by the US political class. Macron's vision has also struggled to gain wide acceptance in Europe. Yet, a strong and sovereign Europe responds to calls from US officials for Europe to both take on more of the security burden and more effectively challenge Chinese and Russian influence. The EU's expansive economic, trade, technology, and regulatory powers are key to Europe's ability to assert its sovereignty and meaningfully shape world affairs. Rather than reject Macron's vision out of hand, the United States should engage with France and others in Europe on the concept of a sovereign Europe, as a means of bolstering Europeans' resistance to predatory influences.

The US-France relationship is also a lesson in alliance management. Going forward, the United States will need allies able to provide security in their near strategic environments, invest in the high-end capabilities required to maintain allied interoperability in high-intensity conflict, and, above all, be resilient against coercive economic and political influence.

France is an example of such an ally—and the main lesson is that the capabilities and the vision that make it valuable are intrinsically linked to what makes the relationship difficult. France's drive for sovereignty underpins both its deployment of an aircraft carrier to support US troops and its ability to say “non” to Washington.

Understanding this dynamic can provide inputs into sketching a type of US leadership fit for the post-COVID-19 world. It informs a new approach that allows allies greater room to maneuver, pays greater attention to their constraints, political narratives, and objectives, and spends the time to build the necessary familiarity to get there. This is not an easy task. It is one that will likely require investing in and strengthening US diplomacy. Yet, the prospect is attractive: a coalition of likeminded allies able to be security providers in their region of the world, while supporting US coalitions with robust diplomacy and high-end capabilities.

As policy leaders from both parties in the United States seek enhanced contributions from allies in a strategic environment marked by the return of great-power competition, much can be achieved with France. To this end, this report has identified **five high-level recommendations for US engagement with Paris.**

- 1 Preserve current operational cooperation, especially around counterterrorism in Africa and the Middle East.** France's extensive counterterrorism activities in these regions are a model example of burden sharing from a US perspective.

- 2 Enhance bilateral defense and security cooperation in three promising areas: space, cyber, and the Indo-Pacific region.** These are the areas that match priorities set in the National Defense Strategy, and in which France can offer interesting avenues. In those three areas, France has published strategies and developed a mature conceptual framework, restructured its internal organization, and committed financial resources.

- 3 Reduce frictions on the four outstanding political misunderstandings—Russia, China, burden sharing and the role of NATO, and strategic autonomy—by elevating the conversation.** This means, first and foremost, giving the benefit of the doubt to initiatives that are designed to ensure a European voice on the world stage, independent from, but not antagonist to, the United States, so as to be able to engage on the real points of divergence.

In particular, the next administration should constructively engage France on its agenda of a “sovereign Europe.” A sovereign and geopolitical Europe, notably able to resist destabilizing influences and hybrid threats, could be an asset for the United States in a major-power competition environment if shaped accordingly—and a strategic liability if Europe is constructed in opposition to US power. US diplomacy with France and other allies should seek to realize the former and prevent the latter. Conversely, France would greatly benefit from the United States' buy-in and encouragement for other allies to embrace the idea of a more sovereign Europe. Both sides stand to lose from continued antagonism on this front.

- 4 In the medium term, create greater familiarity among policymakers** to provide more opportunities to dispel future misunderstandings through a structured 2+2 dialogue between the defense and foreign ministers, expanded fellowships for policymakers, and a deeper intelligence relationship at the strategic and operational level.

- 5 “Neither vassal, nor enemy.” Adapt the method for managing the relationship with France** by engaging it earlier and more meaningfully, while understanding that some amount of divergence and independence will be necessary, especially with regard to the political narrative. This entails trusting that France will end up backing the United States when it matters, as the historical track records suggests, even if disagreements persist in other areas. Lessons learned through engaging France in this fashion could offer insights for managing other capable, yet independently minded, partners and allies—arguably the kind the US will need in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship with France is a paradox. The French are both the United States' oldest ally and one of its most complicated. In a decade, France went from "cheese-eating surrender monkeys" to "security partner of choice."¹ President Macron was the first of only two leaders invited for a state dinner at the White House under the current administration, at which President Trump called Macron "perfect."² Six months later, President Trump found him to be "very insulting" when the French president proposed greater European military autonomy from the United States.³

France does almost all that the National Defense Strategy expects of allies—it invests in its defense capabilities, chases terrorists in the Middle East, patrols the High North, sails through the South China Sea, and confronts predatory Chinese investment. Yet, it also generates considerable political headaches for Washington, from its agenda of European strategic autonomy to reopening the dialogue with Russia.

This raises an interesting conundrum for US policymakers: as an ally, few countries have more to offer than France, but

Paris often insists on approaching its problems in its own way. These misunderstandings sometimes pit Washington and Paris against each other in unproductive ways. In an era where US officials want and need allies to share more of the burden, how can the United States maximize cooperation with France, and in turn maximize the impact of the transatlantic partnership?

At a time where the United States is debating its foreign policy orientation and the proper role and value of alliances, studying the Franco-American relationship can be insightful. It can offer lessons on how the United States can secure cooperation with other independent and complex allies and partners.

To understand the future possibilities of the US-France relationship requires a review of the key moments in history that drive the volatility in US-France relations. That, in turn, lays the foundation to exploring what France can today bring to the table in practical terms and how to best engage Paris. Moving beyond military cooperation, this report also delves into the great political misunderstandings of the current relationship.

1 Gary Younge and Jon Henley, "Wimps, weasels and monkeys - the US media view of 'perfidious France,'" *The Guardian*, February 11, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/11/pressandpublishing.usa>; "Remarks by Secretary Mattis at an Honor Cordon Welcoming Florence Parly, Minister for the Armed Forces, France, to the Pentagon," US Department of Defense, October 20, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1349766/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-an-honor-cordon-welcoming-florence-parly-ministe/>.

2 Jessica Estepa, "President Trump After Picking Something Off Macron's Suit: 'We Have to Make Him Perfect,'" *USA Today*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2018/04/24/president-trump-after-picking-something-off-macrons-suit-we-have-make-him-perfect/546134002/>.

3 Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "President Macron of France has just suggested that Europe build its own military in order to protect itself from the U.S., China and Russia. Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly!" Twitter, November 9, 2018, 3:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1061003186125856769?s=20>.

1 THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE: A VOLATILE ALLIANCE

1.1 A RICH DRAMA WITH MANY CHAPTERS

The Franco-American relationship is a rich drama with many chapters. It enjoys periods of warm collaboration, followed by moments of suspicion and recrimination. A review of the history of this alliance can offer insights into how the United States can better engage this long-standing friend to best advance its objectives.

Common geopolitical interests, and a shared attachment to universal ideals, form the foundation of the France-US relationship. It is precisely because this alliance balances interests and values that it has endured across regimes, centuries, and diverse strategic challenges. For that same reason, the alliance has enjoyed moments of turbulence, drama, and historic impact. At times, competition, ambition, and fierce attachment to their respective revolutionary ideals pit the United States and France against each other on the world stage. History shows that when the two countries work together, they are much more likely to achieve their common goals. When they work at cross purposes, success is more elusive.

The alliance has its origins in France's crucial support for the US independence movement against the British crown. French military leaders like the Marquis de Lafayette and the Count of Rochambeau offered decisive military support in helping the fledgling Americans defeat the British empire, which culminated in the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War. Of course, the experimentation of these Enlightenment ideals in the New World helped spark revolutionary blowback in the Old World, including the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

France would again play a major role in shaping America's destiny with Napoleon's sale of the Louisiana territory to the United States in 1803. The purchase of Louisiana by President Thomas Jefferson—an ardent Francophile—doubled the size of the Union and gave the United States a continental scale that would lay the seeds for its emergence as a superpower in the 20th century.

The twentieth century brought wars of great misfortune to France and dragged the United States into European geopolitics, however reluctantly. The US entry into World



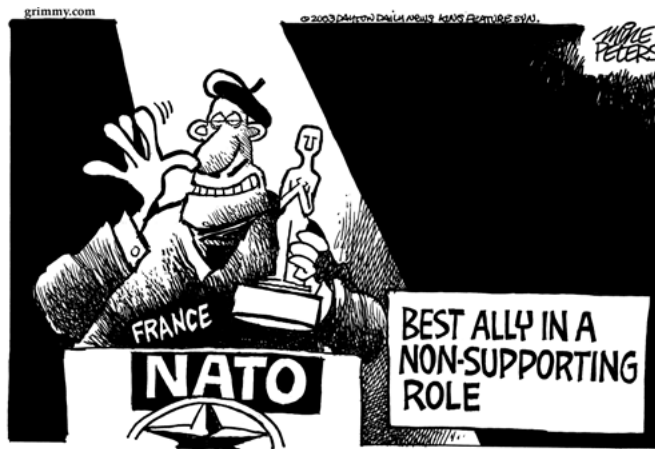
This battle scene was painted in 1919 by artist Frank Schoonover of the Battle of Belleau Wood. Source: US Naval Institute <https://tinyurl.com/y4dxfv27>

World War I marked a renewed military cooperation—from cries of “Lafayette nous voilà” to iconic moments in the history of the Marine Corps being written at Belleau Woods—while US President Woodrow Wilson’s idealistic visions for the post-war world clashed with the realities of European geopolitics and was followed by a US retreat into isolationism.

World War II would again bring the United States into European geopolitics. The cooperation between allied forces and the Free French carrying on the resistance would prove both fruitful and fitful. Free French leader Charles de Gaulle battled his Anglo-Saxon allies for respect and a place at the table with the victors, even as his forces carried on the fight against the Nazis in the empire and the metropole. The US-UK-Canadian-led invasion of the Normandy beaches in June 1944 set the stage for France’s liberation, but the humiliating circumstances of France’s fall and occupation would impact the French psyche for generations to follow.

The United States remained involved in European geopolitics after World War II. US fears of communist encroachment in Western Europe in the aftermath of the war motivated its historic and sustained commitment to Europe’s economic recovery and collective security. France was a major recipient of Marshall Plan aid and a founding member of NATO in 1949, and hosted US forces to deter the Soviets in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, the United States’ tepid support for French colonial operations in Indochina and opposition to the Anglo-French-Israeli operation in the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 influenced French strategic culture profoundly: France concluded that it must not allow its US ally to control its sovereignty.

General de Gaulle’s return to power in 1958 implemented that strategic culture through a new Fifth Republic, backed by a strong presidential system. Determined to cast off the shadow of 1940, de Gaulle brought to his presidency a relentless focus on ensuring France’s sovereignty and autonomy. A static, bipolar environment of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union gave him space to act. In 1966, although never questioning the validity of the Washington Treaty itself, nor France’s Atlantic engagement, de Gaulle withdrew French forces from NATO’s integrated command and ordered the departure of US forces from France, severing an operational link between US and French forces. He explored détente with the Soviets, tested an independent nuclear deterrent in 1960, recognized communist China in 1963, and harshly criticized the United States’ continuation of the war in Vietnam that France had fought a decade earlier. France would remain a NATO ally and would align with the United States in key moments—like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s, or the Gulf War of 1990—but would remain an ally apart, determined to carve out its own space in a bipolar world.



Source: Mike Peters. Editorial Cartoon used with the permission of Grimmy, Inc. and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved.

1.2 TERRORISM FORGES HISTORIC CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, ushered in a world of mass terrorism, and set the stage for a new cycle of both intense diplomatic conflict and deep cooperation between the United States and France. From sparring at the UN in 2003 to sharing aircraft-carrier rotations in 2016, the past two decades have seen the relationship sink very low in the early 2000s and rise to unprecedented heights in the mid 2010s.

After the 9/11 attacks, French President Jacques Chirac was the first foreign leader to visit the White House and pledge his solidarity with the United States. French forces were among the earliest to fight alongside US forces in Afghanistan, albeit in limited numbers (four thousand troops at maximum engagement).

Yet, the US-led war on terrorism pitted the two allies against each other when US attention turned to the invasion of Iraq in 2002–2003, with the stated goal of eliminating Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

France’s fierce opposition to this conflict, and its broader opposition to the unilateralism and militarism of the George W. Bush presidency, revealed serious differences of worldview and experience, backed by popular stereotypes. Yet, former US National Security Council staffer Kurt Volker—who sat on the calls between President Bush and President Jacques Chirac during the run-up to the Iraq war—believes that more careful US engagement of President Chirac could have forestalled the messy Franco-American split about the prosecution of the strategy to address Iraq’s WMD program.⁴ Volker concluded that Chirac sought respect—inclusion in the decision-making

4 Kurt Volker, “Bush, Chirac, and the War in Iraq,” *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/15/bush-chirac-and-the-war-in-iraq/>.

process—and participation in the reconstruction process, where France believed its understanding of the region's religious and ethnic makeup could contribute.

Yet, neither the United States nor France could afford to work at cross purposes. In 2005, President Bush went to Europe to mend fences after his inaugural. Nicolas Sarkozy's election in 2007 resulted in a more visible pro-US tilt in French foreign policy. Sarkozy ended France's "Gaullist exception" by returning to NATO's integrated command in 2009, securing French command of NATO's Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT) based in Norfolk, Virginia, surging French forces in Afghanistan alongside other NATO allies after President Barack Obama's election, and badgering a reluctant President Obama into military action in Libya in 2011 to protect civilians from Muammar al-Qaddafi's dying regime. At the diplomatic level, France served as critical partner of the Obama administration through President François Hollande's leadership in hosting the Paris climate talks and as a tough negotiator in the P5+1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program.⁵

The evolving menace of Islamist terrorism and instability in the Middle East and Africa demonstrated France's singular utility as an ally. In this instance, the interests of France and the United States aligned. This shared threat pushed US and French military cooperation to ever higher levels in the last decade.

France's anti-terrorism operations in Mali—launched in 2013 to forestall the jihadists' advance on Bamako—have enjoyed consistent US support across the Obama and Trump administrations in terms of surveillance drones, refueling, and transport. France was lined up to support US airstrikes in Syria in 2013 to respond to President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons on Syrian rebels. President Obama's uncoordinated reversal on the airstrikes left a lasting impression on French decision-makers and reinforced France's desire to enjoy strategic autonomy from Washington.

The rise of ISIS in 2014, and its dramatic attacks on France in 2015, brought about renewed US-France cooperation against terrorism in Syria and Iraq. France joined US-led coalition operations against ISIS in Iraq in 2014 through air and naval support and training of Iraqi forces. French forces later became involved in the coalition fight against ISIS in Syria as well, and French artillery and special forces became active on the ground. For instance, CAESAR cannons shelled ISIS' last stronghold at the Iraq-Syria border for months.

These operations resulted in ever-deeper practical cooperation, as well as creative mechanisms to build a closer relationship between two valuable allies who lack the deep legacy connectivity of the Five Eyes.⁶ When, in 2015–2016, the US Navy's maintenance schedule meant that no US aircraft carriers were available for counter-ISIS operations, the French government swiftly gave approval for the Charles de Gaulle to fill the gap. The United States returned the favor in 2018, allowing French pilots to land on the George H.W. Bush for training while the Charles de Gaulle was under periodic maintenance. In 2016, the creation of the standing Lafayette Committee by President Obama's Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Marcel Lettre deepened French-US intelligence cooperation, and increased the access of French military leadership to data and meetings relevant to military operations.

1.3 MACRON AND TRUMP: ALLIES WITH DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS AND AGENDAS

The increasing operational collaboration between the US and French militaries continues, despite political changes in both countries and in the wider world that have shaken the foundations of the broader US-France political relationship.

President Trump's election on the promise of "America First" retrenchment was received with less emotion in Paris than in other parts of Europe. Unlike many NATO allies, France views Trump's foreign policy with a certain detachment. Leading French officials are less fearful than other allies of a US withdrawal from Europe, thanks to France's longtime investment in its own strategic autonomy. French officials see in Trump's foreign policy aspects of continuity from the Obama administration, notably a desire to draw down US involvement in Middle Eastern wars and focus elsewhere in Asia.

Trump's retreat from multilateralism, and his "America First" agenda, has strained US-France relations at the political level and reinforced France's thinking about the need for a sovereign Europe. Trump's withdrawals from the Paris climate accords, Iran nuclear deal, World Health Organization (WHO), and Treaty on Open Skies have all upset relations with Paris and other European allies. These political differences have impacted bilateral military cooperation as well. President Trump's abrupt announcement of the United States' military withdrawal from Syria in November 2019 annoyed French officials—both because of the lack of coordination from its close US ally in the war on terrorism, and because France sees the war against ISIS as unfinished business, despite the

Continued on page 8

⁵ The multilateral framework of negotiations between Iran, the United States, UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China.

⁶ The Five Eyes is the deep intelligence-sharing network between the United States and the major Anglo-Saxon states of Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

FOCUS

UNPRECEDENTED BILATERAL COOPERATION AT THE MILITARY LEVEL

The bilateral relationship rests on the 2016 Ministerial Statement of Intent, a detailed document listing key areas of cooperation. As the relationship deepened in the 2010s, then-Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and then-Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter felt it was time to enshrine it in a written statement listing six priority areas (strategic assessment sharing, mutual operational support, intelligence exchanges, new technologies, nuclear, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRN)).¹

At the strategic level, the yearly Strategic Indo-Pacific Dialogue, organized since 2016 by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OSD/Policy) and its French counterpart, the Direction Générale des Relations Internationales et de la Stratégie (DGRIS—Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy) paved the way for a Global Strategic Dialogue launched in 2018. Since 2009, a spatial-cooperation forum also allows key policymakers to exchange perspectives and the 2016 Lafayette Committee oversees intelligence cooperation in a cross-agency perspective. These structured formats are underpinned by a host of interactions at all levels, thanks to a network of one hundred and twenty exchange and liaison officers, which facilitates deeper integration.

Naval cooperation is also strong, from cross-deck carrier operations—which are facilitated by France and the United States being the only two countries to operate CATOBAR carriers—to a deep anti-submarine warfare (ASW) partnership in the North Atlantic area. The relationship between air forces has been bolstered by strikes against ISIS, as well as the regular experience of integrating around key enablers

(intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), air-to-air refueling) in Iraq and the Sahel. The army-to-army partnership rests on the 2015 Joint Strategic Vision Statement by Chiefs of the Army, and has led to further developing the exchange network and greater cross-participation in exercises.

France also purchases critical US systems, especially when it comes to filling capability gaps. Already operating C130H and Hawkeye E-2C, it is in the process of acquiring C-130J Super Hercules, notably for air-to-air refueling missions, and Hawkeyes E-2C. France also regularly uses its MQ9 Reapers and laser-guided bombs in the Sahel.

This strong operational cooperation has also opened the way to deepen the partnership in other domains, such as space. Although the political framework was laid by the Juppé-Gates 2011 accords, cooperation has accelerated since, notably around exchanges of space-situational-awareness (SSA) data. Personnel exchanges have also deepened, allowing for greater familiarity. France is also entering the Five Eyes circle, having joined the combined space operations forum in February 2020.

Cooperation in cyber is also densifying, though largely at higher levels of classification. There is a recognized mutual interest in sharing assessments, as both countries face similar, if not the same, attackers, leading to better understanding, notably in fighting organized crime and terrorism. Exchanges take place at all levels, from the interdepartmental specialized agencies to military operators and intelligence services, and discussions are often attended at high levels.

1 "Joint Statement of Intent by Mr. Jean-Yves le Drian, Minister of Defence of the French Republic, and the Honorable Ashton Carter, Secretary of Defense of the United States of America," US Department of Defense, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/Joint-Statement-of-Intent-between-the-US-and-France.pdf>.

fall of its last strongholds. The Trump administration has also mused at withdrawing its support for French operations in Mali, to the chagrin and discomfort of French officials.

Macron's commitment to investing in France's defense has won him significant admiration among policy professionals on both sides of the aisle in the United States. But, many of his bolder ideas for European and transatlantic security have failed to gain traction with a US audience. Notably, his stated goal of "strategic autonomy" for Europe, his description of NATO as "brain dead," and his insistence on dialogue with Russia have generated skepticism among US foreign policy actors in the United States.

Macron's sweeping interviews with the press on foreign policy are designed to shake up the debate and generate the political will for action. They are part of a strategy of disruption.⁷ That tactic has perhaps moved the agenda on European Union issues, but it has failed to connect with decision-makers on the western shore of the Atlantic. Macron's talk of "strategic autonomy" is seen by many US policymakers in the transatlantic community as either neo-Gaullism, a means of decoupling Europe from the United States, or another European initiative to create bureaucratic structure to avoid investing in actual defense capabilities. Few US analysts see Macron's vision as an opportunity for Europe to become less of a security burden for the United States and a more capable partner in a great-power competition environment.

Macron's outreach to Russia is presumably not a problem for President Trump—who talks to Vladimir Putin often and wants to bring Russia back to the Group of Seven (G7)—but it annoys Democratic observers and traditional Republican Russia

hawks, and upsets cohesion in the Alliance. Macron's "brain death" comments about NATO are seen by US observers as unconstructive, given France's relatively light participation in NATO operations—and hypocritical, given France's lack of specific suggestions about what NATO should do.

On the larger issues of transatlantic relations, US-European defense issues, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean, France's vision and proposals have limited success in gaining traction with the wider policy community in the United States. France's impressive conceptual and diplomatic power is not yet translating into influence in Washington, raising a question of how Paris can complement its vision and bold statements with more concerted follow through, concrete suggestions, and creative channels to enhance influence. Macron's failure to convince the United States on transatlantic policy matters has wider implications for France's Europe vision as well. As long as key Atlanticist allies—particularly allies in Central and Eastern Europe—look to align with the United States, or perceive European defense as having to choose between Brussels and Washington, France will struggle to realize its vision of a sovereign Europe. This raises the question of whether France needs a US strategy to achieve its European ambitions.

Relations between the US and French militaries remain strong at the operational level. Yet, Macron's France and Trump's United States are moving in different directions, even if both leaders share a common goal of pushing their countries to be more sovereign in a great-power competition environment. US policymakers aiming to better align France and its vision for Europe with US interests will benefit from an understanding of the capabilities that France can bring to the table and the strategic culture that underpins its foreign and defense policies.

⁷ Benjamin Haddad, "Emmanuel Macron's New Strategy is Disruption," *Foreign Policy*, December 11, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/11/nato-eu-emmanuel-macrons-new-strategy-is-being-a-jerk/>.

2 FRANCE—A FULL-SPECTRUM ALLY

2.1 A LOOK AT FRENCH CAPABILITIES: WHAT CAN FRANCE BRING TO THE TABLE?

Diplomatic power to punch above its weight. France prides itself on its diplomatic network. It maintains a large bilateral presence (one hundred and sixty embassies), despite cuts and mergers in recent years. A founding member of NATO, the EU, and the UN, France relies on a network of sixteen permanent representatives to international organizations. Within those organizations, France is often in a position to wield decisive influence, such as being one of the five veto-holding members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and representing roughly 40 percent of a blocking minority of the EU's qualified-majority voting.⁸ France is trying to make its influence a constructive one. It is the penholder on numerous UNSC resolutions. It plays a key role, notably alongside Germany, in driving European construction, and hosts key diplomatic forums such as the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP) 2015 on Climate Change or the now-yearly Paris Peace Forum.

France is one of the few European countries that maintains a relatively full-spectrum military force. Paris' commitment to this model has been reaffirmed by the 2017 Strategic Review.⁹ France spends 1.8 percent of its GDP on military expenditure¹⁰, and the 2019–2025 Military Programming Law charts a course that meets the 2-percent target of the NATO Defence Investment Pledge before 2025. The 2021 budget features a 4.5% increase to €39.2bn from 2020, amounting to a 22% increase since 2017¹¹ and demonstrating commitment to the 2019-2025 multiannual path. Equipment represents around 25 percent of defense spending, already above the 20-percent target set by NATO allies. In terms of personnel, France maintains the third-largest force in NATO (approximately two hundred and three thousand), smaller than those of the United States and Turkey, but larger than those of Germany (one hundred and eighty-two thousand) and the United Kingdom (one hundred and fifty-three thousand).

Around thirty thousand personnel—i.e., around 14 percent of total forces—are currently deployed. Numbers aside, France is a rare country that maintains a relatively full-spectrum forces package, and the only European Union ally to do so. French special forces pursue jihadists in the Sahel, French artillery shells ISIS positions in Iraq, and French troops deploy in Estonia and Lithuania as part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). Its navy operates in the High North or upholds freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, while its air force launches air raids against ISIS in the Levant or patrols the Baltic skies.

France also boasts valuable intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. Because of France's insistence on its sovereignty and autonomy, it invests heavily in its ability to assess intelligence independently, which offers the United States an independent allied assessment separate from its more closely integrated Five Eyes partners.

As a result, France is one of the few US allies able to offer high-level cooperation along the entire range of capabilities—though its capabilities are obviously still far behind those of the United States. It is the only country other than the United States to operate a “catapult-assisted take-off barrier-arrested recovery” (CATOBAR) aircraft carrier, a configuration that allows for greater projection and interoperability between US and French seaborne aircraft. As a result, French and US navies enjoy a deep level of integration best exemplified by the cross-deck operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, or when French pilots maintained their qualifications during the Charles de Gaulle mid-life upgrades by flying out of the USS George H.W. Bush. The two air forces are also very close, conducting high-intensity operations such as the 2018 joint US-Franco-British strikes against Syrian chemical sites. The armies have also developed deep ties. A French general is now deputy commander of the US 3rd Infantry Division, and an American general of the French 3rd Armoured Division.

8 A blocking minority consists of at least four member states representing more than 35 percent of the EU population; France represents 15 percent.

9 “Strategic Review of Defence and National Security: 2017 Key Points,” République Française, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/514686/8664672/file/2017-RS-PointsClesEN.pdf>.

10 Though the NATO Defense Expenditure 2020 Report estimates that France could reach 2.1% in 2020 already, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/10/pdf/pr-2020-104-en.pdf

11 L'Armée Française Voit Son Budget Poursuivre sa Remontée en Puissance,” Les Echos, September 28, 2020, <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/air-defense/budget-les-armees-poursuivent-leur-remontee-en-puissance-1249743>; “2021 Army Finance Bill - LPM year 3,” Ministère des Armées, September 29, 2020, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/portail/enjeux2/plf-2021/projet-de-loi-de-finances-des-armees-2021-lpm-anne-e-3/editos>

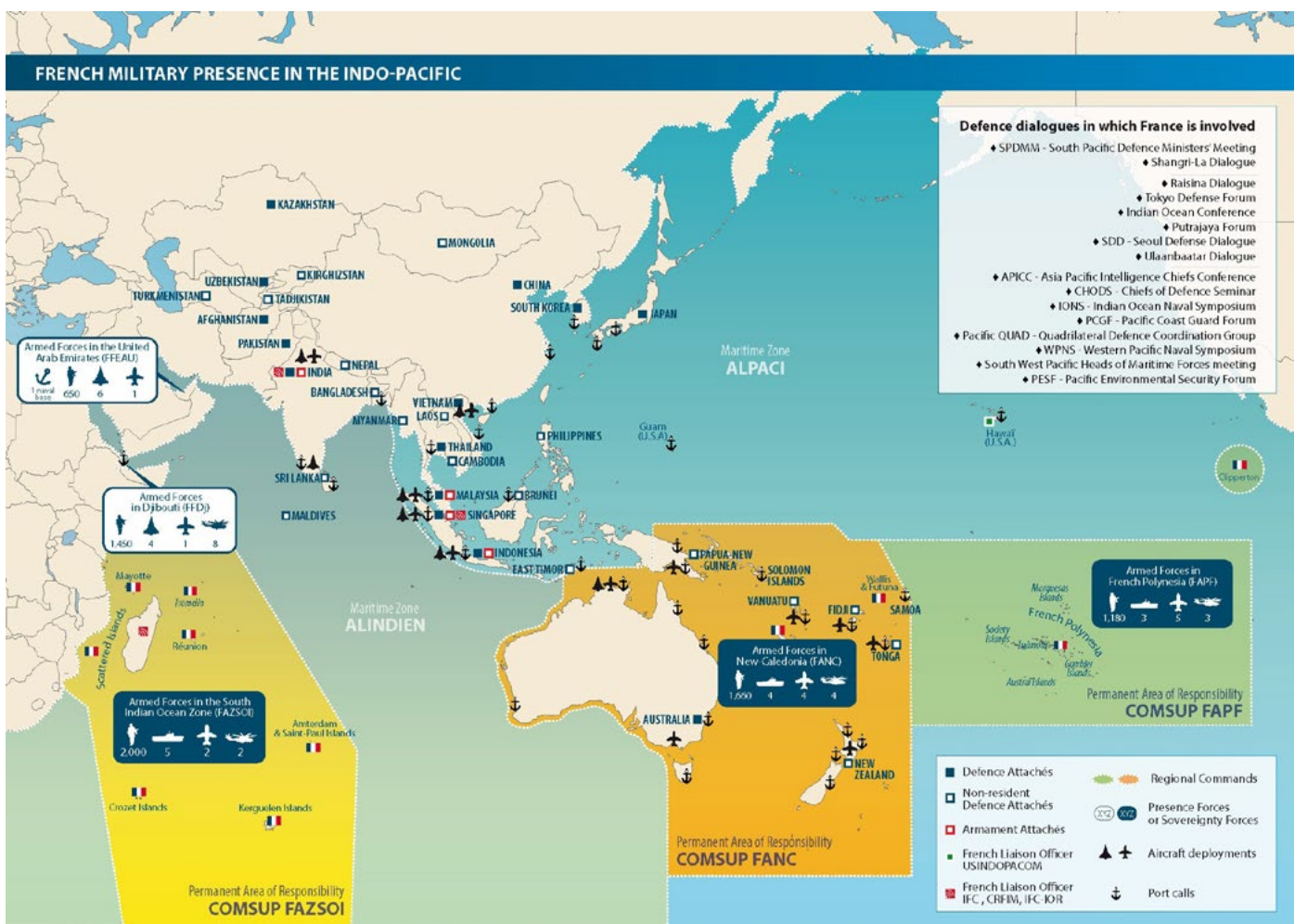
Prepared for great-power competition. France has invested in capabilities to be present in what it terms the “new spaces of conflictuality” (*nouveaux espaces de conflictualité*), which feature prominently in its 2017 Strategic Review.¹²

France’s investments in capabilities and structures align, at their own level, with similar moves made by the United States, particularly in the domains of defense innovation, space, and cyber. France’s investments reflect the vision of allies put forward in the US National Defense Strategy of 2018, which seeks partners who can effectively share the burden, maintain interoperability with the United States, and be prepared for great-power and nontraditional sources of conflict.

Innovation: Correctly identifying the role innovation plays in a sovereign defense industrial base, the French Ministry of the Armed Forces created a Defense Innovation Agency in 2018. The agency aims to break down silos by gathering all those working on innovation in a central place, creating a “one-stop

shop” for innovative companies to interface with the ministry. It is particularly tasked with identifying connections between civilian and defense research, creating bridges between long military-procurement processes and fast-paced startup innovation. In that respect, the choice of an artificial-intelligence (AI) scientist hailing from the private sector, Emmanuel Chiva, reflects a desire to open up defense innovation. To further the cultural change, the *Instruction Ministérielle de l’Innovation de Défense*, published in May 2020, aims to transform working methods and places a greater focus on “open” innovation and short development cycles.

The attention paid to innovation is also reflected in budgetary commitments rising by 25 percent between 2014–2019 and 2019–2025 to reach one billion euros per year in 2022. This is underpinned by the creation of two equity funds: Definvest (one hundred million euros) is tasked, alongside private-sector investors, with assisting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) deemed strategic for the military supply chain. Definnov



To optimize its presence in the vast Indo-Pacific area, France relies on joint regional commands. This map details the areas of responsibility. Source: French Ministry for the Armed Forces/DGRIS (Mariam Pontoni and Lucie Lelyon)

12 Ibid.

(two hundred million euros), launched in 2020, supports small and intermediate companies involved in dual innovation.

Created in 2019, the DROID (*Document de Référence pour l’Orientation de l’Innovation de Défense*) is a yearly exercise aimed at assessing the state of defense innovation and setting priorities for the coming year. For 2020, it identified hypersonic weapons, counter-unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), directed-energy weapons, sensors, and critical components as key areas on which to focus. Thinking even further ahead, the Ministry for the Armed Forces has tasked a group of science-fiction writers, called “Red Team,” to come up with scenarios about warfare in 2030–2060. The first ones should be unveiled at the November 2020 Defense Innovation Summit.

Space: Like the United States, France has for many years recognized the strategic importance of space, and the need to invest in capabilities and structures to support French sovereignty in this important domain. As a result, it has developed capabilities covering the full military spectrum. Since 2005, the French air force (or, rather, the French Air and Space Force) has operated GRAVES, an autonomous surveillance system tracking more than three thousand objects in low-Earth orbit, a type of capability only possessed by the United States, Russia, and China.

Yet, space has received renewed attention from French officials in recent years. At the political level, Paris has also been rather outspoken about aggressive uses of space, as illustrated by Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly calling out the hostile maneuvers of the Russian Olymp-Luch satellite around the Franco-Italian Athena-Fidus satellite (“Trying to listen to one’s neighbor is not only unfriendly. It’s called an act of espionage”¹³). This effort builds on the groundwork laid by decades of investment in civilian space technologies, seen as a domain of national sovereignty, which have notably led to the development of a national launch base in Guyana and the creation of an ecosystem around space and aeronautics in Toulouse.

As a sign of France’s attention to space, Parly unveiled a comprehensive Defence Space Strategy in July 2019, and led the way for the creation of a large Space Command based at the heart of the European space ecosystem in Toulouse.¹⁴ France then proceeded with an offer to host the NATO Center of Excellence for Space, aiming at creating an internationally recognized focal point for the space community of interest. France’s defense investment in space has been raised to 4.3 billion euros, up from 3.6 billion euros in the 2019–2025 military



French Minister for the Armed Forces Florence Parly presents the country’s new space defense strategy at Lyon Air Base 942, July 25, 2019. Source: Photo by the Ministry for the Armed Forces

programming law, to increase its ability to detect and attribute actions, and to enhance the protection and “active defense” of French space interests in line with international law.

The concept of “active defense” was defined in Parly’s 2019 Space Defence Strategy speech as “when a hostile act has been detected, characterized and attributed, to be able to respond in a adequate and proportionate manner, in conformity with the principles of international law.” To give it teeth, France is in the process of upgrading its ability to detect and attribute by bolstering its space situational-awareness (SSA) tools (modernizing GRAVES and developing instruments to track objects in medium and geostationary orbits) and developing and acquiring defensive capabilities, such as self-protection cameras and patroller nano-satellites. This is underpinned by an understanding that the response to threats should first be a diplomatic and legal one and, hence, efforts to develop norms for responsible behavior in space.

Cyberspace: Since cyber was established as a strategic domain in 2008, France has developed a mature conceptual architecture. The 2015 National Strategy for Digital Security is complemented by: the 2017 International Digital Strategy; the 2018 Cyberdefense Strategic Review, coordinated by the Secretariat General for National Defense and Security; as well as the 2019 Military Cyber Strategy, which even lays out elements of an offensive doctrine. France is one of the few US allies to have developed such a comprehensive intellectual framework. For Paris, clarifying that it has thought through both offensive and defensive doctrines, and making them public, is seen as important. This plays a role in deterring

13 John Leicester, Sylvie Corbet, and Aaron Mehta, “‘Espionage’: French Defense Head Charges Russia of Dangerous Games in Space,” *DefenseNews*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/09/07/esplonage-french-defense-head-charges-russia-of-dangerous-games-in-space/>.

14 “Space Defence Strategy,” French Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2019, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/574375/9839912/Space%20Defence%20Strategy%202019_France.pdf.

malicious actors, indicating France's abilities and willingness to act. Transparency is also seen as critical to ensuring that France's position is understood and predictable, so as to avoid unwanted escalation.

France has a distinct stance on public attribution. For France, attribution of attacks is seen as an essentially political and sovereign decision, within the remit only of the president. It does not imply that France refuses to publicly attribute cyberattacks but, rather, that it eschews doing so automatically, preferring to let the decision rest on political considerations rather than technical criteria. For Paris, this is also seen as a way of avoiding escalation and maintaining credibility, believing that being parsimonious with its condemnations gives them more weight. This has been a source of tension with allies, who perceive this posture as noncommittal and lacking in solidarity, emphasising that having a predictable response to attacks is an important element of trust in alliances. French authorities, in response, tend to point out examples of when they supported collective response, such as the first EU cyber sanctions passed in July 2020.¹⁵

At the organic level, the National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSSI), created in 2009, is the cross-departmental body tasked with both preventing and responding to cybersecurity incidents at a broader level. One of its key responsibilities entails accompanying key private and public players, notably critical infrastructure operators, to ensure that they are robust and resilient. It holds the authority to sanction them, though this is not the preferred approach. Given this role, ANSSI is at the heart of France's approach to fifth-generation (5G) wireless technology. In 2017, the Ministry of the Armed Forces created a Cyber Defence Command (COMCYBER), reporting directly to the Chief of the Defence Staff, to both secure ministerial networks and handle defense cyber capabilities and operations. Making the distinction clear between a COMCYBER handling military matters and a whole-of-government agency, which stays away from offensive considerations, was critical in building private-sector trust. The organization is now quite mature, and has generated interest among partners setting up their own agencies.

For France, mobilizing at the European and international levels is critical. As a result, France has been a strong driver of the EU's digital-sovereignty agenda, played a key role in NATO's 2016 cyberdefense pledge, and hosted the conference dedicated to that pledge in May 2018.¹⁶ In the meantime,

France initiated the 2018 Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace, signed by more than sixty countries and five hundred entities, including the private sector. This diplomatic effort is underpinned by an industrial strategy, resting on a center of excellence in Brittany, where the cyber command, research labs, and private firms are located. Exemplifying the importance of cyber defense, the 2019–2025 military programming law sets aside 1.6 billion euros to invest in cyber capabilities, including personnel.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING THE FRENCH STRATEGIC MINDSET AND ENGAGING WITH IT

France's strategic culture is defined by the country's history, geography, domestic political structure, and culture. The section below describes the strategic mindset that permeates the national security thinking in the country across the mainstream political spectrum. Of course, these issues evolve through debates, vary by personality, agency, and department, and do not comprehensively describe the French strategic mindset. However, the illustrative examples below are of particular relevance for US officials to understand who seek to engage Paris.

A global outlook. France has a global presence, military posture, and mindset. Many readers will be surprised to know that France shares its longest land border with Brazil and its longest maritime boundary with Australia. More than 1.5 million French citizens live in French territories in the Indo-Pacific area and one million in the Caribbean. Closer to home and in its approach at NATO, France is both a Mediterranean and an Atlantic country.

However, it is more than geography that underpins France's global perspectives. Its history as a colonial power and its self-perception as an important part of the international system for centuries ensure that France has a keen interest in challenges beyond its immediate horizon.

This global outlook is both an opportunity and a challenge in dealing with France. As the United States looks for allies able to take a strategic view and operate from the High North and the Baltics to the Middle East and the South China Sea, this makes France an ally of choice.

However, this also means that the relationship with France cannot be grasped solely through a European Union, NATO, or even European-affairs perspective, but requires cross-regional

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15 "EU Imposes the First Ever Sanctions Against Cyber-Attacks," European Council, press release, July 30, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/30/eu-imposes-the-first-ever-sanctions-against-cyber-attacks/>.

16 "Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Cyber Defence Pledge Conference (Ecole Militaire, Paris)," NATO, May 15, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_154462.htm.

FOCUS

FRANCE: PRESENT AND INVOLVED IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

For France, the Indo-Pacific is more than a catchy new concept or buzzword in the international security arena. For more than 1.6 million French citizens, it is home.

The region, which France defines as stretching from Djibouti to Polynesia, also sees a significant part of its trade flows, and comprises nine of the eleven million square kilometers of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

At the conceptual level, France's approach is now relatively mature. Building on Emmanuel Macron's 2018 Garden Island speech, which envisioned a trilateral France-Australia-India strategic dialogue, the Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, unveiled by Florence Parly in Singapore in 2019, is structured around four objectives.¹

"1. Defend and ensure the integrity of our sovereignty, the protection of our nationals, territories and EEZ.

2. Contribute to the security of regional environments through military and security cooperation.

3. Maintain a free and open access to the commons, in cooperation with our partners, in a context of global strategic competition and challenging military environments.

4. Assist in maintaining strategic stability and balances through a comprehensive and multilateral action."

France's military posture in the region is underpinned by three bases on French soil (FASZOI in Réunion, FANC in New Caledonia, and FAPF in French Polynesia) and two foreign military bases (FFEAU in the United Arab Emirates and FFDj in Djibouti), amounting to around seven thousand personnel deployed.

Beyond naval assets permanently deployed in the region, France regularly sends ships to the Indo-

Pacific. For instance, FREMM frigates were deployed to the South China Sea in 2016 and 2017, and a Mistral-class amphibious assault ship in 2017 and 2018. In 2019, the entire carrier group sailed to Singapore, with escort frigates continuing to the South China Sea. The air group Pégase, composed of three Rafale fighters and one A400M transport aircraft, also flew across Southeast Asia on its way back from Australia, where it participated in Pitch Black 2018.

French ships sail regularly through the South China Sea (on average two times a year) to uphold freedom of navigation and show opposition to unilateral measures aimed at changing the status quo there and elsewhere in the world. French deployments are independent, though France seeks to promote greater cooperation with its European partners in this contested area.

French assets make full use of what is allowed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), such as training or flying helicopters within another country's EEZ, whenever this presents an operational interest, and refuse to comply with illegal requests for authorization or notification—but, so far, have refrained from entering the twelve-nautical-mile zone (i.e., territorial waters). France's posture seeks to be balanced and avoid a confrontational attitude toward China.

Illustrating Paris' will to control the political narrative around its operations, it does not coordinate its transit with Washington. This is yet another example of France sharing roughly the same assessment as the United States, but acting in its own way. Arguably, this strengthens the message because it is seen as coming from an independent voice, rather than a US proxy.

As a result of the region's growing geopolitical importance, France has sought to invest in partnerships. Australia stands out, if only thanks to the \$35-billion submarine contract, which creates a long-

¹ "France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific," French Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2019, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/559608/9684004/file/France's%20Defence%20Strategy%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific%20-%202019.pdf/>.

lasting relationship (a “fifty-year wedding” according to French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian). The Attack-class submarines are expected to be delivered around 2030, and should remain in service for the next thirty years at least. France and Australia have also signed logistical agreements in recent years, which has paved the way for increased operational cooperation. France also enjoys close ties with India, bolstered by the sales of Rafale fighter jets and a joint commitment to maritime security in the Indian Ocean, and with Japan, with which it regularly organizes joint exercises, such as Exercise La Pérouse. In September 2020, France, India, and Australia held their first trilateral strategic dialogue at the level of permanent secretary among the foreign ministries.

Beside these major partnerships, France supports the development of its partners’ defense capacities in Eastern Africa, the Indian Ocean region, and the South Pacific. It also contributes to increasing its Southeast Asian partners’ strategic autonomy, especially concerning the surveillance and control of their maritime areas. For instance, France contributed to the creation of the Malaysian submarine force back in the 2000s, and will soon deploy a maritime security expert to Jakarta. The Noumea-based multilateral exercise Croix du Sud (Southern Cross) is a major humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) gathering for Pacific island countries.

In addition to bilateral partnerships, France has increased its engagement with multilateral organizations and forums. French ministers of defense have, for instance, participated in every Shangri-La Dialogue since 2014. France is a member of the South Pacific Defense Ministers’ Meeting, and applied to

obtain an observer status to the ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus). It will chair the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium, of which it is the sole European member, from 2021 to 2023.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France actively participates in nonproliferation initiatives across the whole region. It implements a coordinated maritime security policy, aimed at enhancing maritime domain awareness. It supports its partners’ maritime security agencies, and deploys liaison officers to the information-fusion centers in Madagascar, Seychelles, India, and Singapore.

Furthermore, it has been a leading partner in environmental security matters. France has built a long-standing HADR cooperation in the South Pacific within the FRANZ agreement framework between France, Australia, and New Zealand. It also launched innovative research programs aimed at anticipating future risks. For example, the Ministry of Armed Forces-backed “Kivi Kuaka” project tests whether birds could serve as early sentinels for imminent natural catastrophes in the South Pacific. France has also conducted joint research with Australia to identify climate-change-induced security threats in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and to determine ways to adapt their armed forces to address these new challenges.

France encourages its European partners to contribute to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. It supports European initiatives such as the European Union External Action Service’s (EEAS’) “Enhancing Security in and with Asia” three-year program, and seeks to coordinate with its partners whenever possible.

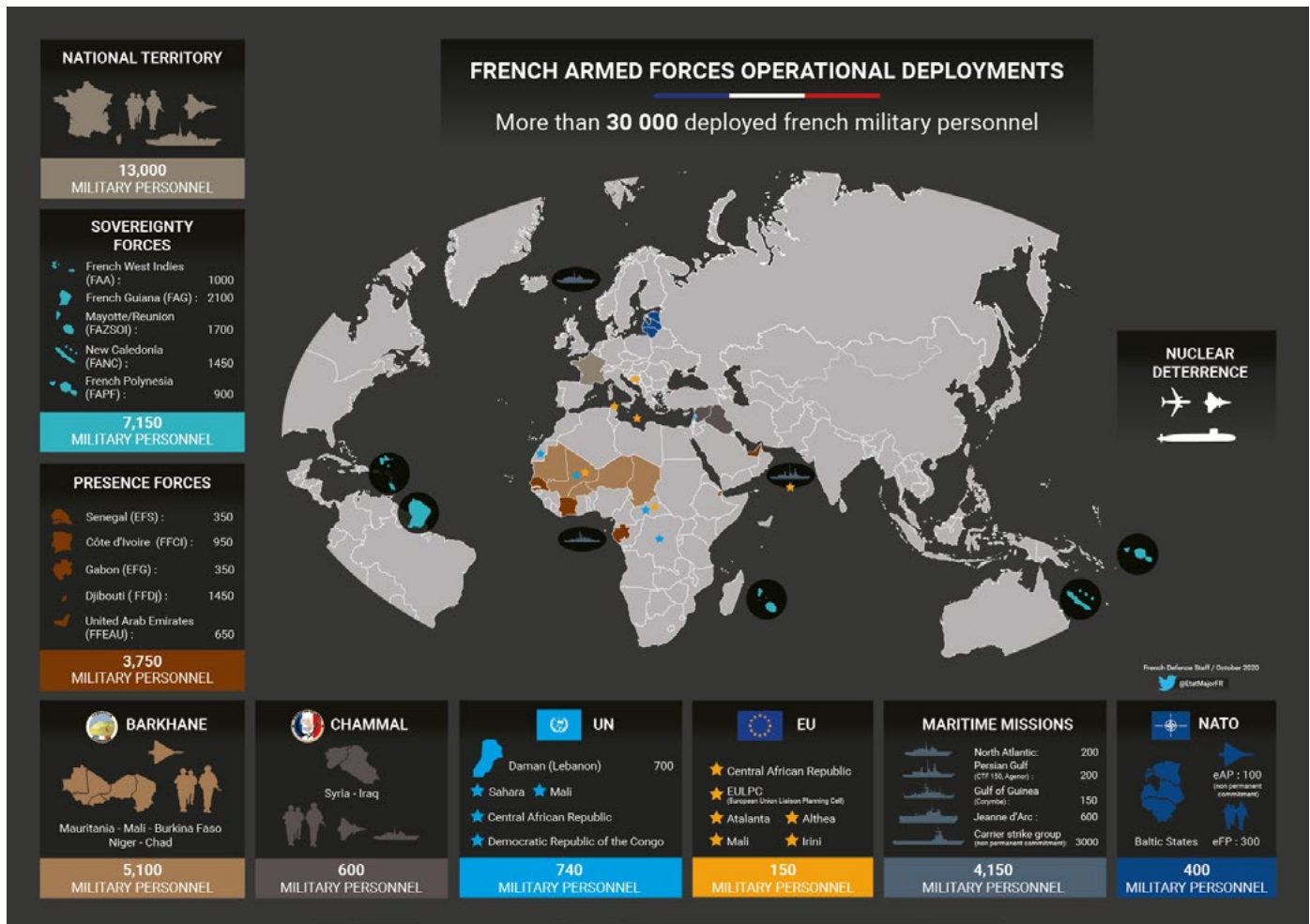
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coordination (notably across the Combatant Commands (COCOM) for the Pentagon). Moreover, as a result of its global outlook, France is happy to switch between frameworks, depending on the nature of the threat. It will, for instance, treat NATO as simply one of the vehicles through which it can act, rather than the capstone of its defense policy. This often contrasts with US officials—particularly those responsible for Europe—who instinctively look to put European issues into a NATO context.

“A bias toward action.” France’s willingness and ability to act swiftly to defend its interests are both underpinned and reinforced by institutional arrangements that facilitate rapid

decision-making. By emphasizing verticality and centralization, the French system favors reactivity, though sometimes at the expense of bandwidth.

Constitutionally, foreign policy and defense are the purview of the French president—the “*domaine réservé*”—although the prime minister is tasked with implementing government policy. The president chairs the security and national defense councils, usually held every Wednesday, decides upon the use of military forces and, ultimately, is solely responsible for nuclear strikes. As the “chief of the armies” (*chef des armées*), the president has a direct link to the military forces, which, unlike in the US system, runs through the chief of the defense



Map of French armed forces operational deployments. Source: French Ministry for the Armed Forces/EMACOM

staff (*chef d'état major des armées*), under political oversight by the minister of defense.

Reactivity is facilitated by constitutional arrangements. Although declaring war necessitates parliamentary approval, committing military forces abroad only requires the president to inform the parliament in the following three days. The continuation of the military intervention beyond four months must then be authorized by parliament.

At the military level, this culture of readiness is maybe best exemplified by the *Guépard* (Cheetah) Quick Reaction Force, able to project seven hundred airborne troops in two waves, the first in twelve hours and the second in forty-eight.

Recognizing the need for greater reactivity at the European level, notably after the experience of intervening in Mali in 2013, France has tried to export this strategic culture. This has notably taken the form of the European Intervention Initiative, launched in 2017 as a forum for experience sharing and horizon scanning among a select set of European partners to facilitate reactions to crisis. This has also

informed France's decision to contribute in a significant way to NATO's Readiness Initiative, providing 10 percent of the required capabilities.

Survival and nuclear independence. Two historical lessons are deeply ingrained in French strategic culture: 1940 and 1956. France's shocking fall to Nazi Germany in 1940 taught French elites that the worst is indeed possible. Although allies are important, they are not always sufficient. Ensuring survival can only rest, at the end of the day, on an independent nuclear deterrent. US opposition to the French-British-Israeli initiative to seize the Suez Canal in 1956 drove the point home: without independent capabilities, notably of a nuclear nature, France would always run the risk of being sidelined by the new great powers of the twentieth century.

The centrality of an independent nuclear deterrence has informed much of France's strategic thinking, creating an influential school of experts within the strategic affairs community. For Paris, this also entailed ring fencing the budgetary commitment to maintain nuclear capabilities, both in their airborne and seaborne components. This is embodied

in high-level exercises, called “Poker,” that, four times a year, test the ability of long-distance nuclear air raids to penetrate enemy defense.

France has tried to balance the independence of its nuclear deterrence with its understanding of alliance commitments. This duality plays out at NATO, where France is the only ally to opt out of NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group, while also acting at the forefront of efforts to revive the Alliance’s nuclear culture. The 1974 Ottawa Declaration, whereby NATO was an important step in recognizing France’s nuclear contributions to the Alliance.¹⁷ The closest France has come to nuclear sharing is the 1998 Chequers Declaration with the United Kingdom, whereby both parties “do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either Party could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened.”¹⁸ More timidly, the 2019 Aachen Treaty with Germany and President Macron’s 2020 nuclear deterrence speech have opened the door to greater European integration, though it can only come with great caution. French understanding of the centrality of nuclear weapons to political independence also underpins Paris’ effort to ensure that a European voice is heard in the post-Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) arms-control discussions.

Controlling the political narrative. Given the importance of sovereignty as an element of survival, the constitutional responsibilities of the president, and its historical experiences, France gives careful consideration to the political narrative surrounding Alliance commitments. This should not be confused with a reluctance to enter into such commitments. France has, after all, been a reliable ally when it mattered. It does, however, mean that France will pay specific attention to ensuring that it both subscribes to and controls the political narrative, as well as prevent military actions from carrying away the diplomatic framing.

A good example of this appears in the debates about the enablement of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe’s (SACEUR’s) Area of Responsibility (AoR), with France pushing back against greater delegations of authority. This is rooted in a deep desire to maintain political control of any potentially escalatory process, rather than a deep-seated distrust of NATO. The latest instance can be found in the launch of the European maritime operation in the Persian Gulf (Agenor). While France and other European countries rallied behind the goal of securing vital trade routes and sending a strong message to Iran, they did not wish to be associated with the US administration’s strategy of “maximum pressure.”



Rafale fighter jets and Airbus A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport from the French Strategic Air Forces, in charge of nuclear deterrence.
Source: J-L Brunet/Armée de l’air

This also leads France to try to avoid being seen as a junior partner. French officials are keen to point out that France did not choose, as Britain did, to be the “Athenians of the Romans.”¹⁹ Tellingly, the counterterrorist efforts of the 2010s are often presented in a symmetrical way to suggest an equal division of labor: in the Levant, the United States is the leading partner and France the supporting partner; in Africa, France is the leading partner and the United States the supporting partner.

Any administration wishing to advance a proposal in a multilateral organization where France is present, or to ask France to join the bandwagon, would do best to anticipate that aspect. Although the French are not above “bureaucratic guerrilla” and dilatory tactics, deep scrutiny of the arrangements for ensuring political control should not be interpreted as hostility toward the proposal itself. Previewing those arrangements, as well as the political narrative, with French colleagues would be advisable to help smooth the proposal’s reception.

The ability to say “non.” “what I like about [France] is that [it] has no problem in being the problem.”²⁰ France’s ability to forcefully voice its disagreement and hold under pressure has been regularly demonstrated, and has often been pointed out in interviews with the authors.

17 “The European members [of the Alliance...] two of whom possess nuclear forces capable of playing a deterrent role of their own contributing to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance.” See “Declaration on Atlantic Relations,” NATO, June 19, 1974, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26901.htm.

18 “Conférence de Presse Conjointe de MM. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, et John Major, Premier Ministre du Royaume Uni,” République Française, October 30, 1995, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/178978-conference-de-presse-conjointe-de-mm-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-re>.

19 Interview with former senior French official.

20 Interview with an Eastern European official.

This is a deeply ingrained attitude. It partly stems from the fact that France takes both its commitments and its worldview seriously, and is therefore often unwilling to bend either. It also allows France to stand out and be treated as a country that matters. Some would argue that it is also rooted in French domestic political culture, one marked more by flashy duels than German-style compromise and consensus.

Beyond cultural explanations, France's stern attitude is also the result of its resources, either in the form of political influence or legal prerogatives, such as its UN Security Council veto. Moreover, French diplomats are often galvanized by discreet expressions of support from other countries—which, though in agreement, are happy to let France be on the front lines.

That ability is a powerful negotiating tool, both in its use and

in the credibility it brings to French negotiators. Yet, it is not without downsides, creating tensions and ill will that may be hard to dissipate. France's reputation at NATO is a case in point. French officials underline that there is a growing realization of France's reputation as difficult to handle and an effort to be more flexible, though it is not yet always perceived by their counterparts.

As a result, diplomatic confrontation with France is a strategy that is relatively costly in political capital. That is not to say pressure and diplomatic isolation cannot yield results; they do. But, the threshold may be higher with France than with other partners. Any administration wishing to engage France would do well to preview proposals with French partners. Bringing Paris on board early could turn out to be a longer, but more cost-efficient, way of engaging Paris.

3 ELEVATING THE CONVERSATION AND DISPELLING THE GREAT MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A deeper bilateral relationship cannot rest solely on better technical cooperation; it must also address the underlying political divergences generated, in part, by France's particular strategic culture described above. At the moment, four main issues mar the conversation, often to the detriment of both countries.

3.1 RUSSIA

Russia occupies a particular place in French history and diplomacy. France and Russia were allies in major conflicts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a strand of Russophilia courses through certain French political and business circles. Yet, Macron's recent outreach to Russia—which has been a source of major misunderstanding between the United States and Paris—is born of a different aim than traditional French diplomacy, and falls more in line with Macron's own strategy of disruption.

France's outreach to Russia undertaken during the summer of 2019 also resulted in misunderstandings in many European capitals. After Emmanuel Macron's meeting with Vladimir Putin in Bregançon, ties were reopened, notably by having the CCQS (*Conseil de Coopération sur les Questions de Sécurité*, a format comprising defense and foreign affairs ministers) reconvene and by appointing Pierre Vimont as special envoy for Russia.

This was met with much skepticism in Washington. Some commentators disapproved of any overture to Russia, and maintained that only a hawkish stance would produce results. Others worried about the divisive potential of such an initiative for NATO and transatlantic relations. A third group pointed to failed instances of “resets” with Russia and argued that there was little to be gained, fearing that France would make concessions—especially with regard to Ukraine—while obtaining nothing in return.

The Franco-US rift was worsened by the domestic politics in both countries. President Macron's desire to move rapidly, and to favor visible announcements, meant that much was initially left to interpretation by allies and partners. Macron's outreach also suffered from poor timing with his US allies, who were in the midst of highly partisan and emotional impeachment hearings surrounding Russia's role in US domestic politics. These two trends opened the door to extensive, worried,

and sometimes stereotypical US readings of otherwise unconnected French positions, mistakenly interpreting Paris' stance on the EU enlargement to the Balkans as a concession to Moscow.

Efforts by French officials to better explain their position, to both the United States and European partners, the relatively balanced outcome of the December 2019 Normandy meeting, the Franco-German lead on EU sanctions following Alexei Navalny's August 2020 poisoning, and a degree of transparency by Paris—notably, Florence Parly being honest about limited progress—as well as better US engagement with France, have somewhat helped dispel that misunderstanding.

Macron's Russia strategy is not a form of neo-Gaullism trying to place France in an equilibrium position between Moscow and Washington. It does not renege on France's commitments, such as participation in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence. The 2017 Strategic Review is clear that the answer to “the affirmation of Russian power” calls for “firmness which must also be accompanied by dialogue.”²¹ Macron's initiative, rather, is a recognition that a diplomatic effort to engage Russia is necessary, as the current situation does not appear to be viable in the long run. If anything, it hopes that opening channels to Moscow might lessen the regime's siege mentality and prevent it from forming too tight a bond with Beijing. In the same way that Macron has sought to shake up NATO by labeling it “brain dead,” and Europe through his visionary speeches and proposals, his outreach to Russia is designed to uproot a status quo that he believes is failing to serve French and European interests.

Policy disagreements over Russia between the United States and France are not, in and of themselves, an issue. Indeed, Macron's strategy is also debated and challenged in France. Rather, transatlantic relations were hurt by both sides talking past each other and resorting to stereotypes or suspicions, which still linger today.

Paris would be well advised to communicate its intentions and report its progress, or lack thereof, beyond what it would deem necessary, considering the sensitivity of the issue in the US strategic debate. Washington would do well to look at French policy for what it is, rather than resort to existing labelling.

21 “Revue Stratégique de Défense et de Sécurité National 2017,” République Française, 2017, paragraph 117, translation by authors, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/514684/8664656/file/2017-RS-def1018.pdf>.

3.2 CHINA AND SOVEREIGNTY

While the strategic debate in Paris on China is less frenzied than in Washington, there is a solid grasp that managing Beijing will be one of the defining features of the rest of the twenty-first century. If anything, the discussion surrounding 5G and China's attitude during the COVID-19 pandemic have been clear wake-up calls.

However, Washington would do well not to mistake the nuances in France's position for hesitations about its strategic orientations and commitment. The issue of discussing China within the NATO framework stands as a good example. Paris looked favorably on what it felt was a useful way to raise awareness among Europeans about the challenges posed by China. However, it soon worried that making NATO the main vehicle for such a discussion would lead to militarizing the nature of the contest, and viewing it with a limited lens insufficient to addressing the economic, diplomatic, and technological challenges posed by China.

This speaks to the heart of the debate around strategic autonomy. France's vision of sovereignty—both for itself and for Europe—does not mean severing ties with the United States or trying to establish itself in a median position, where it would act as a balance between Washington and Beijing. At the end of the day, Paris shares most—if not all—of Washington's concerns, from the South China Sea to trade and technology.²² Most importantly, Paris understands that, at a fundamental level, its way of life, and its conception of the political space and individual freedoms, means that it is part of the same “side” as the United States. It does not sit in an equidistant position between Washington and Beijing, but leans toward the former. However, France's approach is rooted in both its desire to preserve its sovereignty—and that of Europe—and to uphold the multilateral order.

France is rather unwilling to be the junior partner in a new Cold War, wrapped in the language of values or not, or to have Europe become a battlefield for US and Chinese influence. Moreover, France will bristle at US attempts to curtail Europe's sovereignty or undermine multilateral institutions, just as it will resist China's attempts to do so. A case in point here is France's opposition to US extraterritorial sanctions against Europe to force its hand on policy issues like Nord Stream 2 or the imposition of snapback sanctions regarding the JCPOA. For US policymakers, then, European sovereignty is a double-edged sword requiring clear strategic priorities. A sovereign Europe would be better able resist non-military tools of influence and coercion by the United States' autocratic rivals, which serve as a key source

of concern for US policymakers. But, sovereignty would also better enable Europe to chart its own course on matters of trade, technology, or diplomacy where US and European interests may diverge.

A constructive US approach to engage France on a common agenda regarding China would do best to acknowledge that France is anchored to the United States at a fundamental level—that, when it matters, it will be there—thereby affording the confidence to give Paris, or Brussels, space to develop an independent approach. It may sometimes be misaligned, but, overall, more forceful and complementary. More concretely, a US approach would prioritize cooperation around China's violations of international norms and rules in security, technology, and trade. The United States will find much more enthusiasm in France for multilateral engagement on China issues through the European Union than through NATO, outside of pure military issues.

At the end of the day, as it engages France, the United States needs to clarify its strategic priorities: is this about the existing hegemon rallying its allies to arrest the rise of a rival, or is this about defending a rules-based international order? The latter is much more likely to secure France's cooperation than the former—but it is more demanding.

3.3 BURDEN SHARING AND THE ROLE OF NATO

US officials overwhelmingly look to NATO as the premier forum for engaging European allies multilaterally, and judge commitments by allies to NATO accordingly. NATO is a US-dominated organization, and the preferred US venue for convening its European allies. As a result, US policymakers from both political parties seek to put as many issues as possible in the NATO basket.

France sees things differently. The return to the integrated command in 2009 and SACT's position going to a French officer helped strengthen the NATO culture in the French system. However, for France, NATO is a collective-defense organization and should remain as such, with non-core defense issues better addressed in other forums, particularly the EU. As a result of these differences, NATO is often a theater of battle between the United States and France, where small, practical disputes become magnified by philosophical differences. The divergent French-American approach to burden sharing is one such example.

The heart of the misunderstanding lies with different ways of tallying burden-sharing contributions. The French like to view themselves as reliable allies and supportive security partners.

22 Clément Beaune, *Europe after Covid*, *Atlantic Council*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/feature/europe-after-covid/>.

French officials tend to be aware of France's uncooperative reputation, especially within NATO, but generally brush it aside by pointing out that France always answers the call on matters of import.

French officials often illustrate France's commitment to the Alliance by showcasing its participation in reassurances measures such as the eFP or Baltic air policing. Paris genuinely believes these to be outstanding efforts. US and other NATO officials acknowledge those contributions, but tend to consider them a baseline expectation from NATO's third-largest military, rather than a demonstration of exceptional commitment. As a sign of transatlantic goodwill, Paris also emphasizes its important contribution to the US-inspired NATO Readiness Initiative, providing 10 percent of the capabilities.

In response, French officials contextualize their burden-sharing contributions beyond NATO to extensive deployments in Africa (where France spearheads counterterrorism efforts) or in the Levant (e.g., regular deployments of the French carrier group or CAESAR cannons preparing the assault on the last ISIS stronghold), arguing that these are important and concrete contributions to collective security.

In other words, France will emphasize how much it is contributing to NATO operations given its other existing combat commitments around the world, while NATO and US officials will understand the same contribution to be a bare minimum, given France's overall capabilities. To be fair, the same debate sometimes flares up, *mutatis mutandis*, about France's contribution to EU operations and missions.

This misunderstanding has deep roots, and is unlikely to disappear by itself. France does not view its defense solely, or even primarily, through NATO (or, for that matter, the EU). It has a single set of forces that would undoubtedly be massively put at NATO's disposal in times of war, but is not primarily used for NATO purposes in peacetime. As a result, it tallies its contribution in a holistic manner.

Any administration seeking to increase France's participation in NATO operations and structures by challenging France will meet limited success. Paris is unlikely to substantially increase its military contribution to operations or structures as long as other commitments in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia remain. Insisting that it do so will only generate frustration on both sides, without achieving much.

Bolstering the more constructive and NATO-friendly elements of the French system, rather, requires a more conciliatory tone and a recognition of France's overall contribution. Since the relationship with France is often handled by NATO or Europe-centric entities, while French efforts are spread across the COCOMS, building a global picture would be a good starting point. France's command of NATO's Allied



Source: Mike Peters. Editorial Cartoon used with the permission of Grimmy, Inc. and the Cartoonist Group. All rights reserved.

Command Transformation in Virginia can play an important role as a bridge between NATO and France. In particular, the presence in the United States of a French 4 star general at a NATO command offers the opportunity to deepen bilateral French-US and broader Alliance efforts to embrace emerging technologies in the military domain.

In return for a more understanding appreciation of France's contribution to burden sharing, a future administration could ask for greater French political and strategic involvement with NATO.

This approach would mean shifting from implicitly asking France to demonstrate its commitment to the Alliance through increased military participation—something it cannot do, given its existing deployments and combat missions—and start asking it to do so through genuine political and strategic engagement.

A good place to start would be NATO's involvement in Iraq. Given its existing operational commitments, Paris is unlikely to be able to field a significant military contribution. However, it could play a constructive role on the issue, considering the importance given to counterterrorism in its strategic review. To succeed, this would need to be accompanied by US assurances about its presence and strategy in the region, so that it is construed as an exercise in burden sharing, rather than burden shifting. If anything, it is a constructive way of elevating the burden sharing from arithmetic to politics and strategy.

3.4 EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND TRANSATLANTIC TIES

The largest friction points between France and the United States arise out of France's agenda for European strategic autonomy, notably laid out in Emmanuel Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech,

and embodied, for instance, in Paris' support for the European Defence Fund or the creation of Agenor, an independent maritime mission in the Arab-Persian Gulf.

Interestingly enough, this agenda has been a friction point with both the US administration—notably on the occasion of President Trump's November 2018 visit to Paris—and the more traditional foreign policy establishment. This has led to fairly tense exchanges, with the US administration viewing France as the architect of the “poisons pills” in the European Defence Fund, though the letters exchanged between Florence Parly and Jim Mattis help somewhat dampen the tensions.

In Washington, criticism of Paris tends to fall into three broad categories. On one end of the spectrum are those who support anything that generates European capabilities, but fear they are misguided and will produce more paperwork

than actual capabilities. Often echoing debates from the 1990s, others worry about a security decoupling, fearing not so much the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or the European Defence Fund (EDF) as such, but viewing them as driving a wedge in transatlantic relations. Finally, industrial concerns, either in the form of market access or research and development (R&D) divergences, loom large, notably in the US administration's rhetoric. Washington also responds to complaints from numerous European allies, who also are suspicious of Paris' agenda and are eager to strengthen defense industrial cooperation with US industry.

Semantics have helped deepen the mistrust on that issue. France's rhetoric, often designed for domestic or European audiences, aims for grand conceptual constructs, often leaving room for US interpretation. The wording of “strategic autonomy” itself conveyed overtones of Cold War Gaullism, while it instead meant the ability to act by its own means

FOCUS

THE EUROPEAN INTERVENTION INITIATIVE (EI2)

Announced in Macron's September 2017 Sorbonne speech, and launched by defense ministers in June 2018, the European Intervention Initiative aims to bring the “strategic culture” of Europeans closer together.

It is not a standing force, with no earmarked troops and no institutional structure besides a small, mostly double-hatted secretariat. It is tied neither to the European Union nor NATO, though it indirectly supports both. It is more akin to a club whose participants meet to exchange threat assessments and foresight, plan together, facilitate support to operations, and share lessons learned.

In practice, participants jointly set up recurring expert-level workshops on a given topic, ranging from the Sahel and terrorism to the Baltic, and from disaster relief operations in the Caribbean Sea to Indian Ocean security. Twice a year, they report to the chiefs of defense assembled in the Military European Strategic Talks. Policy directors then convene yearly to prepare the annual ministerial meeting, which provides political guidance.

EI2 was the product of longer trends meeting the newly elected Macron's agenda to energize Europe. Throughout 2016, the French Ministry of Armed Forces conducted an in-depth study assessing how best to mobilize Europeans. It drew on experiences, such as France's invocation of Article 42.7 TEU, the EU “mutual defense clause” following the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, as well as the 2013 intervention in Mali.¹ It notably found that, despite the existence of “able and willing” European forces, differences in threat perceptions and strategic culture delayed joint responses to crises by requiring extensive consultations. The initiative was designed to allow those countries to share intelligence and expertise, plan together, and be more prepared when the next crisis hits.

The initiative now gathers thirteen participants: the nine original members (France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, and Estonia) have been joined by Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

¹ “Mutual Defence Clause,” EUR-Lex, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/mutual_defence.html.

should that be necessary. Strong reactions from the United States, such as the “poison pill” letter—as well as attempts to influence the EDF and PESCO negotiations, which were perceived in Paris as meddling in internal EU affairs—have created a backlash in France.²³

France’s vision for Europe is rooted in its domestic understanding of strategic autonomy as the threefold ability to assess a situation, decide, and act within one’s own means. This entails having the capabilities, from intelligence to strike fighters, as well as the political will and culture. France partly sees this as a reaction to US demands—Democratic and Republican presidents alike have lashed out at inadequate European burden sharing—and US actions, from the failure to intervene in Syria in 2013 to the Trump administration questioning NATO Article 5. Yet, France is also motivated to enhance internal European burden sharing, which is often a source of great frustration for French officials. Realizing that it cannot, alone, sustain the current level of intervention or invest in the required high capabilities, it is seeking greater involvement from other Europeans.

Moreover, France’s current approach, perhaps unlike its tack in the early 2000s, is rather pragmatic and non-institutional. The focus is less on conceptual constructs—such as the Helsinki Headline Goal—and more on building industrial or operational cooperation.²⁴ It focuses less on reinforcing the EU and more on using whatever framework works best, as illustrated by the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), an informal club aimed at bringing the strategic culture of Europeans closer.

Defense industrial interests play an important part in France’s agenda for strategic autonomy for three reasons. First, in line with the focus on concrete cooperation, it is seen as an easier starting point than operations or conceptual discussions. Second, it stems from an understanding that, at least to some degree, political freedom is rooted in having full control over the technology used, and being able to deploy or export it without third-party restrictions. Third, industrial cooperation is seen as an important element of the long-term political sustainability of the European defense effort. Filling European capability gaps (such as strategic airlift) and investing in high-end technologies (such as hypervelocity) require years of rising defense budgets. Yet, especially as the memories of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and terror attacks in Europe recede, European countries are unlikely to sustain the required level of budgetary commitment, unless they can show domestic political benefits in the form of jobs and technologies.

In a way, this is a good example of an issue where France acts in a manner that is broadly aligned with US interests (investing in its defense capabilities and inciting others to do so) but in a different way than the United States sought (partly through promoting European industry).

There is now a willingness, on both sides, to resolve an issue that is increasingly seen as dragging on for far too long. A path forward can be discerned by focusing less on the issue of market access, which is not directly impacted by European initiatives, and finding limited, but promising, areas of cooperation and shaping an architecture of burden sharing.

23 Ellen M. Lord and Andrea L. Thompson, “Letter to Her Excellency Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice-President of the European Commission,” May 1, 2019, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/1073-19-5-1-02-letter-to-hrvp-moghe/6cdebd319d226b532785/optimized/full.pdf>.

24 In 1999, EU member states set an ambitious target of being able to deploy sixty thousand troops within sixty days by 2003.

4 THE WAY AHEAD

4.1 FRANCE: A MODEL ALLY FOR MAJOR-POWER COMPETITION?

America needs allies, but what kind?

US alliances are a subject of vivid debate. President Trump has done more than any other official in recent years to shake up the debate about the United States' place in the world and its obligations to its allies, and vice versa. Ironically enough, he has done so at precisely the moment that China's rise and the COVID-19 pandemic have forced renewed thinking about the kinds of international relationships the United States needs.

Democrats are in the midst of their own debate about foreign policy. Centrist voices around Democratic nominee Joe Biden call for a reaffirmation and renewal of US alliances and partnerships, and a more assertive line against

autocracies. More progressive voices have shaped party thinking toward a disavowal of “forever wars,” reduced reliance on military tools in favor of enhanced diplomacy, and a larger focus on climate change and global health and development. Still other voices, such as Jeremy Shapiro of the European Council on Foreign Relations, chastise the foreign policy establishment in both political parties for seeking to preserve as much as possible with existing alliance structures, even in the midst of massive change to the strategic environment.²⁵

Generally speaking, both parties want greater burden sharing from allies and fewer sustained US military engagements in the Middle East, and see China as a major competitor. These three trends will likely drive US foreign policy in the coming years, and should shape the debate about the kinds of allies the United States needs accordingly.



Almost 200 U.S. soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen assigned to units in Europe and the 1st Infantry Division based at Fort Riley, Kansas, march from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde during a July 12 rehearsal for the military parade on Bastille Day to be held in Paris, July 14, 2017. Source: Navy photo by Chief Petty Officer Michael McNabb

²⁵ Jeremy Shapiro, “The Future of US Global Leadership,” *Boston Review*, June 15, 2020, <http://bostonreview.net/war-security-politics/jeremy-shapiro-future-us-global-leadership>.

The United States will have different needs from its allies than in previous eras, in a major-power competition environment where strategic challenges are shaped by military and non-military tools of power. It will want allies investing in high-end capabilities to remain relevant in the game of great-power competition and fight at a deep level of interoperability in a high-intensity conflict. It will want allies able to manage their own environment and be security providers rather than consumers. And, it will want internally resilient allies capable of handling themselves against economic and informational interference in areas of conflict and competition below the threshold of direct military force.

***“Neither vassal nor enemy”:
Managing valuable, yet independent, allies***

France can serve as an insightful case study into the kind of allies that can be of value for the United States as it considers the state of its alliances.

Ironically enough, President Macron is also a leader looking to shake up and reform transatlantic and European structures, in response to both recent US policy and global developments. This presents an opportunity in the bilateral relationship for the two countries to serve as engines of meaningful reform in a way that achieves strategic convergence.

France brings to the table what the United States seeks in its allies—an ability to be a security provider in its own environment, with relatively high-end capabilities in the domains that will be critical for great-power competitions, sustained defense investment, a wide network of partnerships, a global outlook, and a strong vision.

Yet, unlocking that potential also requires handling an independent-minded, and sometimes difficult, ally. France does what the United States expects its allies to do, but does so in its own way—and sometimes opposes the US agenda and rallies other partners in that fight. Yet, what makes France valuable is not separable from what makes it a difficult ally. Paris invests in key defense capabilities and takes hard, sometimes irritating, political stances because of its focus on sovereignty. Improving cooperation with France is best served by an approach that gives space for similar-minded, but independent, partners.

US-France relations can inform thinking about managing independent-minded allies. The more capable allies that the United States seeks to face great-power competition will also end up being more independent allies—if only because acquiring greater capabilities requires some kind of domestic political purchase. Improving Franco-US relations is, therefore,

not just a bilateral endeavor, but an exercise in adapting the US alliance-management software, and in understanding how to best marshal the independent but aligned energies of countries that are neither vassals nor enemies.

Embracing—and Shaping—France’s Vision for a Geopolitical Europe

For the next administration, the strategic prize in US-France relations goes beyond bolstering bilateral ties to reorienting problem issues of US-EU relations, European defense, and strategic autonomy into an area of renewed transatlantic collaboration.

France, like many US allies, remains a middle power—albeit one with greater ambition, scale, and global reach than most US allies. After Brexit, France is the only EU country with nuclear capabilities and full-spectrum military forces. France has a vision for a geopolitical European Union, whose expansive authorities in trade, economics, and technology could make it a very valuable partner to the United States, and a complement to NATO in a major-power competition environment. France can play a key role in injecting its strategic culture, built around readiness and self-reliance, in the European Union. Alternatively, if a geopolitical Europe is constructed as against US power or as a means of balancing Europe between the United States and autocratic rivals, this would serve as a major setback to US diplomacy. The goal of transatlantic diplomacy in the next administration should be to ensure the former scenario, which should go a long way to preventing the latter.

Disputes about burden sharing, defense industry, transatlantic political decoupling and duplication of defense capabilities limit France’s ambitions for Europe.²⁶ Rather than challenge the idea of a sovereign Europe, the United States should engage France and other allies to shape the agenda in a way that advances US interests and produces a more sustainable and effective transatlantic alliance.

The United States and France alone cannot bring about stronger US-EU collaboration, of course. Much work remains to be done by Paris to bring other European allies along with its vision. But, it is difficult to imagine enhanced US-EU collaboration on major foreign policy issues during the next administration if the United States and France are working at cross purposes. Both parties may be forced to collaborate on this agenda, despite lingering reluctance and suspicion in the diplomatic establishments of both countries.

The United States will find that it is severely disadvantaged in a major-power competition environment without a strong,

26 Madeleine Albright, “Statement to the North Atlantic Council,” US Department of State, December 8, 1998, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/981208.html>.

sovereign European Union as a partner to a strong NATO. And, France will find more Atlanticist European countries hesitant to support its vision of Europe without greater US buy-in and support. What is today the greater irritant in bilateral relations should be the most-discussed and most promising element.

4.2 PRACTICAL STEPS TO DEEPEN DEFENSE AND SECURITY COOPERATION WITH FRANCE

Recommendation 1: Continue to deepen the operational relationship, notably in the Middle East and Africa.

The present Sahel model—of France providing most of the kinetic actions, European partners in supporting roles of increasing importance, and the United States supplying critical enabling support—is a valuable one. This is how an alliance should work. The United States is there for France when it needs it, and the United States can, and should, expect the same from France. As the United States seeks to limit its operational involvement in the Middle East, cooperation with allies like France, who are willing to take on the security burden, will be more critical.

The United States should take care not to undermine a successful burden-sharing operation that serves as a model for what US officials will want from Europe in the future. Neither France nor Europe is in a place where it can handle those operations alone, though either can take the lead on them. A US withdrawal that comes too early or in a poorly coordinated manner risks collapsing current European efforts to take on a greater share of the security burden. Counterterrorism operations will remain critical, given that ISIS has not been fully defeated and the situation is worsening in the Sahel.

Moreover, the operational gains of the last decade in the US-France military-to-military relationship are an achievement of value across the board.

- Sustain US support for operations in the Sahel and the Levant.
- Keep open channels about any posture changes, and, in case of changes, agree together on a timeline.
- Continue communicating the importance of those commitments to the general public.
- Draw on the experience to further inform the burden-sharing debate.
- Deepen the exchanges of lessons learned on counter-terrorist operations.

Recommendation 2: Develop the US-France defense and security relationship in space, cyber, and Indo-Pacific cooperation.

The French and US national defense strategies both emphasize the challenges of the return of great-power competition, and notably highlight the need to develop the high-end capabilities it requires.

France is one of the few US allies to have a high degree of conceptual and organic maturity in space and cyber, having produced its strategic syllabus and set up a solid institutional structure. It is increasing its investment in those domains and possesses capabilities, such as the detection of low-Earth-orbit objects, that few other US allies offer.

Moreover, France offers interesting avenues of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Relying on its permanent bases and its deepening relationship with India and Australia, Paris is investing heavily in a region that hosts 1.6 million of its citizens.

Space, cyber, and the Indo-Pacific region, therefore, stand out as three areas that match US priorities as laid out in the National Defense Strategy, and where France can bring the most added value. As counterterrorism cooperation recedes in political salience, these areas can form the next chapter of Franco-US defense relations.

France's effort to reform its defense innovation ecosystem and to commit significant financial resources, both through direct investment and private equity funds, could also form the basis of fruitful transatlantic conversations.

- Invest in bilateral cooperation in space, cyber, and the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Space:** Given France's abilities, deepen exchanges around space situational awareness and defensive space capabilities.
- **Cyber:** Greater exchanges at higher levels of classification, and a better dialogue around attributions, are the most promising places to start.
- **Indo-Pacific:** Deepen exchanges of information and common engagement with other partners.
- As a prerequisite for those exchanges, improve connectivity and solve classification issues. In the same way that the United States and France needed to find creative mechanisms to allow a non-Five Eyes ally like France to operate at the highest level of interoperability possible, the two countries will need to address hurdles in cyber, space, and strategic intelligence sharing to enable greater cooperation on shared challenges.

Recommendation 3: Create greater familiarity and opportunity to dispel misunderstandings.

- Organize structured strategic dialogue at the ministerial level, possibly in a 2+2 format with ministers of defense and foreign affairs, alongside a larger track-1.5 forum to foster a meaningful exchange and assessment on medium to long-term challenges. Involving lawmakers could help socialize the issues with a larger audience.
- Expand the bilateral intelligence relationship to the strategic level. In recent years, the Lafayette Committee and other exchanges bolstered information sharing between the United States and France at the tactical and operational levels. This could be complemented by the creation of a French-American Forum on Strategic Foresight, dedicated to sharing medium to long-term assessments from across departments and agencies of strategic challenges, starting with the evolution of Russia, China, and emerging technology.
- Continue deepening the exchanges of military and civilian personnel to build personnel's experiences and familiarity.
- Encourage the development of track-2 and track-1.5 exchanges such as the Rochambeau dialogue.
- Support the establishment of fellowships to give US policymakers a better understanding of French capabilities, institutions, and mindsets.

Recommendation 4: Elevate the conversation, and compartmentalize conflict and cooperation.

- On Russia, engage with French policy as an example of Macron's disruptive foreign policy strategy, rather than neo-Gaullism. The United States will continue to have serious differences with Russia and with France on Russia, but US officials need not see France's engagement as conducted in bad faith concerning other policy matters in the absence of policy decisions that undercut transatlantic solidarity in the EU or NATO. Moreover, the United States can, and should, compartmentalize the areas in which it has intense Franco-US bilateral or multilateral cooperation on Russia, such as Ukraine, from areas where it may not have an interest in working together.
- On China, recognize that France and the United States are pushing in a common direction, and that a bit of independence and divergences on non-core issues is not a crisis. The United States can maximize the

results of its engagement with France on China and the wider Indo-Pacific around an agenda of compelling adherence to rules and multilateral commitments, and less on a strategy for containing Beijing.

- On burden sharing and strategic autonomy, move beyond mathematical considerations to chart out an architecture of shared responsibility.
- For the United States, engage France to shape its European strategic-autonomy agenda, as a way of mobilizing other allies to make real capabilities investments. This can serve as one pillar of a cooperative agenda at NATO, and also bolster Europe's economic and political resistance to Russian and Chinese influence as well as hybrid threats. France could seek greater US engagement on this issue, as the road to Europe sometimes goes through Washington.
- As France's military contributions to NATO are unlikely to increase as long as its other operational commitments remain, move the burden-sharing debate to a more strategic level—for example, discussing leadership on NATO's mission in Iraq.
- Discuss an architecture of shared burden sharing and interventions, assessing where Americans and Europeans would take the lead in being security providers, but understand that collective security rests on a commitment by all. At the moment, such an architecture is emerging as the result of domestic politics and piecemeal decisions. It needs to be a topic of dialogue between allies.

Recommendation 5: "Neither Vassal nor Enemy": Adapt the method for engaging France.

- Do not see France exclusively through a NATO or a European-affairs lens, but keep a wider focus to take full advantage of the breadth of the relationship.
- Engage France early and meaningfully when conceiving new initiatives. Consideration and consultation will go a long way toward acceptance of US initiatives, but will not guarantee it.
- Consider giving France and French initiatives more leeway, especially with regard to political narratives, as long as they are working in the same general direction as the United States. This requires giving France a greater amount of trust, as well as recognizing the value that an independent, but supportive, voice can have.

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