

# The Franco-Italian Quirinale Treaty and the post-Merkel power balance: what is new for the European security and defence environment.

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The long negotiations between Italy and France, started in January 2018 with President Macron's visit to Italy's Paolo Gentiloni, have reached their final act.

After troubled years, the rise and fall of a Populist government in Italy, the pandemic, and various tensions between Italy and France, the Quirinale Treaty – named after the Italian Presidential palace in Rome – has been signed, signalling a new phase of bilateral cooperation between the two countries (Roberts, Leali, 2021).

In the press conference following the official signature ceremony, Italian prime minister Mario Draghi and French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged the agreement as the new cornerstone of Italo-French relations and a crucial step towards a more solid, more capable, European Union (EU). Given the major changes taking place in the sector, it does not come as a surprise that the future of the EU Security and Defence Policies is one of Treaty's the core topics.

What does the Quirinale Treaty mean for the EU's ability to provide security, and what should we expect from the new bilateral agreement?

Firstly, it is important to note that the official signature of the Treaty, which has been under negotiation for the last four years, comes at a time of political transition for Europe. Former-Chancellor Angela Merkel's departure from the scene undoubtedly marks the end of an era of stability and opens the way for new, uncharted possibilities.

The moment is propitious to form new power geometries within EU intergovernmental institutions, and many have bet that the respected and solidly pro-EU Italian Prime Minister Draghi will be the one to guide the Union towards a new power equilibrium (Amiel, 2021; Giuffrida, Connolly, Henley, 2021).

Secondly, the Treaty mirrors the Franco-German Treaty of Aachen of 2019 and lays the foundations for a new, strategic partnership with the potential to create durable and well-established coordination between the EU big three, with France being the linchpin (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2019).

Remarkably, the attention reserved for security and defence cooperation goes beyond the content of Article 2, specifically dedicated to it, and permeates Article 1, formally dedicated to foreign affairs, Article 3, generically dedicated to EU affairs, and Article 7, aimed at bolstering the cooperation in the space sector (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021).

In concrete terms, the underlying objective of the Treaty is that of achieving the highest possible level of coordination of positions in the forums where both countries are represented, be it within the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or other international bodies. As anticipated, great attention is reserved for the future of defence cooperation in Europe, for which Article 2 envisages stricter commitments in finding common ground to bring forward shared positions. It does not come as a surprise that from the outset of the Article, together with the usual formulas aimed at excluding incompatibility between EU and NATO objectives, the European Intervention Initiative (EII) – the French-led 'coalition of willing' targeting the establishment of shared land doctrine – is recalled (Zandee, Kruijver, 2019).

Cooperation is far from being confined to the political level. Periodical ministerial meetings are also set up where the industrial and capability dimensions receive just as much attention, and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is identified as the natural seat to carry out shared goals in these fields (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021).

The work plan that has been signed contextually to the Treaty allows us to identify, from a more pragmatic point of view, the direction of the new duo. Specific consideration is therein given to naval, missile, next-generation munitions, and 'security in space' capabilities so that one can expect that the next tranche of PESCO programmes, after the one approved in November 2021, will start including many projects in these fields.

Spatial security and economic considerations feature as one of the Treaty's leitmotivs – from the cooperation and coordination of the respective space commands and the mutual support for the Vega and Ariane launchers to the restatement of the principle of preference of European autochthonous products to foreign ones (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021).

The commitments concerning the space sector also offer insight into what the Treaty could mean for the EU's strategic and political direction in the security and defence sector. Article 2 Par. 5 of the Treaty states that "[...] [the parties] actively contribute to the development of a European strategic culture in this sector", a statement that is further contextualised by the attached work programme, which states in Article 2.1 that the parties will take steps to "identify future axes of capability development in the areas of space security and defence by signing a bilateral letter of intent" (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021).

Without wishing to give more importance than deserved to these elements, both articles imply the need to consolidate and affirm a shared strategic vision in Europe. Other parts of the text also allude to this need, and the press conference that followed the signing left no doubt as to the wide-ranging political objectives of the initiative. In the words of Prime Minister Draghi, pronounced with great gravitas at the end of his press conference speech:

*[...] the agreement, in addition to consolidating bilateral relations, aims to encourage and accelerate the process of European integration. I am thinking of [...] the constitution of a true European defence; we must provide the EU with instruments that are compatible with our ambitions and the expectations of our citizens. The treaty that we have signed today marks the beginning of this path. (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2021)*

Realistically speaking, calls to establish a true European defence have hardly ever led to concrete action. Nevertheless, Italy and France's alignment on a more ambitious common security and defence policy – which has always been one of President Macron's major themes – is a meaningful fact and should be seen in the context of the major initiatives that will come to fruition in the coming months: the approval of the Strategic Compass under the French presidency of the EU Council, for example, or the much-talked-about creation of a new 5000-strong rapid reaction force, complemented by naval and air assets (Emott, 2021; Bouemar, 2021). These are the initiatives where the critical mass of Italy and France is most likely to be crucial and to determine non negligible consequences in the power dynamics of the Council of the European Union and European Council (Leali, 2021).

Similarly, the intention to work together to identify the axes of development in the space and defence sectors suggests France and Italy's desire to drive the most sceptical Member States and the Union towards more ambitious goals. Indeed, it is no secret to anyone that the French government has always advocated an ambitious and exclusive approach in the most critical sectors of European integration, in contrast to the more inclusive vision put forward by Germany (Bouemar, 2021).

The now formalised Franco-Italian partnership could indeed tip the balance towards a more far-reaching and bold vision for EU security and defence policies. It now remains to be seen how the new German government, faced with such a scenario, will decide to change its position.

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