

NOVEMBER 2024



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Introduction

The post-World War II period marked the beginning of a pivotal chapter for European defence and security cooperation, particularly between France and West Germany. The establishment of the Western European Union (WEU) in 1954 and the signing of the Élysée Treaty in 1963 symbolised a shared commitment to European peace and integration. Despite differing strategic orientations, Franco-German cooperation has long served as the backbone of European unity, laying the groundwork for numerous defence initiatives. From joint military undertakings, like the Eurocorps, to contemporary frameworks, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), this Union has profoundly shaped European defence policy. However, as the geopolitical landscape has evolved, strategic divergences between France and Germany, rooted in their distinct defence cultures, have become increasingly apparent. These differences not only affect bilateral relations but also pose significant challenges to Europe's ability to act cohesively in security and defence matters, as evidenced by their varied responses to recent crises, including the conflict in Ukraine. This article aims to analyse the different strategic visions of France and Germany and provide insight into how these divergences impact Europe's ability to act cohesively in times of crisis. Firstly, this article provides a historical overview of Franco-German cooperation structures and mechanisms in the field of security and defence, providing an understanding of the trends and characteristics of such relationships. Secondly, the paper delves into the strategic cultures of both France and Germany. Ultimately, the paper examines the practical implications of profoundly different strategic approaches and showcases how Franco-German divergences hamper Europe's ability to act cohesively.

1. Forging Unity: The Evolution of Franco-German Cooperation

The post-World War II defence and security cooperation between France and Western Germany officially began with the establishment of the WEU in 1954, whose primary goal was to foster collective security and promote cooperation among European nations in defence matters (Krotz, 2015). Franco-German partnership within the WEU was part of their broader efforts to strengthen European cooperation in the defence and security areas. France and Western Germany committed to peace and cooperation as the foundation for European integration. The signing of the Élysée Treaty in 1963 was a landmark moment in this process, as it symbolised the reconciliation of France and West Germany, cementing a bilateral partnership intended to serve as the backbone of European unity. While this treaty was hailed as a symbol of Franco-German strategic alignment/cooperation, the two countries' differing defence strategies were already apparent (Schmidt, 1993).

Krotz argues that this treaty transformed Franco-German relations from ad hoc collaboration to structured and ongoing diplomatic efforts, setting a precedent for how both nations would coordinate on European and international affairs (Krotz, 2010). Even though the cooperation between the two countries served as the cornerstone of the European integration project, the prevailing Cold War dynamics proved the existence of profound strategic differences in each country's visions (Cole, 2008). Despite already apparent diverging strategic approaches, their tight relationship laid the groundwork for future initiatives.

The post-Cold War era brought the deepening of Franco-German cooperation in the field of defence and security. With the reunification of Germany in 1990, both countries saw this new period as a chance to further develop and deepen the European integration framework. As Olexandrivna (2022) aptly argues, it is France and Germany that stood at the origins of practical military and political European integration. In this context, several joint initiatives have shown a clear political and strategic will to collaborate in the field of defence and security, such as Franco-German Brigades. While the operational capabilities of such initiatives have been limited, their significance laid mostly on the symbolism of those projects (Krotz, 2015). Their cooperation resulted in the establishment of frameworks and structures through which Europe could act as a cohesive actor. Diverging strategic visions of France and Germany hampered the operational capabilities of those initiatives. Therefore, they remained largely symbolic, serving as a tool for ensuring all-encompassing consensus for the development of European integration.

The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) marked a turning point for European integration and Franco-German cooperation in security. It formally established the European Union (EU) and set the groundwork for a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the second pillar of the EU. Paris and Berlin were instrumental in pushing for this development, exemplified by their collaboration in propelling the creation of the so-called Petersberg Tasks. The Tasks outlined the range of missions European ground forces could undertake, from humanitarian, rescue, and peacekeeping missions to crisis management missions. With the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), they were formally included in the EU framework and served as a pillar of the European Defence and Security Policy (Krotz, 2015).

The trend towards Franco-German joint military initiatives presents a meaningful symbolic gesture, with its notably smaller operational capacity remaining as one of the major characteristics of the relationship. In recent years, their cooperation has deepened the European defence framework with projects such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). Launched in 2017, PESCO is designed to enable EU member states to develop military capabilities together and be able to undertake

joint missions (Billon-Galland & Quencez, 2017). France and Germany jointly pushed for the launch of PESCO but did so from opposing positions. France wanted cooperation to be ambitious, and Germany wanted cooperation to be inclusive (Giegerich, 2019). Established in the same year, the EDF is framed as a much-needed catalyst for scaling up the EU's defence by conferring strategic autonomy to Europe and overhauling a lagging European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (Csernatonni & Martins, 2018). Once again, the idea behind this initiative showed great potential, but differing visions between the two leading countries of the European integration project have hampered its potential. As Krotz and Wolf explain in their work (2018), Franco-German cooperation in security and defence is marked by a paradox. On the one hand, France and Germany are closely connected institutionally and consult across all key areas of foreign policy, security, and defence in highly regularised ways. On the other hand, the countries' general orientations in security and defence, as well as their strategic postures and numerous policy preferences in these domains, are often disparate and deeply divergent.

2. Strategic Divergences

Paris and Berlin are the indispensable leaders and the backbone of European defence. Beyond political gravitas, they represent about 50 percent of military and industrial capabilities within the EU (Major & Molling, 2018). In security and defence, the Franco-German duo produces a lot of symbolism, some progress and several missed opportunities (Giegerich, 2019). To grasp the complexities of their relationship, one must first understand some fundamental features of their respective strategic cultures.

2.1. France's Strategic Autonomy

France's approach to defence and security is deeply rooted in the country's political culture, which emphasises the importance of independence and regards France as one of the great powers in the world. De Gaulle's withdrawal from NATO's military command in 1966 and the development of a nuclear deterrent, becoming the only European state with nuclear capacity, marked the start of the official pursuit for strategic autonomy (Calmels, 2022). France's view of European strategic autonomy is coherent with its own strategic culture, as at the heart of both lies the importance of autonomous decision-making (Giegerich, 2019). This vision calls for Europe to have the capacity to defend itself and to act independently of external powers, mainly the United States (Zarobny, 2018). In that manner, one can understand France's National Strategic Review (2022), where the accent is put on more effective European autonomy and on the deepening of European capacities to act independently. If one observes France's initiatives in the military and defence fields for the past 30 years, such as the Saint-Malo initiative or the EDF, the need for independent, joint

European industrial military capacity is one of the most important aspects referred to, exemplifying Paris' strategic culture characteristics (Kayali & Posaner, 2024). The willingness to drift away from the US-dominated military industry and further develop European capacities is also motivated by its economic aspect. France's robust defence industry would benefit from a more autonomous European defence industry.

Within the country, strategic autonomy is an established part of French discourse in government, the analytical community, and possibly even the interested public. Last year, French President Emmanuel Macron warned Europe against being drawn into a conflict between the US and China. "Being the United States allies doesn't require being its vassals" (Vohra, 2023). It appears that it is not only about being independent of the US but most importantly, this discourse also embraces the idea that France views Europe as a future global power, the so-called third pillar between the US and the East. Part of Paris' strategic vision relies on the traditionally active military interventionism, especially in the 'regions of interest', and active international presence complements the global ambitions shown by French officials (Olexandrivna, 2022). France's strategic culture is marked by its emphasis on sovereignty, military interventionism, and the pursuit of European defence independence, and it remains committed to maintaining a robust defence posture.

2.2. Germany – A Culture of Restraint

Germany's culture of restraint has been characterised by a devout adherence to multilateralism and non-involvement in military operations aimed at maximising its global self-image as a reliable political partner (Dowdall, 2010). In the context of defence integration within the European framework, one of the main characteristics of Germany is that the country is neither an outspoken driver nor a brake in the process. In that sense, it evolved as "a power without a cause" (Biermann & Weiss, 2021). Giegerich (2019), in his research, aptly argues that Germany needs to work on its defence policy and willingness to take on practical, not just moral, responsibilities. According to Giegerich (2019), Germany has a deeply rooted national preference for civilian over military instruments and an inclination to look for multilateral solutions as the default. Germany's decision-making structures reflect this strategic culture. Regarding security policy, Germany is firmly embedded in the Euro-Atlantic structures. One of the declared goals of the Federal Government is to strengthen NATO's capacity to act (Die Bundesregierung, 2020). An innovative, strong, and competitive security and defence industry is also fundamental to Germany's ability to cooperate and honour "obligations within alliances, especially within NATO" (Die Bundesregierung, 2020). In that manner, Germany has always had a more transatlantic orientation, with a greater focus on NATO operations and mechanisms than on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

One of the defining features of German strategic culture is its commitment to multilateralism and its preference for working within international organisations. Germany sees itself as a “civilian power” that uses diplomacy, economic tools, and international cooperation as its primary instruments of influence (Die Bundesregierung, 2020). The normative nature of such multilateralism also aligns with the ethical dimension of Germany’s foreign policy, as stated by German authorities (Gibadlo, 2021). German public opinion continues to be more staunchly antimilitarist than their French counterparts. In general, political commitment to armed engagements remains controversial. Thus, in contrast to France, Germany possesses a strategic culture deeply reticent about the role of armed force, utterly at odds with a realist perspective, which is reflected in a policy preference for ‘restraint’ (Dowdall, 2010).

3. Practical Implications of Converging Strategies

Profound strategic differences are weakening Europe’s ability to act, as the two biggest military powers can hardly ever agree on the necessity of operations and the mandates of deployment (Major, 2013). Germany often feels pressured to deploy its troops, for instance when it was accepted to lead the EU operation EUFOR RD Congo in 2006, it felt drawn into a French African adventure (Major, 2008). France’s interventionist posture and its push for European strategic autonomy often clash with Germany’s caution and emphasis on multilateralism. These differences have practical implications for Europe’s ability to respond to crises quickly and cohesively. The reliance on France for rapid military interventions, while Germany prefers non-combat roles, creates imbalances in burden-sharing and hampers Europe’s efforts to develop a unified and robust defence posture (Ross, 2024). This trend repeat itself as similar challenges plagued Europe’s efforts in Congo, Libya, and Mali. With their distinct and sometimes competing approaches, Germany and France are currently preventing the EU from realising vast potential while also incurring European collateral harm.

The war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the security dynamics in Europe. As Weber (2024) aptly puts it, the Franco-German leadership failure poses a risk to European security, as they have neither succeeded in jointly leading European support for Ukraine nor have they come up with a common roadmap for strengthening European defence. The trajectory of the Franco-German relationship during the Ukrainian conflict is one of disunity and rivalry. One example of this is the press conference in Paris, set earlier this year (2024), which aimed at strengthening support for Ukraine and showing a unified European front. With their respective media appearances, the French President and his counterpart, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, achieved the opposite. While President Macron stated that the deployment of European troops cannot be ruled out, the German Chancellor insisted that no such activity will occur (Moutet, 2024). Ever since the outbreak of the conflict, Paris and

Berlin have been at loggerheads over military aid to Ukraine. In that manner, recently leaked recordings where Scholz confirmed that Germany would not be sending its Taurus missiles to Ukraine further deepened the already vast gap between the leading powers in Europe (Naughtie & Paternoster, 2024).

The conflict in Ukraine and the changing international security landscape have brought another product of diverging strategical approaches, the defence industry, at the heart of this discussion. From tanks and jet fighters to air defence, the Franco-German engine pushes on opposite sides (Hess, 2024). Propelled by Chancellor Scholz, the European Sky Shield Initiative addresses Europe's vulnerability to missile threats. It is based on the acquisition of German, American, and Israeli systems (Melville, 2024). However, this proved to be another thorn in their relationship, as the Élysée publicly criticised the initiative because of the role of non-European systems instead of building a stronger and more autonomous Europe (Vincent, 2023). The only way for Europe to become stronger and more autonomous in the defence and security field is through greater, deeper Franco-German cooperation.

Conclusion

As this paper has investigated, Franco-German collaboration has been integral to European defence and security since post-World War II, yet it remains fraught with strategic divergences. While joint initiatives such as the WEU, the Eurocorps, and PESCO underscore their role in shaping Europe's defence framework, France and Germany often approach these initiatives from different strategic angles. France prioritises strategic autonomy, emphasising military interventionism and an independent Europe from the influence of external powers, while Germany leans towards multilateralism and a stronger commitment towards NATO. These differing strategic cultures continue to have practical implications, particularly in the way Europe responds to crises.

The Ruso-Ukrainian conflict has exposed and deepened divisions, with France advocating for a more robust European defence and Germany exercising caution. This divergence has become evident in their contrasting stances on military aid and defence industry projects such as the European Sky Shield Initiative. As Europe faces increasing security threats, the lack of coherence between its two largest military powers will continue to hamper collective defence efforts. Overcoming these strategic differences and fostering deeper cooperation between Berlin and Paris will be essential for strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and achieving true strategic autonomy; without such alignment, Europe's ability to act cohesively on the global stage remains compromised.

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