The 2013 French Defence White Paper: Don’t write France off just yet

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LONG POST 2013|05|01
Published by European Geostrategy
http://europeangeostrategy.ideasoneurope.eu
The 2013 French Defence White Paper is finally out. Over the past months and weeks, a number of analysts have already condemned what they expected to be nothing more than a cost-cutting exercise that would amount to the decline of France as an extra-European power. The cuts are not something to sneeze at. The overall military budget has been brought down from 1.7% to around 1.5% of France's gross national income. And some 34,000 military–related jobs will be cut between now and 2019. However, as tempting as it may be for some to just dismiss such cuts as a vindication of their expectations, a careful reading of the 2013 Defence White Paper reveals a more nuanced story.

Admittedly, important reductions will take place in terms of personnel (specially land), heavy armour, fighters and cargo planes. These cuts, however, should really be seen as an opportunity. They reveal France's attempts to leave behind dated paradigms and assumptions, namely the fixation on capabilities primarily designed to sustain large land-based interventions in rather permissive strategic environments. Conversely, the prioritisation of the country's maritime and amphibious projection capabilities – which, bar some exceptions, have been relatively shielded from the cuts – and the emphasis on cyber-defence, intelligence (human and signal), guided-missiles, remote-controlled air systems, space-based assets or special operations forces all bear testament of the White Paper's forward-looking nature. Strategic cooperation with Britain is deemed particularly important in the areas of missiles, drones and maritime and amphibious capabilities. In turn, the potential of European cooperation is highlighted when it comes to space-based assets.

The preservation of the airborne and submarine 'legs' of the nuclear deterrent and the ongoing commitment to defence industrial and technological autonomy confirm the status of the force de frappe and the armaments industry as the crown jewels of French grand strategy. They also reaffirm France's penchant for military and strategic autonomy. Additionally, the maintenance of a global network of overseas military stations and of world-class maritime and amphibious capabilities also confirm France's ambition to maintain global strategic reach. A renewed emphasis on pre-positioned forces in Africa or the recent opening of a military station in the Gulf underscore the value France continues to attach to forward presence. As so does its commitment to maintaining a world-class navy, one including four ballistic missile submarines, six attack submarines, an aircraft carrier, fifteen frigates, over twenty patrol and surveillance ships or three command and strategic projection ships.

For all the limitations imposed by a constrained budgetary environment, the 2013 Defence White Paper provides a sound analysis of a dynamic and multifaceted geopolitical environment, of France’s evolving position in it and of the implications of change for defence
strategy and capabilities. In doing so, it offers a solid starting point for other European countries.

The bottom-line is that France remains by far the second most capable military power in Europe, and a much-respected military power by global standards. Moreover, France remains an indispensable actor in European geopolitics. It is perhaps the only country that can help bridge the gap between the two isolationist trends that assail Europe, namely Britain’s political distancing from the European Union and the mood of strategic isolationism prevailing in most European countries – and perhaps most notably Germany) – which unless halted and reversed, threatens to make Europe (geo)strategically irrelevant.4

Following the path set by its 2008 predecessor, the 2013 Defence White Paper identifies five main functions through which military power can contribute to the attainment of France’s strategic objectives, namely knowledge and anticipation, deterrence, protection, prevention and intervention. This confirms France’s broad and pro-active understanding of military power, which contrasts with the much narrower and reactive conceptions most Europeans hold – primarily associated with defence and crisis management.5

The 2013 Defence White Paper singles out the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy as the two main pillars of French military policy. It identifies France’s reintegration into the Atlantic Alliance’s integrated military structure as an opportunity to rationalise and streamline such structures as well as its various agencies and processes. Its participation in Allied Command Transformation (led by General Jean-Paul Paloméros, of the French Air Force) confirms France’s increasing interest in the Atlantic Alliance’s role in the area of concept and capability development. This dovetails with the White Paper’s emphasis on the importance of bridging the operational and capability development efforts ongoing in the framework of the Alliance and the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (particularly ‘Smart Defence’ and ‘Pooling and Sharing’). This confirms that France has turned page and sees the Atlantic Alliance not so much as a political threat to European autonomy but as an asset to channel more expeditionary concepts and capabilities into the Common Security and Defence Policy.

While France has called for a European Defence White Paper and reasserted its commitment to a credible and efficient ‘European defence’, one of the novelties of the 2013 White Paper Blanc is precisely the fact that it explicitly acknowledges for the first time the difficulties such prospect faces and speaks of the need to develop a more ‘pragmatic’ approach towards the Common Security and Defence Policy.6

The geostrategic vision outlined by the 2013 Defence White Paper is largely articulated around the premise that the rise of Asia and Washington’s strategic rebalancing towards that region – two prominent themes throughout the paper – make it increasingly com-
pelling for Europeans to take care of their own security and that of their immediate neighbourhood. Once having established those premises, the White Paper does exactly what this type of exercise is supposed to do: identify France’s geostrategic priorities (and, indirectly, those of Europe).

The first priority is the protection of the national territory and the preservation of France’s independence and sovereignty. The maintenance and integrity of an independent nuclear deterrent remains the ultimate guarantee of France’s national security. Its ongoing commitment to an independent nuclear deterrent underscores France’s understanding of the importance of providing for its own security. This also distinguishes France from most other European nations.

The second priority is ensuring the ongoing stability of Europe and the North Atlantic space. For Paris, the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union remain critical to this end. The consolidation of peace and stability in the Balkan peninsula and the regulation of existing conflicts in the Caucasus are identified as key to shielding Europe from potential spills of instability.

Third in France’s list of geostrategic priorities is Europe’s extended southern neighbourhood, namely the space running from the Gulf of Guinea, through Africa’s northwestern seaboard, the Sahel-Magreb areas and the Mediterranean and Red Seas onto the Horn of Africa and Somalia. As the United States pivots eastwards, France sees itself (and Europe) as increasingly responsible for taking the lead in providing security to this Guinea-to-Somalia stretch. This is an area that has recently attracted most French and European operational engagements, notably in Libya and Mali, but also in the Gulf of Aden. The renewed emphasis the 2013 White Paper places on Europe’s immediate vicinity represents a retreat from the more far-reaching strategic vision laid out by the 2008 Defence White Paper, which included the Indian Ocean and South and Central Asia in France’s axis of strategic priority.

Fourth in the hierarchical order of strategic importance are the Near East and the Persian Gulf. The White Paper acknowledges the vital importance of these two areas to France and Europe and takes note of France’s strengthening of military ties there in the past few years, including the signature of bilateral defence agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar; the opening of a joint military facility in Abu Dhabi; the signature of a military cooperation agreement with Bahrain; and ongoing ties with Saudi Arabia. However, France understands that its role in the Middle East and Persian Gulf (and that of Europe) is one of co-participation alongside the United States – whose strategic influence in that region is highlighted – and regional partners. This contrasts with the leadership role France envisions for itself and Europe in the Guinea-to-Somalia space. Next in line is
the Indian Ocean, which is described by the 2013 White Paper as a strategic waterway that connects Europe to Asia and acts as a meeting point for European, American and Asian navies. Of special importance to France is the southwestern part of that ocean, home to a number of French extra-metropolitan enclaves. The White Paper highlights France’s strategic ties to India and pledges France’s support of its bid for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.

Finally, the 2013 White Paper confirms France’s commitment to continue to play a role in global security. It singles out the potential for strategic tensions in East and South-East Asia. While it highlights the importance it attaches to stability and freedom of navigation in Asia, its categorisation of these as ‘diplomatic and economic’ priorities; its dwindling capabilities; and its re-focusing on the immediate European neighbourhood; clearly reveal France’s intention not to play a direct strategic role in this region. This, of course, does not mean France’s actions will not have an impact upon the region’s strategic balances. France has strong strategic ties to both India and Australia – with whom a strategic partnership was entered in 2012 – is in the process of furthering its military and security relationship with other regional partners (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia or Vietnam), and remains a global military-industrial power. Finally, the 2013 White Paper speaks of a geopolitical and economic renaissance in Latin America, singles out the importance of strengthening bilateral ties with Brazil, and highlights the important of engaging other countries such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico or Peru.

All in all, and without prejudicing the limitations that derive from a constrained budgetary environment and from Europe’s relative decline, the 2013 Defence White Paper reaffirms France as one of the few European powers – alongside the United Kingdom – that understand the importance that military force and the ability to project power globally have for a nation’s security. Finally, and critically, by emphasising the importance of Europe and its immediate neighbourhood as well as that of developments beyond it and maintaining a strategic presence and ties elsewhere, France bridges Britain’s more global-maritime approach and Germany’s narrower emphasis on the European continent and thereby offers a geostrategic vision that includes elements and themes that most European countries can relate to.

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Notes


6 For a good overview of France’s rapprochement to the Atlantic Alliance, see: Leo G. Michel, ‘Cross-currents in French defense and US interests’, Strategic Perspectives No. 10, April 2012.
