



## ANALYSIS

# ESTONIAN-FRENCH DEFENCE COOPERATION

WHERE ESTONIAN PRAGMATISM MEETS FRENCH VISION

| KALEV STOICESCU | MAXIME LEBRUN |

AUGUST 2019

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RAHVUSVAHELINE KAITSEUURINGUTE KESKUS  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY  
EESTI • ESTONIA

Title: Estonian-French Defence Cooperation: Where Estonian Pragmatism Meets French Vision

Authors: Stoicescu, Kalev; Lebrun, Maxime

Publication date: August 2019

Category: Analysis

Cover page photo: ESTPLA-30 soldiers on a patrol in Mali (Estonian Defence Forces,  
<https://pildid.mil.ee>)

Keywords: Estonia, France, defence cooperation, European defence cooperation

Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely those of its authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

Acknowledgements: We are very grateful to our interlocutors in Paris and Tallinn, who were generous with their time and opinions, and to ICDS's summer intern, Anna-Liisa Merilind for editorial assistance.

ISSN 2228-2076

©International Centre for Defence and Security  
63/4 Narva Rd., 10152 Tallinn, Estonia  
[info@icds.ee](mailto:info@icds.ee), [www.icds.ee](http://www.icds.ee)

## INTRODUCTION

This analysis describes Estonian-French defence cooperation in bilateral and multilateral frameworks in the period since the end of the Cold War. It assesses the incentives and rationales of the two countries to work together and the benefits they derive from doing so. We pay particular attention to cooperation in operations: crisis response in Africa, and the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) programme that reflects NATO's renewed focus on deterrence and collective defence. We also examine the relationship between this cooperation and France's conception of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and the related idea of European Strategic Autonomy (ESA).

The first section of this analysis provides an overview of Estonian-French defence relations since the end of the Cold War. The second section describes in greater detail the practicalities of the relationship, in particular Estonia's contribution to French-led and EU operations in and around Africa and France's contribution to collective deterrence and defence in the Baltic region. The third section analyses the motivations of Estonia and France in pursuing this close defence relationship and the benefits they derive from doing so. Finally, we draw conclusions and make some recommendations.

Our analysis is based on information compiled from open sources and from interviews conducted in Estonia and France. In order to encourage openness, our interlocutors were guaranteed anonymity and their remarks are not individually attributed in what follows.

## 1. THE ESTONIAN-FRENCH DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP: A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

Estonian-French defence cooperation has developed steadily since Estonia regained its independence in 1991. Four different stages of the defence relationship can be recognised.

### 1.1. INDIFFERENCE

In the 1990s, defence-related activities and contacts between Estonia and France were limited. In a welcome gesture, France provided the uniforms of the *Légion Etrangère* (without insignia) in which members of the Estonian Defence League marched in the first military parade in Tallinn after the restoration of Estonia's independence. Also, France like other Western countries, donated military equipment (F2 sniper rifles and M2 Browning heavy machine guns) to Estonia in the mid-1990s once the former Soviet/Russian troops had withdrawn from the Baltic states. A general framework in the form of a bilateral defence cooperation agreement was signed in 1992, but was not followed by any notable practical steps.

Estonia and France both participated in peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Estonia first participated in March 1995, when it contributed a platoon-sized unit to the Danish UNPROFOR battalion in Croatia.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Estonia participated from April 1996 in IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in KFOR from June 1999 in Kosovska Mitrovica in the French-led Joint Regional Detachment North.<sup>2</sup> However, the rotating Estonian companies remained embedded in the Danish battalions and had practically no direct interaction with the French contingent.

<sup>1</sup> UNPROFOR: United Nations Protection Force, "[Kaitseväge kasutamise Eesti riigi rahvusvaheliste kohustuste täitmisel rahuvalvemissioonil endise Jugoslaavia Vabariigi territooriumil](#)," ("The Deployment of the Estonian Defence Forces in the Fulfilment of the International Duties of Estonia in the Territory of Yugoslavia") (06.02.1995), RT I 1995, 14, 167.

<sup>2</sup> IFOR: the NATO-led multinational peace enforcement Implementation Force, renamed the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in 1996; KFOR: Kosovo Force, a NATO-led international peacekeeping force. Kaitseväge (Estonian Defence Forces), "[Operatsioonid alates 1995](#)" ("Operations Since 1995").

## 1.2. MISTRUST

At the beginning of the new millennium, Estonia's aspirations to join NATO saw its operational focus shift from the Balkans to the Greater Middle East, where it participated in NATO's ISAF (from March 2003) and the US-led OIF coalition (from June 2003).<sup>3</sup> In the mountains of Afghanistan and the deserts of Iraq, Estonia contributed platoons, companies, convoy protection units and staff officers to the contingents of its main defence partners: the UK and the US.

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While France (and Germany) disagreed with the US and UK over the invasion of Iraq, Estonia, which sought membership of both NATO and the EU, had to secure support from Washington and thus supported the US position. Estonia's stance, along with that of other NATO and EU candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe, was strongly criticised by French President Jacques Chirac with the memorable riposte that they had missed a good opportunity to "shut up".<sup>4</sup> However, once Estonia became a member of both organisations, in March and April 2004, Paris and Tallinn began to discover each other politically, economically, and also in defence. Michèle Alliot-Marie was the first Minister of Defence of France to visit Estonia in June 2004, when she promised that Estonia could count on French support in strengthening its defence.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.3. RAPPROCHEMENT

When Nicolas Sarkozy became the President of France in May 2007 he quickly announced that France would reintegrate into NATO's

command and force structures. France's resumption of its full place in the Alliance was officially celebrated at NATO's Summit Meeting in Strasbourg-Kehl in April 2009.<sup>6</sup> Sarkozy also declared that France sought to strengthen—in parallel—the EU's defence dimension (*l'Europe de la Défense*). Estonia immediately saw an opportunity to seek bilateral defence relations with France that would be both wider, including strategic dialogue, peacekeeping operations, procurement of equipment and cyber defence, and deeper, at all levels from the tactical through to chiefs of defence and governments.

As a practical consequence, Estonia once again enlarged its peacekeeping geography and the list of its main defence cooperation partners. In the mid-2000s, decision makers in

Tallinn could not have imagined that Estonia would be actively participating shoulder to shoulder with the French in the fight against piracy in the Indian Ocean and around the Horn of Africa, and in peacekeeping operations in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Central African Republic (CAR). Yet France, a nuclear power and one of NATO's most capable member states, was to become Estonia's newest, and one of its closest, defence cooperation partners.

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## 1.4. GROWTH

In late 2012, as Estonia was preparing to deploy its fifth and last Ship Protection Team (SPT) on a French frigate in the counter-piracy Operation Atalanta, it was also beginning preparations for its first land force deployment to continental Africa—to EUTM Mali.<sup>7</sup> The Mali operation was followed by a deployment to CAR, as part of the EU's French-led EUFOR RCA operation.<sup>8</sup> At the end of 2013, France had requested logistical

<sup>3</sup> ISAF: the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, established in December 2001; OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom

<sup>4</sup> CNN World News, "[Chirac lashes out at 'new Europe'](#)," February 18, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Liisi Poll, "[Prantsusmaa lubab Eestile riigikaitseabi](#)," ("France Promises to Provide Support for Estonian National Defence,")  
*Postimees*, 24 July 2004.

<sup>6</sup> NATO, "[Summit Meetings](#)," NATO, 19 July 2018.

<sup>7</sup> EUTM Mali: EU Training Mission Mali.

<sup>8</sup> EUFOR RCA: European Force Republic of Central Africa.



and troop support from its NATO and EU allies in order to beef up a multinational contingent in CAR. Estonia was the first country to respond and to commit ground troops (a strengthened platoon).

Before Estonia could deploy its contingent to CAR, in May 2014 for one rotation, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in Crimea and the Donbas started to unfold. The need for a refreshment of NATO's collective deterrence and defence posture against the Russian threat was brought to the table and France became one of the main contributors to NATO's assurance measures and to the eFP. France provided two eFP rotations of about 300 troops to the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia in 2017, and will provide two further rotations in 2019. In parallel, Estonia's participation in the French operation Barkhane in Mali, began in August 2018.

The rapprochement between Estonia and France in the field of defence thus took about 15 years. The relationship developed according to the logic of political events in the transatlantic area, and took account of destabilising threats to Europe, in particular to France and Estonia, from Europe's southern and eastern perimeters. The present high levels of

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cooperation reflect the fact that Estonia and France are NATO Allies who largely think alike, have similar instincts and seek mutual benefits from close partnership.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP IN PRACTICE

In practical terms, the Estonian-French defence relationship is expressed primarily through Estonia's participation in French-led and EU operations in and around Africa, and in France's contribution to the UK-led eFP battlegroup in

Estonia and other deployments to the Baltic region. In addition, there has been some cooperation between the two countries in procurement, and through a shared strategic dialogue

### 2.1. ESTONIA'S PARTICIPATION IN OPERATIONS IN AND AROUND AFRICA

Estonia has supported French deployments in several operations in and around Africa over the past decade.

#### 2.1.1. EUNAVFOR SOMALIA (DECEMBER 2010 TO MAY 2013)

The European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Somalia (Operation Atalanta) was launched in December 2008, and has a United Nations

*Estonia's contribution to Atalanta was an excellent experience, opening avenues for further operational cooperation between Estonia and France*

mandate to protect vessels of the World Food Programme and other vulnerable shipping around the Horn of Africa. The overall operational area is around 4 million square kilometres. It is a counter-piracy operation conducted with rotational forces of typically five to ten navy vessels (including frigates with helicopters) and patrol and reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>9</sup> Most EU member states have participated in the operation, as well as other countries including

Ukraine, Norway and Russia. In late July 2018, the European Council prolonged the mandate of EUNAVFOR Somalia until the end of 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Estonia was unable to participate in the operation with a navy ship of its own (the Estonian Navy consists primarily of mine countermeasure vessels), but participated

<sup>9</sup> EU NAVFOR Somalia, "[EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta](#)".

<sup>10</sup> European Union, Council of the European Union, "[EU NAVFOR Somalia Operation Atalanta: Council prolongs the Operation and decides on new headquarters and new Operation Commander](#)", press release, 30 July 2018.

instead with SPTs. Five Estonian SPTs operated on French and German frigates between December 2010 and May 2013, providing the first opportunity for the Estonian and French military to cooperate bilaterally in an operational environment.<sup>11</sup> The SPTs helped to detain suspected pirates and to free kidnapped ship crews.

While Estonia's contribution to Atalanta was limited in size, it was considered to be effective and was appreciated by all parties involved.<sup>12</sup> It was an excellent experience, opening avenues for further operational cooperation between Estonia and France. More broadly, Estonia demonstrated that it was not solely oriented towards NATO and the US/UK, but also strongly interested in cooperating with France (and Germany) and ready to act in support of strengthening the EU's defence dimension.

### 2.1.2. EUTM MALI AND MINUSCA (2013 TO PRESENT)

In January 2012, an armed conflict broke out in northern Mali, a region mostly inhabited by Tuareg peoples. The Tuaregs demanded independence from Mali, and a homeland (Azawad) of their own. In March 2012, President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted in a coup, and a 'National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State', comprising mutinous military personnel, took control of Mali's capital, Bamako, and suspended the constitution. The rebel Tuaregs invaded all major cities in northern Mali, including Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, and proclaimed independence, making civil war between the north and the south of Mali inevitable. However, by July 2012, the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) had lost control of most cities in the north to the Islamist group Ansar Dine. Ansar Dine, suspected of being related to al-Qaeda, had initially been allied with MNLA, but had broken free and was seeking to implement Sharia law. The government in Bamako

requested international assistance, especially from France, which already had forces deployed in the region.<sup>13</sup>

France responded in January 2013 by launching Operation Serval intended to prevent the advance of Ansar Dine, and at the same time lobbying for an EU military training mission. EUTM Mali, which has its HQ in Bamako, was launched by the European Council in January 2013, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (2012).<sup>14</sup>

The mandate of the mission stipulates that the EU will provide military and training advice to the Malian Armed Forces operating under the control of the legitimate civilian authorities.<sup>15</sup> The EU operates in the South of Mali and supports local military capacity building with the aim of restoring and defending the territorial integrity of the country and reducing

*France sought logistic support, but soon realised that NATO Allies and Partners might also offer ground troops. Estonia was the first country to respond positively (and very quickly) to the French request*

the terrorist threat. The mission's area of responsibility was extended in 2016 up to the southern bank of the Niger River, including the cities of Timbuktu and Gao, and support to G5 Sahel was also increased.<sup>16</sup> The current mandate expires on 18 May 2020.

Estonia has participated in EUTM with staff officers and instructors since the beginning of the mission. It has also participated since September 2013 with staff officers in the

<sup>11</sup> EU NAVFOR Somalia, "[French naval ship embarks an Estonian Vessel Protection Detachment](#)," 10 May 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Berit-Helena Lamp, "[Terras: kaitsevägi hindab kõrgelt koostööd operatsioonil Atalanta](#)," ("Terras: the Estonian Defence Forces highly appreciate cooperation on Operation Atalanta,") *Postimees*, 18 November 2012.

<sup>13</sup> For further detail, see Kirkland Green, "[Crisis in Mali](#)," International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect.

<sup>14</sup> EUTM Mali, "[News](#)"; United Nations Security Council, "[Security Council Authorizes Deployment of African-Led International Support Mission in Mali for Initial Year-Long Period](#)," news release, 20 December 2012.

<sup>15</sup> EUTM Mali, "[Mandates](#)."

<sup>16</sup> G5 Sahel: a regional framework of cooperation in security policy matters established in February 2014 between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. European Union, Council of the EU, "[EU training mission in Mali: Council extends mission for two years with broadened mandate to include support for G5 Sahel Joint Force](#)," press release, 14 May 2018.

United Nations MINUSMA mission in Mali, established by UN Security Council resolution 2100 to provide security throughout the

CAR (MISCA, with a strength of 4 000 personnel) that had been established by UN Security Council Resolution 2127.<sup>20</sup>

*Estonia's participation in both EUTM and MINUSMA provided solid experience and paved the way for the deployment of Estonian ground forces to Operation Barkhane*

country.<sup>17</sup> MINUSMA comprises a force of around 15 000 personnel, mainly manned by ECOWAS (Western African) countries. It has suffered almost 200 fatalities since its inception. Estonia's participation in both missions provided solid experience and paved the way for the deployment of Estonian ground forces to Operation Barkhane (the successor to Operation Serval) in Mali in 2018.

### 2.1.3. EUFOR CAR (MAY TO AUGUST 2014)

In 2012, CAR president François Bozizé requested assistance from France and the US to counter a rebel Muslim movement, Séleka, which threatened the country with civil war. Bozizé was ousted in a coup, in March 2013 and replaced by a new Muslim president Michel Djotodia. Fierce fighting erupted between Muslim sélekas, who controlled the northern part of the country, and Christian anti-balakas, who were dominant in the south. Bangui became a battleground and, just as during the 1994 Rwanda war, the possibility of genocide inflicted by the machete hung over CAR.<sup>18</sup>

France launched Operation Sangaris on 5 December 2013, with a mandated strength of 1 600 to 2 000 personnel.<sup>19</sup> Sangaris was the seventh French military intervention in CAR since it became independent in 1960, and was intended to offer immediate assistance to the African-led International Support Mission to

In parallel France sought logistic support from European and American allies (especially strategic and tactical airlift), but soon realised that NATO Allies and Partners might also offer ground troops.<sup>21</sup> The French initiative quickly turned into an idea to establish an EU operation to support Sangaris and MISCA, and to make the EU a responsible player on the ground.

Given CAR's distance from Europe, its remoteness and the harsh conditions and uncertain political situation, EU member states hesitated over the initiative. Estonia was the first country to respond positively (and very quickly) to the French request and its example was soon followed by Finland, Georgia, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

EUFOR CAR was officially launched by the European Council on 1 April 2014, one day before an EU-African summit meeting.<sup>22</sup> The Estonian platoon of about 50 personnel was deployed as a EUFOR CAR entry force to Bangui, alongside 100 personnel provided by France, at a time when local tensions were still very high.<sup>23</sup> There was almost no obedience to law and order, few prisons or even laws to regulate the bearing of arms. The Estonian peacekeepers performed various tasks, including night patrols to prevent armed clashes between Muslim and Christian fighters.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> MINUSMA: Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission; United Nations, "[MINUSMA](#)"; United Nations Security Council, "[Security Council Establishes Peacekeeping Force for Mali Effective 1 July, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2100 \(2013\)](#)," news release, 25 April 2013.

<sup>18</sup> For further detail, see Michelle Rae Eberhard, "[Crisis in Central African Republic](#)," International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect.

<sup>19</sup> Ministère des Armées (French Ministry of Defence), "[Operation Sangaris](#)," 10 December 2013.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Security Council, "[Security Council, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2127 \(2013\), Mandates Mission in Central African Republic to Protect Civilians, Restore State Authority](#)," news release, 5 December 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Jacques Mével, "[Centrafrique: la France trouve des alliés à l'est et au nord de l'UE](#)," ("Central Africa: France finds allies in the east and north of the EU," ) *Le Figaro*, 13 February 2014.

<sup>22</sup> RFI, "[L'UE lance son opération militaire en Centrafrique](#)," ("EU launches military operation in the Central African Republic," ) 1 April 2014.

<sup>23</sup> ERR (Estonian Public Broadcasting), "[Estonian Personnel to Deploy to Central African Republic 'Within Two Weeks'](#)," 4 April 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyn Kaldoja, "[In the darkness of Bangui nights: Estonians hunting gunmen](#)," 15 July 2014.

EUFOR CAR lasted less than a year until mid-March 2015, and Estonia participated in only one four-month rotation. According to analysts, the EU's mission had a "tough start, but a smooth ending."<sup>25</sup> Operation Sangaris, meanwhile, endured until the end of October 2016, and, based on the low level of fighting in Bangui and in rural areas, was considered by France to have been a success.<sup>26</sup>

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Estonia's experience of just four months with a small force was, nonetheless, a significant departure for the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF). The contribution and difference Estonia made on the ground was very much appreciated by the French commanders of both EUFOR RCA and Operation Sangaris, and by the French government. The EDF, meanwhile, gained valuable experience.<sup>27</sup>

#### 2.1.4. OPERATION BARKHANE (AUGUST 2018 TO PRESENT)

As the borders of the G5 Sahel countries are very often porous and hard to control, Islamic fundamentalist insurgents were able to leave Mali, hide in neighbouring countries, and conduct cross-border, hit-and-run terrorist attacks. While the Tuareg rebellion in Mali was largely defeated, attacks by Islamic fundamentalists such as the June 2017 attack in Bamako nonetheless continued.<sup>28</sup> In response, France's counter-terrorist operation, Barkhane, succeeded Operation Serval in

*France, the UK and Estonia (and possibly Denmark) work together in Africa as they do in the NATO eFP battlegroup in Estonia*

August 2014. Headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad, its 3 000 personnel operate in all G5 Sahel countries.

In addition to stabilisation and offering support to the development of Sahel nations, the EU's interest in the region is in curbing the flow of migration to Europe. However, the link between Barkhane and other peacekeeping operations in the Sahel and the migration issue is indirect, as managing migration is mainly a policing and border guard function. The impact of Barkhane is primarily on the security of Mali and the neighbouring countries, which also influences their economic performance and growth.

The G5 countries, which provide indirect support, but are not directly affiliated with the operation, have very different levels of military capability. Mauritania and Chad are considered to be well above the African average, but Mali still struggles with huge problems in spite of EUTM and other aid. The Malian armed forces are thus reforming and training at the same time as they are conducting extensive kinetic operations. Nonetheless, the neighbouring African nations are increasingly willing and able to share the burden of present and future operations, and want more African-led security frameworks.

Barkhane enjoys strong US logistics and reconnaissance support, and support from American special forces. The UK also participates directly in the operation through the provision of helicopters and Denmark may consider participating.<sup>29</sup> France, the UK and Estonia (and possibly Denmark) thus work

<sup>25</sup> Thierry Tardy, "[EUFOR RCA: tough start, smooth end](#)," European Union Institute for Security Studies, 13 March 2015.

<sup>26</sup> BBC News Africa, "[France ends Sangaris military operation in CAR](#)," 31 October 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Estonian Defence Forces, "[EUFOR medals presented to Estonian Defence Forces' members in Central African Republic](#)," 18 July 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Al Jazeera News Agency, "[Armed men storm resort in Malian capital Bamako](#)," 19 June 2017.

<sup>29</sup> France Diplomatie, "[Sahel – Consultations in Denmark on the Danish army's possible participation in Operation Barkhane](#)," 1 March 2019.



together in Africa as they do in the NATO eFP battlegroup in Estonia.

The rotational deployment to Mali of strengthened platoons of up to 50 personnel to support Barkhane was approved by the Estonian parliament in May 2018.<sup>30</sup> Estonia's participation has no definite end date and will probably continue until at least the end of 2019. The cycle of preparations for and rotations of Estonian platoons to Gao works very well, and there is no reason to contemplate the termination of this process from the viewpoint of military practicalities.

The Estonian contingent provides force protection to the French base in Gao by patrolling a 20 kilometre-wide area, protecting the base perimeter, and being ready for a high-readiness response to potential threats.<sup>31</sup> The mission presents limited risks compared, for example to Helmand in Afghanistan or Bagdad where Estonia units were deployed in the 2000s, as the situation on the ground is significantly different in terms of kinetic intensity. The insurgents prefer not to attack French and Estonian forces, but rather the less capable MINUSCA and G5 contingents. Nonetheless, on July 20, 2019, six Estonian personnel, alongside French and Malian soldiers, were wounded in a suicide attack against the Gao base, most probably conducted by local Daesh Jihadists. This incident—which fortunately did not result in fatalities—demonstrated that French and Estonian forces are capable of minimising risks even in the face of such extreme attacks.

## 2.2. FRANCE'S CONTRIBUTION TO ESTONIAN AND BALTIC SECURITY

In Helsinki on 23 August 2018, the French Minister of Defence Florence Parly emphasised the commitment of France to the entire Baltic

region stating, "Your security is our security."<sup>32</sup> France has contributed to the strengthening of security in the Baltic region, including Estonia, since the end of the Cold War, but became far more active in the Nordic-Baltic region after Poland and the Baltic states joined NATO and the EU in 2004. France has significant economic and political interests in the Baltic region, which accounts for about one third of Europe's GDP, and is also home to 200 000 French citizens.<sup>33</sup>

France's principal military contribution to Baltic security is its participation in NATO's eFP through Operation Lynx. This consists of a contingent of about 300 personnel, 13 Boxer wheeled multirole armoured vehicles, 4 Leclerc main battle tanks, and various other vehicles and equipment. Lynx has involved two four-month rotations in Tapa, Estonia in 2017, two rotations in Rukla, Lithuania in 2018, and a further two rotations in Tapa in 2019.<sup>34</sup>

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In the air domain, France has participated in the Baltic Air Policing mission on several occasions: April to July 2007, January to April 2010, May to August 2011, May to August 2013, and September to December 2016 in Šiauliai, Lithuania; May to August 2014 in Malbork, Poland; and May to August 2018 in Ämari, Estonia. Only Germany and Belgium have performed more frequent air policing rotations. France has also conducted 26 E-3F Airborne Warning and Control System missions over

<sup>30</sup> ERR (Estonian Public Broadcasting), "[Estonian government approves sending 50 troops to French-led Mali mission](#)," 22 March 2018; Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), "[Riigikogu toetas Eesti kaitsevõelaste osalemist operatsioonis Barkhane Malis](#)," ("The Estonian Parliament Supports the Involvement of Estonian Troops in Operation Barkhane in Mali,") press release, 9 May 2018.

<sup>31</sup> ERR News (Estonian Public Broadcasting), "[ESTPLA-26 returns from Mali mission](#)," 16 December 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Puolustusministeriö (Finnish Ministry of Defence), "[Announcement of the signing of a Framework paper on Defence Cooperation between France and Finland, in the margin of the NATO ministerial meeting, in Brussels, on 4 October 2018](#)," news release, 2 October 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Here the Baltic region refers to all countries around the Baltic Sea, including Germany (but not Russia).

<sup>34</sup> Permanent Representation of France to NATO, "[Lancement fin avril 2019 de la mission «Lynx» en Estonie dans le cadre de la Présence avancée renforcée \(eFP\)](#)," ("Launch of the "Lynx" mission in Estonia in late April 2019 as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)," news release, 24 April 2019.

Poland since 2014, and six directly over the Baltic states.<sup>35</sup>

On the sea, France has deployed annual maritime surveillance patrols to the Baltic Sea, and has participated regularly in NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1. It deployed 7 surface ships to the Baltic Sea in 2018, including frigates and mine hunters.<sup>36</sup>

According to French estimates, about 4 000 soldiers from the French army, navy and air force have participated in around 20 activities on NATO's eastern flank each year since 2014, mainly in the Baltic area, at an annual cost of up to 50 million euros. This trend will continue in the near future. France also deployed 2 700 personnel to NATO's Trident Juncture 18 exercise in Norway.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3. COOPERATION IN DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

The French defence industry has competed successfully in several Estonian defence acquisition tenders. In 2018, the Estonian Defence Investments Agency signed a contract with MBDA France for the procurement of

service in the Estonian 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade in 2009.

Estonia also purchased in 2009 two Ground Master 403 air surveillance radar systems, each value at 11.3 million euros, from the French defence company Thales-Raytheon. The two primary radars, as well as secondary radars and other equipment are the key components in securing the full coverage of Estonia's air space up to an altitude of 30 kilometres.<sup>39</sup> Together, these two procurements significantly increased the air defence and air surveillance capabilities of the EDF.

On a less positive note, the Estonian Government decided in 2018 to allocate 200 million euros on top of the defence budget for additional defence investments distributed across the period from 2019 to 2022 for the procurement of different types of ammunition.<sup>40</sup> The EDF decided to buy 40 million euros worth of anti-tank systems from the German company EuroSpike GmbH, but MBDA has since appealed to the Defence Committee of the Estonian parliament questioning this decision.<sup>41</sup>

### 2.4. STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

High-level French-Baltic foreign and security policy seminars have taken place yearly since 2006, and have involved numerous representatives of governments, parliaments, academic institutions and think-tanks, as well as media from the four countries. The seminars, in addition to regular bilateral consultations between ministries of foreign affairs and defence, have greatly contributed to establishing and maintaining contacts, addressing strategic issues such as transatlantic

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Mistral short range air defence systems and simulators.<sup>38</sup> The contract was valued at 50 million euros and included the possible additional purchase of 100 million euros worth of missiles between 2020 and 2027. Estonia made its first purchase of Mistral systems from France in 2007, and introduced them into active

<sup>35</sup> Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy, [France and the security challenges in the Baltic Sea region](#), DICOd (French Defence Information and Communication Delegation), January 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> ERR News (Estonian Public Broadcasting), ["Eesti ostab 50 miljoni eest lühimaa õhutõrjerakette Mistral"](#), ("Estonia signs deal with French MBDA to purchase Mistral short range air defence systems worth 50m EUR"), 12 June 2018.

<sup>39</sup> ERR News, ["Kaitseväge soetab kaks uut õhuseireradarit"](#), ("Estonian Defence Forces obtains two new air surveillance radars"), 29 April 2009.

<sup>40</sup> ERR News, ["Eesti kulutab nelja aastaga laskemoonale 200 miljonit eurot"](#), ("Estonia to spend 200m EUR over the next four years on ammunition"), 14 February 2018.

<sup>41</sup> BNS, ["Riik ostab tankitõrjesüsteemi saksa firmalt EuroSpike"](#), ("Estonia buys anti-tank systems from the German EuroSpike GmbH"), 20 November 2018; BNS, ["Prantsuse relvatootja pöördus kaitsehanke asjus riigikaitsekomisjonile"](#), ("French arms manufacturer turned to the Defence Committee of the Estonian Parliament with regard to defence acquisition tender"), 14 February 2019.

cooperation and collective defence, Russia, and the Sahel, and reaching common understanding on the purpose and benefits of bilateral and multilateral defence and security cooperation.

### 3. MOTIVES AND BENEFITS

Although both countries profit substantially from the Estonian-French bilateral defence relationship, their motives for cooperation and the benefits they accrue differ.

#### 3.1. ESTONIA

Estonia's motivation to cooperate with France in the sphere of security and defence has both political and military roots. From a political perspective, it is natural that Estonia, as a small state dependent upon alliances and partnerships for its own security, should wish to

*Estonia's support for French-led and EU operations is also a means of demonstrating its commitment to the development of the EU's defence dimension*

strengthen defence relations with all major Western powers, not just with the US and UK. France is a nuclear power, a leading member of NATO and the EU, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the owner of strong and capable conventional (including expeditionary) armed forces. Although Estonia does not support France in operations in and around Africa on a pre-agreed transactional basis, it is surely no coincidence that France is ready to support Estonia's major long term interest of strengthening deterrence in the Baltic region by participating every second year in the UK-led eFP battlegroup in Estonia.

Estonia's support for French-led and EU operations is also a means of demonstrating its commitment to the development of the EU's defence dimension. At a time when European states differ over the relative priorities that should be afforded to the 'eastern' agenda (collective

deterrence and defence) and the 'southern' agenda (instability, migration, and terrorism), Estonia's engagement with French-led and EU missions to Europe's south is an important exercise in bridge building and contribution to European strategic coherence.

Furthermore, Estonia's participation in peacekeeping operations under various organisations (EU, UN, French-led coalitions) and in a variety of non-European environments (Indian Ocean, Central African savanna and Malian semi-desert around the river Niger) offers opportunities to gain a wider perspective on the world than might be possible through normal diplomatic and military means.

From a military perspective, the EDF appreciates the opportunity to deploy with France to fulfil their need for continuous and sufficiently demanding missions from which personnel can gain professional skills and experience. Barkhane is considered by the EDF to be their most valuable ongoing international military operation. As a counter-terrorist operation, it is a good fit for Estonia's military competence, as the EDF have rich experience in this field from earlier operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nonetheless, the EDF believe that Barkhane could be more demanding—and thus more valuable—if the activities and tasks of the Estonian contingent were broadened and their operational area enlarged. To this end the Estonian contingent could be augmented by the addition of certain support elements to create a more rounded presence, or even by deploying company-sized units in order to become more

*The EDF appreciates the opportunity to deploy with France to fulfil their need for continuous and sufficiently demanding missions. Nonetheless, the EDF believe that Barkhane could be more demanding*

autonomous and capable. Meanwhile, there are some logistical and interoperability deficiencies that need to be addressed, such as the rather difficult deployment routes of the Estonian

contingent and incompatible communications equipment.

Generally though, the Estonian military appreciate the skills, capabilities and willingness of their French colleagues. The French military in Mali are usually deployed from prestigious

*The ability of armed forces to work together is not simply a mechanical process, nor can it be achieved through political direction alone. Interoperability develops on the ground through joint action*

units and share with their Estonian counterparts an ability to operate with common sense rather than blindly by the book. The two armed forces have thus proven very capable of acting together, including in fulfilling demanding tasks. Whether in Tapa or Gao, the Estonian and French military are largely interoperable, an attribute that has accumulated with successive joint operations. The ability of armed forces to work together is not simply a mechanical process, nor can it be achieved through political direction alone. Interoperability develops on the ground through joint action.

## 3.2. FRANCE

In order to understand the benefits to France of a close defence relationship with Estonia, it is first necessary to understand France's concept of ESA, its intended implementation through EI2 and the anticipated role of partners in this initiative.

### 3.2.1. FRANCE AND ESA

French strategic culture is permeated with a belief in France's vocation as a leading promoter of human rights. This has been especially salient in the period since the end of the Cold War when France has sought to maintain a justification for its membership of the UN Security Council and for its role as a driving actor in various multilateral fora. In its efforts to realise this vocation, France has favoured the frequent and swift use of force,

which has led to military overstretch.<sup>42</sup> The resultant growing disparity between ambitions and means is the key factor driving France's agenda towards ESA.

President Macron's declaration of the need for a "true European army" was intentionally provocative and designed to move the discussion from the expert level into the realm of politics in the run up to the European elections.<sup>43</sup> In achieving this aim, however, Macron reinforced certain negative connotations that many of France's partners attach to French initiatives related to the defence of Europe. As the notion of ESA invites both clichés and worries, Paris faces a series of difficulties in articulating and selling the argument that it needs to be reinforced.

France's rationale stems from two axioms. The first is that NATO is paradoxically more Europe's business than it is that of the US; 'paradoxically' because NATO is routinely perceived to be run

*Growing disparity between ambitions and means is the key factor driving France's agenda towards ESA*

by and exclusively dependent upon Washington.<sup>44</sup> The second axiom is that Europeans consequently need to take more responsibility for their own security. The inevitable logic (for France) is that ESA is a necessity, and that Paris has a duty to lead in advancing this agenda and attracting partners to it. After Brexit, France will be the only country that is a member of the UN Security Council, the EU, NATO and the OSCE, and in possession of a credible nuclear arsenal. At the same time, US geostrategic interests have continued to tilt towards the Asia-Pacific

<sup>42</sup> Ministère des Armées (French Ministry of Defence), [Strategic Review of Defence and National Security 2017](#).

<sup>43</sup> BBC News, "[France's Macron pushes for 'true European army'](#)," 6 November 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Compte rendu No 27, Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées, [audition du General Denis Mercier \(2S\) sur l'évolution de l'Alliance Atlantique](#), 5 Mars 2019, Assemblée Nationale (Report 27 of the Committee on National Defence and Armed Forces of the French National Assembly, hearing of Major-General Denis Mercier on the evolution of the North-Atlantic Alliance, 5 March 2019).



region. While uncertainties over the transatlantic relationship are seen by Paris as a normal continuation of long-term trends, the 'Trump effect', which has deepened existing tensions over American involvement in Europe, has opened a new political avenue to further the ESA agenda.

However, Paris is clear that ESA should not be taken as a drive for independence or autarchic security; indeed, alongside strategic autonomy Paris recognises a parallel need for 'strategic restraint'. The French Chief of Defence, General Francois Lecointre, has articulated a vision in

*Paris is clear that ESA should not be taken as a drive for independence or autarchic security*

which strategic restraint is a response to a diffuse and contested security environment, insisting that France needs to prove that it can be strategically modest: it cannot be everywhere at the same time, imposing its influence in every situation.<sup>45</sup> Lecointre has also made clear that the French military is meant for crisis response, not for massive state-on-state conflict and that the French force structure is a tool of French foreign policy in an unpredictable world.<sup>46</sup>

Deeply ingrained in French strategic culture is the notion that such a defence posture inevitably requires a credible capability for sustainable force projection and a capacity for first entry into an operational theatre. In France, these essential capabilities have come under threat not only from the sheer multiplication of crises, but also because more and more advanced military technology is available to an ever growing number of state

and non-state belligerents.<sup>47</sup> The West's expeditionary engagements of the past two decades have faced obstacles that have rendered intervention ever trickier. Potential adversaries have, for example, developed stronger capacities for anti-access and area denial. The superiority of the West's conventional capability that once permitted uncomplicated force projection is gradually receding. An intervening party's freedom of action is more likely to be contested and reduced, while the defender has the advantage of intimate knowledge of the terrain and resources.

First entry is now a demanding and expensive capability, requiring a wide spectrum of means that cannot be provided by one state alone. The ESA that Paris routinely advocates to its European allies thus focuses on the ability of Europeans to act in partnership to collectively achieve this capability of first entry. France's role in this is to be able to act as a framework nation for a small-to-medium size joint entry operation.

### 3.2.2. THE E12: TURNING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

While France had been willing to use the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism, the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence and the European Defence Fund to encourage greater European capacity, the compromise eventually reached between Paris and Berlin on the implementation of PESCO resulted in a framework short of that required to meet the needs of a comprehensive European response to situations such as the Sahel. In order to advance greater ESA while avoiding the cumbersomeness of EU structures and securing the participation of willing and able countries such as Denmark (which opts out from the CSDP) and the UK, Paris proposed the E12.

<sup>45</sup> Compte rendu, Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées, [audition du Général François Lecointre, Chef d'Etat-Major des Armées, sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2019](#) (Report of the Committee on National Defence and Armed Forces, hearing of General François Lecointre, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, on the draft budget law for 2019 on 18 October 2018, regular session of 2018-19, 6).

<sup>46</sup> Ministère des Armées (French Ministry of Defence), "[Le Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale](#)" ("White Paper on Defence and National Security"), 29 April 2013.

<sup>47</sup> First entry relates to expeditionary missions in non-permissive environments and requires the intervening force to be able to reduce the level of threat and penetrate a more or less contested territory. "[L'entrée en premier et l'avenir de l'autonomie stratégique](#)" ("First entry and the future of strategic autonomy"), Focus stratégique, n° 70, novembre 2016, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI).

After the German Framework Nation Concept and the British Joint Expeditionary Force, France was the last major European military power to articulate a cooperative construct to

*France's military partnerships in Europe are entered into and designed so as to pull partners towards a higher spectrum of capabilities*

reflect its strategic culture and operational ambitions. The EI2 is meant as a non-binding, non-permanent forum that rests on a network of liaison officers. Regular meetings consider common crisis scenarios, doctrine development, lessons learned and joint planning. The aim is not to create an additional standing force, but to foster greater readiness to act in coalition if required. The EI2 thus promotes flexible and pragmatic cooperation, making use of existing instruments and resources. It is also meant to contribute to overcoming differences in threat perceptions among European allies. Joining the EI2 is intended to be a way of demonstrating—not least to Washington—a readiness to be a security provider by channelling defence spending in a meaningful way.<sup>48</sup>

The EI2 is also intended as a way of avoiding the pitfalls that have been encountered by a capacity-oriented approach to defence integration, i.e. one in which means are developed without a clear idea of ways or ends. Europe's military toolbox has yet to be rationalised. There is a surplus of obsolete capabilities while known capability gaps continue to deepen. Paris thus sees the EI2 as a framework to foster Europe's building of a set of capabilities appropriate to its strategic environment. It is about incrementally structuring forces and generating readiness with the overall goal of having the capacity for first entry.

France does not view this as a threat to NATO. On the contrary, for example, retired General Denis Mercier, former NATO Supreme Allied

Commander Transformation, has argued that NATO's refocusing on collective defence could offer the EU an opportunity for to invest in crisis management, in complementarity with NATO and for the security of Europe. The EI2 could take a leading role in this process with more inclusive defence integration initiatives, potentially at the EU level, building upon such a nucleus in the future.

### 3.2.3. FRANCE'S DEFENCE PARTNERSHIPS

In support of these overall strategic aims, the main objective of France's military partnerships in Europe is to curb the erosion of Europe's qualitative and quantitative advantage in first entry operations. Partnerships—including the defence relationship with Estonia—are entered into and designed so as to pull partners towards a higher spectrum of capabilities in order that they are able to participate in at least one aspect of first entry should the circumstances require.

In these efforts, France faces the extremely difficult challenge of breaking eastern Europeans' understanding of what ESA should mean, and how European security as a whole should be guaranteed. Paris will thus continue to underline that joining the EI2 or moving towards greater ESA does not contradict the aim of securing US involvement in Europe. The EI2 can contribute to improving Europe's

*The EI2 is meant as a non-binding, non-permanent forum. The aim is not to create an additional standing force, but to foster greater readiness to act in coalition if required*

position in the burden-sharing debate, both by encouraging more spending, and by fostering force structures and projection capacities that provide real added value.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of EI2 see: Alice Billon-Galland, Martin Quencez, "[A Military Workshop](#)," *Berlin Policy Journal*, November-December 2018.

### 3.3. A PARTNERSHIP WITH DIVERGING AIMS?

Through its promotion of ESA and its implementation through EI2, France's ambition is to become the leading driver of and actor in European defence. The absence of the UK after Brexit, and Germany's continuing reluctance to adequately strengthen its military potential (including raising its defence expenditure to 2% of GDP) make France the most natural contender for this position, but Paris still needs political support from European allies and partners, and practical examples of successful defence cooperation.

Estonia is mostly ready to offer to France what it needs in this context, in particular through practical cooperation on the ground in Africa and in Estonia itself. As discussed above, Estonia also gains substantially from this partnership. However, for Estonia, ESA remains conceptually difficult. Estonian interviewees stressed that Estonia is primarily motivated to cooperate with France to gain direct military benefits such as operational experience, interoperability and French investment in Baltic security. While Estonia recognises the value of supporting an EU defence dimension, it remains cautious about ESA and the possible contradictions between this concept and American engagement in Europe through NATO. Paris will (as it has recognised) need to explain and justify its conception of ESA further if it is to win the clear support of Estonia and other EU members who are willing to contribute to French/EU initiatives and operations, but unconvinced about France's overall strategic goals.

At present, then, the two countries enjoy a close bilateral defence relationship and accrue significant benefits from it. It is, however, not unreasonable to assume that this relationship may face difficulties in the longer term if France's and Estonia's strategic objectives remain not entirely coherent.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The defence and security cooperation between France and Estonia has passed through several stages since the early 1990s, and has now reached a level of maturity. Cooperation is evident in three main areas—substantial French involvement in the eFP, Estonia's contribution to force protection in operation Barkhane, and cooperation in the framework of the EI2. The two countries also conduct a regular strategic dialogue, and have cooperated in the defence procurement area.

It is clear that both countries derive substantial practical military benefit from this partnership, and that efforts should be made to preserve and enhance it.

- **Estonia and France should prioritise efforts to keep up the political momentum of their defence cooperation, and should present it—whenever and wherever suitable—to their Allies and partners as a positive example.**

These practical military benefits and the relationship as a whole could be further strengthened by increases in the two states' contributions to their own and the common security (although there are, of course, overstretch concerns related to the rotation of Estonian troops in Operation Barkhane and French troops in the eFP).

- **France should further enhance its presence in Estonia and on NATO's north-eastern flank. This might be achieved, for example, by deploying alongside the personnel and equipment that make up its Lynx mission, other capabilities that respond to recognised gaps in the Baltic region, such as air or coastal defence assets.**
- **Estonia should augment its contribution to Operation Barkhane. The current platoon-size detachment might be augmented with certain support elements in order to make it more capable and autonomous, or might even be enlarged to company size. France and Estonia could also agree to give more demanding tasks to the Estonian**

**contingent in Gao, which would increase the motivation and satisfaction of the Estonian military personnel.**

While the eastern and southern threat perceptions of Estonia and France inevitably remain distinct, the two countries have, through their cooperation, moved closer to bridging these threat perceptions. Both subscribe to the notion that the defence and deterrence concerns of eastern Europeans in the face of a large and aggressive neighbour should not overshadow the large-scale and multi-dimensional challenges of Europe's southern periphery, and vice versa. Furthermore, both recognise the importance of redressing the effects of decades of inadequate attention to and investment in defence.

Paris has also focussed its attention on what it sees as a paucity of strategic thinking in Europe. Partly in response, it has advocated the furthering of a concept of ESA that would foster a forward-looking European school of strategic thought and nurture the development of the capabilities that would be required to support this thinking. France's concept of ESA, far from advocating security independence from the US, refers to the very concrete capacity of Europeans in cooperation being able to achieve first entry into an operational theatre. The EI2 is France's preferred tool for achieving this capacity.

Despite the close Estonian-French defence relationship and Estonia's participation in EI2, however, it is apparent that Estonia remains cautious about France's ESA concept and concerned that it may detrimentally impact NATO. It is not inconceivable that Estonia's reluctance to endorse this fundamental French strategic goal, may be a source of misunderstanding and friction as their partnership deepens.

- **Estonia and France should invest in dialogue aimed at improved mutual understanding of their respective policy positions regarding European defence.**



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[INFO@ICDS.EE](mailto:INFO@ICDS.EE), [WWW.ICDS.EE](http://WWW.ICDS.EE)

