October 2022

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

Brief

France's Presidency

Louis Pernotte | Tony Lawrence

EU Defence After Ukraine
Series No. 3

Emmanuel Macron's European activism made certain that France's 2022 Presidency of the Council of the European Union (PFUE – *Présidence Française de l'Union Européenne*) would be anticipated by the other Member States with varying degrees of eagerness or nervousness. The PFUE, from 1 January to 30 June, gave France the power to set the EU's agenda, including in security and defence where shaping an EU able to act autonomously in the military domain has been a French priority for some decades. In the event, Europe's security and defence landscape during the PFUE was overwhelmingly dominated by the build-up to and first months of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, both increasing the relevance of the topic of European defence and substantially influencing the security perceptions of European countries. The war boosted the PFUE's technical achievements in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but these were somewhat overshadowed – and perhaps even damaged – by Macron's personal style of intervention in the war.

France has always sought stronger European defence arrangements and has tried, with varying success, to get this frequently controversial concept accepted by its partners. Where France has succeeded, it has often done so through initiatives engineered in cooperation with other European states. In 1989, for example, François Mitterrand's France and Helmut Kohl's Germany founded the French-German brigade, a military unit bringing together soldiers from both countries and alternatively led by a French and German commander. Nine years later, on 4 December 1998, French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair committed to deepen European defence at the Saint-Malo summit. The Saint-Malo declaration advocated the construction of a European security and defence policy (ESDP) within the Common Foreign and Security Policy: "*the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises*".[1] The proposal was endorsed by the European Council in Cologne in 1999 and through the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, the ESDP became the CSDP. Under these policies, France was the main contributor to several EU military operations, especially in Africa, such as EUFOR Artemis in 2003 and EUFOR Tchad/RCA from 2007 to 2009.

France has always sought stronger European defence arrangements and has tried, with varying success, to get this frequently controversial concept accepted by its partners

During its previous presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008, France had also pushed European defence themes. As a result, at the December 2008 Brussels European Council, the Member States pledged to improve European defence capabilities, to develop joint weapons projects, and to implement an Erasmus scheme for young military officers (an idea later echoed by Emmanuel Macron in his famous speech at the Sorbonne calling, amongst other things, for greater coherence in Europe's strategic culture).[2] They also attempted to find a balance between an Atlanticist stance and strategic autonomy, another theme to which France was to return in its 2022 presidency, albeit usually under the less threatening heading of 'sovereignty'.[3] The 2008 French presidency was also challenged by a war

triggered by Vladimir Putin. On 8 August, Russia invaded Georgia and France used its presidency role to foster a 'compromise' (actually a recognition of the outcome of the invasion) to demonstrate Europe's capacity to be influential on the international stage.

Macron's European Ambition

Macron's commitment to European sovereignty is in line with the policies of his predecessors. To summarise, he advocates Europe's independence from the world's great powers like China and the US, and European sovereignty in every domain. This includes defence and security, which he defined in his Sorbonne speech as fundamental for Europe's overall sovereignty, while stressing that European defence is not opposed to, but intended as a complement to NATO.

Macron's ideas have faced resistance, especially from central and eastern European states, but several have nonetheless been implemented during the last five years. He played a leading role in launching new initiatives following the publication of the EU's Global Strategy in 2016, including the European Defence Fund, approved by the European Parliament in April 2021 (albeit with only 7.3 billion euros compared to the 13 billion initially planned). He has also pushed the idea of a European Intervention Initiative (E2I), a multinational defence cooperation grouping to encourage common strategic culture and provide a framework for engagement in crisis management. It currently counts 13 participating states (including Estonia), but its potential remains, so far, largely unproven.

Macron's success in the past five years, though, has been more ideological than material. While scepticism regarding what Paris has promoted has been high, Russia's war in Ukraine has added to the special circumstances of Brexit, Trump, and Covid to bring several countries closer to French positions, notably southern European countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece, but also northern European countries – for example, the Netherlands, historically not forward leaning on European strategic autonomy – joined France in a joint declaration in August 2021 that recalls many of France's usual positions on defence (as well as the economy).[4] Meanwhile, the use of European Peace Facility funds to reimburse donations of military equipment to Ukraine has cast EU defence in a more favourable light in some otherwise sceptical Member States.[5]

The use of European Peace Facility funds to reimburse donations of military equipment to Ukraine has cast EU defence in a more favourable light in some otherwise sceptical Member States

Under Macron, France has also made efforts to make its own defence policy more European. French soldiers have regularly participated in NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) in Estonia and Lithuania since 2017 and, in response to Russia's war in Ukraine, the French army dispatched 500 troops to Romania (a historical ally of France) to take on the framework nation role of one of the new eFP missions. Meanwhile, French diplomats have sought to Europeanise the formerly heavily French military operation in Mali through the establishment of a European task force, Takuba. This gathered special forces from various EU countries, including Estonia and Sweden, but collapsed in February 2022 when the French troops were expelled from Mali by the new local government.[6] France has also developed its bilateral defence ties with several European countries, for example selling high-technology frigates to Athens.[7]

France's activism in European defence over the past five years thus led to great expectations for this policy domain during the PFUE.

The Compass

France convened several ministerial meetings devoted to defence and security during its presidency. The first meeting between defence ministers was held in Brest (where the French ballistic missile submarine fleet is anchored, and a defence industry cluster is located) before Russia's attack on Ukraine but produced no substantial outcomes. The month of March was focused on European defence, with a summit in Versailles (10-11 March: Versailles is another multifacetedly symbolic location, synonymous with the might of the French monarchy, the birth of the German Empire, and the end of the First World War). The Versailles Summit demonstrated Europe's unity

in the face of the unfolding tragedy in Ukraine which, naturally, was a focal point of discussions. But EU heads of state and government also highlighted the need to strengthen European sovereignty in three domains: defence, energy, and economy. On defence, they called for increased defence expenditure, for creating new incentives for joint weapons procurements, and for better preparations against hybrid threats.[8] These priorities match those of the EU's most recent security and defence strategy document, the Strategic Compass.

The Strategic Compass was perhaps the greatest defence-related success of the French presidency – although the work to develop it began in mid-2020, it was formally adopted at the European Council of 24-25 March 2022.[9] It is a public document analysing the threats faced by the EU and setting guidelines for the collective action of the Union and its Member States.[10] As the third iteration of an EU security and defence strategy, it is not revolutionary, but more a reflection of both changed strategic circumstances (it was, for example, substantially rewritten after the start of Russia's military build-up on Ukraine's borders) and of the EU's experience so far in implementing the CSDP. Its most striking proposal is the creation, by 2025, of a rapid reaction force of 5 000 personnel, but even this proposal draws on the EU's earlier headline goal (a modular expeditionary force of up to 60 000 troops agreed at the European Council in Helsinki in 1999, but never realised) and the battlegroups concept (standby battalion-sized forces for rapid response that have been formed and exercised, but never used in anger). Also of note is the intention to improve infrastructure for military mobility, which will assist western European states in quickly deploying troops to potential crises in countries like the Baltic states – albeit that such contingencies would most likely take place under a NATO, rather than an EU, flag. The Compass does, though, emphasise the importance of a strong relationship between the EU and NATO for European security.[11]

The Compass is also very ambitious in terms of military capabilities, referring to projects for a next generation fighter and next generation main battle tank, both aimed at collectively addressing European shortfalls. These too, though, are not new – there is already a French/German/Spanish project for a future combat air system that would be a leading candidate for wider European adoption, while the 'main ground combat system', launched in 2012, aims to replace France's Leclerc, Germany's Leopard II, and perhaps other Member States' tanks by 2035.[12]

Elsewhere, the Compass is more restrained. Its rather vague suggestions for a European toolbox and response teams to tackle hybrid threats and enhanced efforts to address disinformation seem insufficient to meet the threats posed in these fields and will probably have only limited impact on Europe's strategic situation. Here, it is apparent that the Member States, rather than the Union, will continue to play the leading role.

The Presidency

The PFUE, like any presidency of the Council of the EU, lasted only six months and was thus unlikely to produce a substantial shift in the Union's character. The presidency's powers are also quite limited – it sets the agenda and chairs meetings – but the holder must balance the contradictory aims of acting as honest broker and promoting its own policy goals. In the specific case of the French presidency, the French presidential election in April and general election in June also kept President Macron and his ministers busy with internal affairs.

Against this background, the PFUE was broadly a success. The Elysée Palace claims to have achieved 97 percent of the goals it had set itself.[13] Even Macron's frequent critics, such as *Libération's* Europe correspondent Jean Quatremer, had positive words.[14] The French presidency also attracted warm comments from the heads of the EU Institutions. Ursula von der Leyen wrote, for example:

> Dear @EmmanuelMacron. The results of the French presidency honor France and the whole of Europe. Together we have acted strongly to support Ukraine, to move towards our climate goals, to put order in the digital world and so many other examples. Thank you.[15]

Any EU presidency programme can easily be thrown off course by an international crisis

Any EU presidency programme, however, can easily be thrown off course by an international crisis. In its 2008 presidency, France faced the war in Georgia and the global financial crisis;

in 2022, Russia's war in Ukraine had a major impact. The war brought levels of European (and transatlantic) unity that would have been hard to imagine only 12 months earlier. European nations – Germany notably – committed to higher defence spending, as well as substantial sanctions against Russia, and common funding of military assistance for Ukraine. Denmark removed its CSDP opt-out and Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO, bringing greater strategic coherence to north-east Europe. Macron's European defence agenda thus received an unexpected boost during the PFUE, even if many Member States largely saw themselves as addressing the new circumstances in the framework of NATO, rather than the EU.

But Macron's handling of the build-up to Russia's attack and its full-scale war in Ukraine undoubtedly also cast a shadow over the PFUE, at least in some quarters. It was not until June that Macron visited Kyiv. His calls for ceasefires and negotiations and his warnings against humiliating Putin, his continuous yet fruitless dialogue with Moscow, his references to Russia's inclusion in a post-war security architecture, his lukewarm attitude to further EU enlargement, and France's underwhelming military support to Ukraine went down poorly with many Member States, in particular those on the EU's eastern edges, and often in Ukraine itself.[16]

While Macron did not claim to speak for the EU in any of this, many Member States were unhappy at his apparent unwillingness to seek any kind of consensus before grandstanding on the world stage. This was, at best, a missed opportunity; it may also have damaged the cause of European sovereignty that Paris espouses and damaged the reputation of a presidency that was technically successful in CSDP.

Endnotes

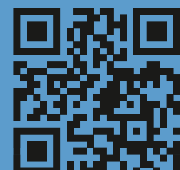
1 "British-French Summit, St Malo, 3-4 December 1998," reproduced in Maartje Rutten (comp.), "From St Malo to Nice: European Defence Core Documents," Chaillot Paper 47 (May 2001), Western European Union Institute for Security Studies, 8-9.
2 EU, Council of the EU, "Conclusions of the Brussels European Council of 11 and 12 December 2008 on the European Security and Defence Policy"; "Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version," Ouest France, 26 September 2017.
3 "[The Council] reaffirms the goal of strengthening the strategic partnership between the EU and NATO in order to address current needs, in a spirit of mutual enhancement and respect for their decision-making autonomy." EU, Council of the EU, "Conclusions of the Brussels European Council"; French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, "Programme of the Presidency."
4 "Joint statement of France and the Netherlands," Government of the Netherlands, 31 August 2021.
5 "Estonia to get back over half of value of arms sent to Ukraine from EU," ERR, 19 July 2022.
6 Elise Vincent, "Les contours du retrait militaire français du Mali se précisent [The contours of the French withdrawal from Mali are becoming clearer]," Le Monde, 18 February 2022.
7 Marina Rafenberg, "Alliance militaire renforcée entre Paris et Athènes [Enhanced military alliance between Paris and Athens]," Le Monde, 18 January 2022.
8 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, "The Versailles declaration, 10 and 11 March 2022," 11 March 2022.
9 EU, Council of the EU, "European Council conclusions, 24-25 March 2022," 25 March 2022.
10 EU, Council of the EU, "A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade," 21 March 2022.
11 "A stronger and more capable European Union in the field of security and defence will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members." EU, "A Strategic Compass", 5.
12 Airbus, "Future Combat Air System (FCAS),"; Theodoros Kaloudiotis, "The Main Battle Tank Project: A Bearer of Interoperability for a Coherent European Defence," Finabel, 23 January 2020.
13 Karl de Meyer and Catherine Chasignoux, "La présidence française de l'UE est unanimement saluée dans les sphères européennes [The French presidency of the EU is unanimously praised in Brussels]," Les Echos, 30 June 2022.
14 Jean Quatremer, Twitter, 30 June 2022.
15 Ursula von der Leyen, Twitter, 30 June 2022.
16 Paul Taylor, "Why Macron is failing on strategic autonomy," Politico, 26 May 2022.

About the Authors

Louis Pernotte and Tony Lawrence

Louis Pernotte is a student at Sciences Po Rennes. He is interested in northern European security and in the EU's defence policies. Tony Lawrence is head of the defence policy and strategy programme at ICDS.

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



International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee

ISSN 2228-2076