

REPORT

The Future of NATO and the Project of European Strategic Autonomy

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RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



The French idea of establishing European strategic autonomy is perceived differently across different EU member countries. From the French official perspective, this autonomy is a means to transform the EU from being an economic power into a geopolitical player on the world stage independent from the United States. This idea has gained popularity in Europe, especially during the Trump administration's era (2017-2021) when rising European dependency on Washington was no longer widely perceived positively compared to during the Obama administration (2009-2017).

1. The Multiple Challenges Facing the Project of European Strategic Autonomy

The conflicting interests of European countries and their respective focus on promoting bilateral ties with Washington remains the main hurdle towards achieving European strategic autonomy. There is also a structural obstacle to this project. Indeed, one has to consider that

the project of European integration was not established on the basis of power projection. It is always important to remember this at a time when we talk about creating a powerful Europe. For most European countries, the creation of a common market was the primary motivation for joining the union. The European economic project started in 1957 when the Treaty of Rome was signed which embodies the integration of a common market. This economic motive also explains why it is not a lack of capability that prevents the EU from becoming an independent power on the international scene but rather it is due to a [lack](#) of political will as the EU member states do not share a common [geopolitical vision](#). Last but not least, the French project is based on the idea of supporting European sovereignty while European private actors are part of the US rules-based international economic system.

During the period 2019-2020, President Emmanuel Macron invited President Vladimir Putin to launch a dialogue with Russia without any consultation with Paris' main EU partners. This is one of the reasons why the Baltic countries and the Eastern European countries have not been particularly enthusiastic about the French project. Furthermore, Macron's interview published in The [Economist](#) magazine in which he described NATO as "brain dead" was not well received by these countries. These remarks about NATO and the initiative to launch [dialogue](#) with Moscow have dented Macron's credibility with the majority of European countries as well as with the United States. Therefore, the French project has been presented as ancillary to NATO rather than as a French alternative to the US-led military organization.

Even if it is true that historically the EU was popularly viewed by the French as a means to counter the United States and NATO, French realism has led French decision-makers to adopt a pragmatic stance and project Paris' initiative as a complementary platform to NATO rather than a rival to it. French decision-makers believe this pragmatism will aid Paris in convincing the majority of EU member countries about the relevance of the European defense project.

On the NATO side, during its 28th summit held in Brussels on Monday, June 14, 2021, 30 heads of state of member countries decided

to strengthen their security partnership and to write a new chapter in the history of the transatlantic alliance. NATO's three main goals are: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. The primary threat to the collective security alliance is still Russia's "aggressive actions." However, the rising threat of terrorism has been at the center of NATO countries' agendas since 2001. A new challenge facing NATO which was expressed at its 28th summit is China's assertiveness and rising influence on the international scene: "NATO leaders [called on](#) China to uphold its international commitments and to act responsibly in the international system. They agreed on the need to address the challenges posed by China's growing influence and international policies, and to engage with China to defend NATO's security interests."

As Kori Schake explains in her book "[Safe Passage](#), the Transition From British to American Hegemony," the new Chinese challenge to the rules-based international system contrasts with the peaceful transition from British to American global leadership during the 20th century. This new Chinese challenge will be at the center of NATO's agenda for the foreseeable future as Beijing poses a threat not only to individual member countries of the alliance but also threatens the military alliance itself. This threat is tangible considering China's advances in developing military technology, its heightened activity in cyberspace as well as its involvement in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. Against this backdrop, the way forward for NATO as a military alliance could be to prevent the constitution of a non-Western anti-hegemonic alliance between China, Russia, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and Iran. The rising influence of non-Western powers such as Russia and China is also having an impact on the future of Syria. Therefore, NATO as a military alliance should place at the center of its agenda the study of non-Western diplomatic/military activities which challenge NATO countries' influence in crisis management.

The main impediment to tackling the rise of these new powers is the internal divide among NATO countries. For example, they do not have a common answer in regard to the question of China's challenge (which may involve Russian support to Beijing). The current

dispute between Western supporters of dialogue, containment or confrontation regarding countering Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus does not require countries to hide their mutual interests to preserve a military alliance based on democratic values and shared ideals of human rights. To confront these new and old challenges, one has to consider the necessity to strengthen the political links behind the military alliance, especially in light of a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan potentially turning into a new territorial base for international terrorism as well as transforming into a pro-Chinese state. The new challenges facing NATO must also be understood in the context of rising Russian influence in Syria and the risks facing the alliance's member countries, such as being marginalized from the diplomatic process to end the Syrian civil war (the Astana talks). The way forward for NATO is to take into account this new connection between the conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, the South Caucasus (the Karabakh war) and the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AfPak) arena.

The ramifications of these three areas of conflict (Syria/Lebanon, the South Caucasus, AfPak) include the circulation of fighters (Shiite militias, Turkish mercenaries) from one battlefield to another. The implication for NATO is the need to rethink its regional approach towards the role of non-state actors in modern warfare.

Indeed, this connectivity is due to the weakening of national institutions in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, non-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, and fighters associated with the Houthis in Yemen, and ISIS and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been emboldened by the transfer and proliferation of new military technology. The evolution of military technology such as the development of drones and ballistic missiles makes it much easier for non-state actors to improve their capabilities both in the defensive and offensive spheres. NATO's response and assessment of these new trends should include the question of Russian/Chinese support or relations with these non-state actors. Asymmetrical responses or hybrid activities of countries like Iran still necessitate conventional responses but these alone are no longer sufficient to safeguard the security of NATO

member countries. Another challenge is the horizontal (among non-nuclear countries) and vertical (increase in the arsenal of nuclear countries) [nuclear proliferation](#) among countries. The focus of NATO member countries should concentrate on Russian and Chinese nuclear activities as well as refining their diplomatic strategy towards potential nuclear countries such as Iran.

2. France's Ambitious Project – The Likelihood of Success

In light of the above, can the European strategic autonomy project or the construction of a [“European pillar”](#) inside NATO be realized? First of all, there is NATO as well as EU concern about Turkey given its purchase of Russia's S400 missile system, its military drills in the Eastern Mediterranean and whether or not it will remain committed to the deconfliction mechanism set up to avoid outright conflict with Greece ([line of communication](#)). Even if it is true that Turkey remains a committed member of NATO, there are significant differences between the alliance's member countries. According to NATO's [secretary general](#), the alliance is fully capable of dealing with these “differences” and mitigating the risk of a military incident in the Eastern Mediterranean given the growing military presence of Greece and Turkey in the region. Nevertheless the new Greek-French military alliance is designed to directly confront Turkey's perceived military threat to Athens. It is important to note that this new military partnership reflects the political will of two NATO member countries (Greece and France) to prepare for a military confrontation against a third NATO member country, namely Turkey.

Secondly, the question of Europe's role in the world is a [dividing issue](#) in Europe. Merkel, Draghi, Sanchez and even Morawiecki agree that there is no contradiction between strengthening Europe and strengthening NATO. But several leaders – including the German chancellor – have pointed out that Europe's economic strength will also bolster its political strength rather than a shared defense project. On the other side, the Baltic countries remain unconvinced about the French project. “As soon as we talk to them about EU autonomy, they tell us NATO, NATO, NATO,” declared a [French](#) diplomat. Biden's statements vaguely encouraging stronger European defense have yet

to influence the Baltic countries where any real or perceived threat to NATO is seen as an existential issue, owing to their neighbor Russia. The White Paper on European Defense to be published in 2022 during France's presidency of the EU is likely to reflect Paris' ambition. However, before its formal adoption, it will be presented in mid-November 2021 by High Representative Josep Borrell to EU defense ministers, and then discussed in December by the EU member countries. This new White Paper will not end the lack of European unity while the EU member countries attempt to deal with the French project concerning European strategic autonomy. To overcome internal differences, the White Paper will also have to define common European interests, especially when dealing with EU neighboring countries. The French proposal for achieving European strategic autonomy and reducing EU dependence on the United States does not enjoy unanimity among the union's 27 member countries. The chaotic withdrawal from Kabul confirmed Washington's inability to act alone. In the wake of the trilateral security pact between the United States, Australia and the UK known as AUKUS, France reiterated its commitment to NATO but signed major contracts with Greece for the delivery of frigates and corvettes, in addition to a recently placed order for Rafale fighter aircraft. Turkey sees this new Greece-France partnership as a threat, particularly as it is accompanied by a mutual assistance clause. Equipped with German submarines, will the Turkish army one day be confronted with Greek ships bought from France in the Aegean Sea?

As a pillar of the EU, French diplomats will have to convince the union's member countries of the necessity to establish a new European military organization parallel to NATO. This will also depend on Washington agreeing to such a military force which the Biden administration for political reasons could agree to, but is likely to face [resistance](#) from the Pentagon.



✉ info@rasanahiiis.com

🐦 [@rasanahiiis](#)

🌐 www.rasanah-iiis.org

