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Priorities and challenges for French and European defense

Assuming the need for a European defence

Today, because it does not think of itself as a power, Europe is threatened by any kind of predation by the three great powers of the "strategic triangle", who skillfully play on the lack of coherence and cohesion of the European construction. The problems are of an economic, fiscal and social nature between countries, but also stem from a lack of shared strategic vision, different perceptions of threats, a fascination with the United States through bilateral games, in a word: the lack of a common diplomacy. The Chinese know how to build on our "internal contradictions". The Russians have an obvious ability to manipulate information and perceptions. As for the Americans, they are in a position to enjoy the benefits of an unbalanced relationship that borders on consensual vassalization.

This is the challenge of defending Europe today. The United States is no longer the reliable ally it was since its transfer of interests to Asia: President Obama's notion of "pivot". NATO therefore no longer provides total assurance. Yet the Atlantic Alliance subsists regardless of the credibility of the Americans' commitment. Article V commits the other member countries to each other just as much. Europeans must therefore organize themselves to ensure their security. European construction, at the heart of the socialist project, has not yet succeeded in making the Union a geopolitical power capable of discussing on an equal footing with the great powers.

Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) has recently decided to contribute to improving the military capabilities of its member states, whether through voluntary commitments in the framework of permanent structured cooperation (PSC/PESCO) or through a European Defence Fund (EDFef) through which the EU subsidizes research and innovation projects from its budget. At the end of the spring negotiations on the multiannual financial framework (MFF 2021-2027) between member states, this fund should finally be endowed with one billion euros per year, since the 750 billion euro recovery plan ("Next Generation EU") does not at this stage precisely identify any investment in defense. In the face of the threats and gaps in the objectives and means allocated in the EU, it is therefore important to seek a consensus on the left on the need for a credible and sovereign defense at the European level.

Preserving the means of our sovereignty

The Fifth Republic has an autonomous nuclear deterrent and a doctrine independent of NATO nuclear plans. Under Article 5 of the Constitution, the President of the Republic is the guarantor of the nation's independence and territorial integrity. This conception of our sovereignty has so far been confirmed by embodying and guaranteeing the credibility of the French deterrent. Yet deterrence is a strategic continuum that begins with the operational capability of conventional forces.

Deterrence is not "all or nothing". It is a logic of complementarity in the face of any type of threat, which begins with the classic protection of the territory, of the essential functions of the Nation (institutions, population, vital networks...) and continues with the projection of force or power, before envisaging the use of atomic weapons, preceded by a possible "final warning". In other words, far from the caricature of "all or nothing", deterrence only works if the range of forces is capable and available.

This Mitterrand-Gallic heritage is a necessity and an opportunity for Europe and France. There is obviously no question of transferring this symbol of sovereignty and tool of power to an unelected or dysfunctional supranational body. Pending a possible reinforced European integration, France, as a major power in Europe, is helping to protect Europe, both within the framework of NATO (Article V) and the EU (Article 42-7 of the Treaty on European Union). To do so, it needs a comprehensive model army.

However, in 2020, the French army still has capability shortfalls (the best known, and despite current deliveries, are in the field of airborne surveillance and strategic transport and supply aircraft) that the current military programming law (LPM 2019-2025) has not yet filled. This will take a few more years, unless the pace of deliveries is accelerated, an option that the current government has not considered as part of the national recovery plan.

Defense, an essential economic tool

Defense investment is economically profitable in the long term, thanks to localized jobs, sovereign technologies, and French intellectual property innovations. It is even economically the least costly investment, due to a fiscal and social return that is all the more rapid as the recourse to importing components and labor is limited. This profitability also emanates numerous and lasting benefits for a large number of industrial sectors of the future. Since the majority of armament companies have a range of civil and military products, investment in armament programs immediately benefits civilian production. These immediate benefits of duality are a central issue, widely practiced by Europeans' military and civilian competitors. The production of helicopters and their engines, as well as electronics and vetronics, illustrate this reality. Defense spending is therefore not a cost center; it is an expense that stimulates innovation, productivity and exports, while developing the industrial fabric in the territories. Several undisputed studies show that one euro invested in defense pays back two after ten years.

France's defense investments serve the interests of all Europeans

Our country would benefit from investing to maintain its status as a significant military power; on the one hand, to dissuade any potential blackmail against European interests on the part of the three great powers, or even a regional power (Turkey, Iran...) and on the other hand, to ensure the defense of European values internationally. This "hard power" would intervene in support of the economic and technological "soft power" among others. It would also enable Europe to assume a historic role in the service of peace and the protection of populations wounded by armed conflict. This challenge is also a structuring factor in mobilizing them and rebuilding economic and social cohesion in France and in Europe. The more we invest in defense, the more competitive we will eventually be in many areas, consolidating our common interests with complex technologies that are essential to our protection.

The plan to re-equip the armies can be accelerated by committing now to the expenditures provided for in the military programming law. Needs are identified and planned. The updating of the LPM scheduled for 2021 to take into account the "macroeconomic situation" and define the spending trajectory up to 2025 is the ideal window of opportunity. Unfortunately, the current executive clearly has no intention of using this review clause to accelerate investments or even launch new programs. Thus, the revival of economic activity through investment in national defense offers a unique lever for the future: it calls for an industrial and technological base of sovereignty, by favoring the localization in Europe of production deemed indispensable.

Human factors, a priority for defense

The French armed forces are undersized in human terms, which leads to strong tensions on personnel and the preservation of skills. Increasing the number of military personnel is a necessity. The recruitment of 11,000 soldiers in 2016-2017 in the land task force has enabled us to cope with the additional commitment of Operation Sentinel. Since then, in addition to annual troop renewal, the armed forces have been recruiting mainly in the intelligence, digital and cyber defense fields. To ensure the security of our fellow citizens, 27,000 new recruits will be hired in 2021, as regiments need soldiers, warships need crews, and air and space forces need airmen and airwomen. The armies are a formidable vector of integration and social advancement for the youth of our country, especially for those who are further removed from the labor market by the crisis. They have a human management that is both rewarding and qualifying.

An assured defense with the citizens

The National Guard, created by François Hollande in 2016, deserves more than a success of esteem. It brings together, in a single structure, all the reservists of the defense and security forces. It is the natural receptacle for any initiative to develop citizen engagement for the defense of our country, including support for internal security and support for civil security. It still suffers from an under-budget allocation that does not adequately meet the aspirations for engagement of our citizens, especially the youngest ones.

Following on from Chapter 2 of Jaures' "New Army", it is necessary to improve the interpenetration of the "active" and the "reserve"; the ideal army according to Jaures is a republican army that is one with society in all its diversity. All are represented and all are united in an effort to defend the Nation through a complex cement, a mixture of common belief in a democratic and patriotic ideal, and a desire to live together. Far from the recent concept of "universal national service," which has not found its role because it has not been thought of as the "new army," it is up to Parliament to conceive of the essential role of citizens with the Nation.

France at the initiative of a Europe that is building its unity

By strengthening its military power, France will succeed in reconstituting a political power capable of rebalancing European construction. Moreover, investing in defense will help in the long term to narrow the economic gap between member states while contributing to the reindustrialization of our country. The resources available to France will have a knock-on effect on our allies. This is already the case, on a small scale, with our commitment in the Sahel and the projection of our naval aviation group in the Mediterranean. Faced with the threats of an unstable world, we are faced with a necessity, not a choice.

In this way, through a knock-on effect, other Europeans will join our actions, according to their means and ambitions. This will contribute to a better sharing of our strategic visions and the perception of threats, leading to a shared geopolitical, industrial and military culture. The European Union, as an institution, has a full role to play in the implementation of this project, by setting up financing, ensuring consistency of needs, encouraging European purchases (principle of conditionality), and even the group purchase of European-manufactured equipment.

At the same time, France's vocation is to remain in NATO, so as not to distance itself from our allies, to gradually convince them that there is a credible and less costly alternative to help them face current and future threats. By becoming the most militarily capable member of NATO on the European continent, France would contribute to achieving Europe's strategic autonomy without frightening its neighbors or risking NATO becoming hostile to it.

The situation generated by Covid-19 has led Europe to question its resilience during crises. A unique opportunity presents itself within the European Union to break its own shackles in order to ensure the survival of the European project through a rebalancing of current policies, too much oriented towards competition between States and not enough on cooperation.

Defense protects Europe and France from dislocation

France is falling behind in the internal market, with its trade deficit (59 billion euros for 2020) and its net contribution to the EU budget (7-8 billion euros per year) affecting the financing of its defense and our social pact. Beyond that, these imbalances threaten the viability of the European project. The joint construction of defence and its associated industry enables Europeans to work towards their unity. Supporting the defense industrial base in France and Europe requires a strong political mobilization to call on our European partners to commit to a common sovereignty, to innovate, produce and buy European. Any strengthened integration must be based on this pact between Europeans. The time has come to recast the original balance with Germany, as it did at the time of the Mitterrand-Kohl partnership. With the double crisis of Brexit and the pandemic, the time has come to give Europe a prosperous and democratic future.

The plan for sustainable defense

The Ministry of the Armed Forces, the State's largest investor, the second largest public employer and the largest user of State land (including 11 Natura 2000 sites) must set an example in terms of sustainable development. The Valbonne site, with its 1,500 civilian and military personnel, is one of the exemplary sites in terms of ecological and environmental transition. In addition, the sustainable development plan "place au soleil" will make available by 2025 more than 2,000 hectares of land with photovoltaic farms. This desire to transform spaces must be accompanied by the effort

to integrate an ecological component into all research and innovation projects, since they are mostly dual-use - civilian and military. Through their missions and resources, our armed forces must be capable of reacting quickly and effectively for the benefit of populations facing a major climate crisis.

In conclusion, a left-wing project with a national ambition must address the security of the French people, which is one of their priorities along with education, employment, housing and health. This is ensured on the territory thanks to a policy that allows us to provide a global response to all threats. Our defense policy must integrate the European dimension, both in its ambitions to defend the continent and the democratic values we hold dear, but also in the global challenges we must face, such as climate change, the current epidemic, access to drinking water or mass migration, which require collective responses. The investments needed to develop the disruptive technologies we need also encourage us to cooperate with our European partners. These investments create jobs in our large network of small and medium-sized companies and some major industrial groups, jobs that cannot be relocated, for the development of equipment and technologies used in civilian applications. Finally, our project must support, beyond the means and a fair employment policy, a sustainable defense policy that is a model to be followed.

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