

Joint Article of Ralph Thiele, President of EuroDefenceGermany and Denis Verret, Member of the Council of EuroDefenceFrance: 26/10/2023

(NB: Disclaimer: the opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors)

The French-German relation in Defence: a must!

But can't we do better?

Suggested ways and means.

Whatever you call it: couple, engine, tandem. The ‘French-German’ is a must. There is no option. An inclusive one, open to other EU member states or even to like-minded third countries, for whom a strong European pillar of the transatlantic alliance is essential and the European ambition for strategic autonomy a necessary tribute to global security requirements. But this fair vision shared by France and Germany faces a lack of confidence, on both sides!

From the perspective of industrial interests, each side is suspicious that the other wants more and more for itself and less and less for the partner, and is trying to take undue advantage of the partnership.

And from a more strategic perspective, the Germans are still convinced that France remains reticent about NATO and doesn't sufficiently appreciate its strategic value for NATO's European partners. And the French feel that Germany is too credulous an ally of the US, despite the clear evidence of the ‘America First’ syndrome and the risk of versatility in the US attitude towards allies.

However, the role of the Biden administration has been the most instrumental in opposing the Russian aggression against Ukraine:

“The transatlantic relationship and EU-NATO cooperation, in full respect of the principles set out in the Treaties and those agreed by the European Council, including the principles of inclusiveness, reciprocity and decision-making autonomy of the EU, are key to our overall security. A stronger and more capable EU 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 of its members.” (The Versailles Declaration 10 and 11 of March 2022 - EEAS). The Strategic Compass, adopted unanimously by the 27 EU Member States the same month (March 2022), repeats the same key words.

And as far as the divergence of industrial interests is concerned, the industry needs to respect its own interests but also the requirements and framing fixed by the public authorities concerned: the necessary leadership of one side (or

the other) but full equality in terms of volume and technological value between the industrial partners. This is the way in which the highest political levels and the chiefs of the armed forces of our two countries have given the necessary impetus for the sake of the air and ground systems of systems of the future, i.e. the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS).

These steps of convergence are necessary but not sufficient for the sake of a stronger French and German contribution to the more autonomous, sovereign and responsible European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Two points in particular come to mind:

1. Method is of essence

- We need more comprehensive, concrete joint proposals to meet common operational requirements, ensure real military operational capability and master the critical technologies of today and tomorrow;
- We need to go deeper between France and Germany (to start with) than the Strategic Compass, with a joint White Paper on security and defence, not meaning that we will do everything together, but committing ourselves to proceed as well as possible in governmental and industrial cooperation in order to match common and respective priorities;
- With regard to short-term purchases by each nation, we have to overcome national preferences and, if there is no national solution, we have to stop denying other off the shelf European solutions, while of course American solutions cannot be ignored.
- Short-term priorities should protect the need to prepare for the future through joint developments. Cooperation is a prerequisite for critical mass;
- Exports are another prerequisite for critical mass: arms export policy must comply with the trilateral agreement on industrial export control co-signed by France, Germany and Spain in Paris on 17 September 2021 and promulgated in the summer of 2022, and welcome other countries willing to join, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom;
- The programmes needed to promote consolidation must be followed by integration through centres of excellence fairly distributed among the parties.

2. Proper communication through media and social networks is important

- If only negative comments and bashing dominate our respective public debates, the positive outcome of our respective efforts will be harder to achieve.
- We need to ensure as far as possible that each element of our collaboration is properly covered by the media and social networks:
 - A good agreement, reached by simple consensus or joint performance, must be unleashed and valorised: for example, the recent success of the MRTT in Canada, which, after many other international successes, proves that the European solution is the best in class; we must valorise the competitiveness of the European defence and space industry, in particular thanks to its consolidation: in military transport aircraft, helicopters, satellites or tactical missiles; we are far from nowhere, but international and American competition is becoming even tougher with the war in Ukraine;
 - an agreement reached in pain has not to be silenced: ex: the French-German agreement regarding industry export control , signed in November 2019 (now joined by Spain as said above). The consensus has been hard to get in Germany. Hiding such an outcome in joint understanding that both cooperation and export have to go together weakens it.
 - We don't have to hide cases of divergence, but we must make every effort to overcome them: MGCS is a good recent example! There is no reason not to consider a possible convergence in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), as long as its shortcomings are addressed! It is imperative to refine the project in order to align it with NATO planning, to include more comprehensively the diversity of threats and of possible operational and interoperable defensive and offensive responses, and to promote European short-medium and long-term alternatives.
 - And if a dead end is noticed on a particular topic, let's face it , make it public and valorise the perspective of unblocking, if any.
 - Clearly, dialogue must be intensified between French and German counterparts involved in Franco-German defence relations: the recent interministerial seminar co-chaired by President Macron and Chancellor Scholz is a wise initiative of the need for a top-down approach; the choice of the Airbus Centre of Excellence in Hamburg to launch the seminar was also wise.
 - But the dialogue - person to person - at each level of the necessary concertation between the respective officials needs to be systematized: if this is not enough, why not consider the appointment by the top

levels of our two countries of a German and a French "caretaker", coming from civil society, whose task would be to monitor the evolution of bilateral defence relations and to alert, in concert and in parallel, the top level of any serious discrepancy, before the risk of mutual bashing in the media?

In conclusion, The French-German relation in Defence is a must! And we can probably do better through more rigorous methods and improve communication, as contributors to proper mutual trust.