

Policy Brief

Can France and Germany relaunch Europe's security agenda?

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There can be no European security agenda without France and Germany. To shape this agenda and get others on board, they need to converge on the challenges they wish to tackle and the means to do that. This policy brief reviews the degree of Franco-German convergence while focusing on three issues: geopolitical assessment, strategic cultures, and capability development. We find that strategic convergence often goes hand in hand with tactical divergence. To be able to shape Europe's security agenda in the short- to medium-term, deeper Franco-German convergence and more inclusive co-leadership will be needed.

Introduction

Convergence between France and Germany is a necessary condition for a meaningful European security policy. In late 2020, they seemed to be at odds on its overall direction. French President Emmanuel Macron and German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer disagreed on whether the pursuit of European strategic autonomy was an imperative (Macron) or an illusion (Kramp-Karrenbauer). These tensions were fuelled by the election of US President Joe Biden, fostering hopes for a relaunch of transatlantic security cooperation. With these hopes came fears that the European security and defence initiatives launched since 2016 could lose steam as many EU member states longed for a return to the 'bosom of Uncle Sam'.

In early 2021, things looked a bit different. France and Germany both acknowledged that a balanced transatlantic partnership must be based on a stronger European pillar. As Macron's chief diplomatic advisor Emmanuel Bonne [underlined](#), the focus shifted from theological debates on strategic autonomy to a more pragmatic discussion on the EU's capacity to act in the face of a magnitude of security threats. He said that there was a "decent level of convergence"

on the next steps between France and Germany. In this vein, both countries threw their weight behind the so-called Strategic Compass for Security and defence, a two-year process that was launched by the German EU Council Presidency and should be finalised under the French one in 2022.

The question is whether “pragmatism” and a “decent degree” of convergence will be sufficient to address pressing items and forge a longer-term vision. The challenge is threefold: First, bilateral tensions could prevent or overshadow Franco-German leadership. Both countries are facing elections in the next 18 months, meaning that their capacity to make bold choices and take controversial steps towards each other will be limited. Second, if France and Germany agree, there is no guarantee that others will follow. Central and Eastern member states will be less willing to give way to a Franco-German push towards a more integrated security and defence policy now that “America is back”. Third, controversial decisions could be postponed or diluted by agreeing on words, but not on substance, leaving the EU with a compass that points in all directions.

This policy brief takes a critical look at the potential of the Franco-German motor to take Europe’s security agenda forward. It draws on insights from the first edition of the Franco-German Security Forum of 23 February 2021. In those discussions, three issues stood out: the need for a convergent assessment of the geopolitical context, a rapprochement between strategic cultures and an agreement in principle to invest in joint capabilities. Examining these dimensions in turn, we ask: where do France and Germany diverge? Where do we see strategic complementarity? What joint initiatives are needed to relaunch Europe’s security and defence agenda?

1. Facing geopolitics: strategic convergence and tactical divergence

To relaunch the EU’s security agenda, France and Germany need to come up with a truly European assessment of the geopolitical context. This is no easy task considering traditional divides and the fact that we are dealing with a moving target. A strategic context marked by great power competition and a global pandemic can easily unravel Franco-German compromises and overtake European thought processes. While the Strategic Compass should chart the course for the next 5 to 10 years, several big-ticket items are already on the agenda in the first half of 2021, before Germany disappears into the electoral tunnel and France follows suit. These include the renewal of the transatlantic bond, Europe’s positioning vis-à-vis China and troublesome relations with Russia and Turkey.

First and foremost, Europeans will have to respond to Biden’s offer of a renewed **transatlantic bond**. Merkel’s [reaction](#) to Biden’s fervent [“America is back”](#) testimony at the 2021 Munich Security Conference was pretty lukewarm. She underlined the importance of the transatlantic partnership but also noted that interests will continue to diverge. After four years of difficult relations with the Trump administration and given the risk of another Republican-led White House in 2024, Germany is set for a cautious normalization of relations. This prudence accommodates French views. At the Munich Security Conference, Macron [said](#) that US and European security interests were not “totally different” but that the level of priorities differed. The French have also taken a more pragmatic approach to strategic autonomy, depicting it as an ingredient for a

stronger NATO. France and Germany thus agree on the need for a rebalanced transatlantic partnership built on a stronger European pillar. This narrative is important to convince Central and Eastern Europeans that deeper European security cooperation will not jeopardize relations with the US nor NATO's primacy. Transatlantic and intra-European convergence is fraught with hazards: on the German side, these include the ever-ongoing 2% debate on defence spending and [growing American impatience](#) on Nord Stream 2; on the French side, disagreements with the US on trade issues or how to manage relations with China could cause friction.

On **China**, we have seen transatlantic and intra-European convergence since 2020. The unexpectedly sharp Chinese reaction to European sanctions in late March 2021, including travel bans for European parliamentarians and researchers, silenced debates about European equidistance between the US and China for the time being. However, rebalancing the transatlantic security agenda will also depend on Europe's approach to Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. A European Indo-Pacific strategy is expected to be drafted during the coming months, with substantial [contributions](#) from France and Germany. Both countries released strategic documents on the Indo-Pacific highlighting implications for European security interests. France published a [defence strategy for the Indo-Pacific in 2019](#); Germany more comprehensive and less security-focused [guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2020](#). While France has immediate strategic interests in the region due to its territorial assets in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the overarching objectives converge: strengthening multilateral institutions and formats, developing regional security partnerships, keeping sea lanes and maritime straits open, fighting terrorism and piracy, and monitoring activities. Germany's decision to dispatch a [frigate to the Indo-Pacific](#) and [strengthen bonds with Japan](#) shows a substantially increased interest in stabilizing extant and developing new partnerships. Franco-German differences are about the level of ambition rather than the objectives. It should thus be a feasible, if not easy undertaking to converge on a common approach to the Indo-Pacific. The already observable rapprochement between France and Germany on trade topics such as protectionism, foreign investment screening, and reciprocity on public procurement market access – all long-standing sources of friction – is furthermore an important foundation for a common approach to China, where security and trade policies are often intertwined.

Regarding **Russia**, there is an uneasy mix of defiance and dialogue on both sides of the Rhine, which risks alienating Central and Eastern European member states. Macron sees Moscow as an unavoidable interlocutor regarding a swathe of geopolitical conflicts ranging from Syria to Belarus. Yet the strategic dialogue he started with Russia in 2019 is on hold and has yielded meagre results. Germany stiffened its attitude towards Russia in light of the Navalny poisoning and advocated additional targeted sanctions. At the same time, it is sticking to the gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 despite severe objections from Washington and occasional, but harsh criticism from France. In February 2021, Secretary of State for European Affairs Clément Beaune said that France has always had the [“greatest concerns”](#) regarding the project. The common denominator between France and Germany is that diplomatic talks should continue. For Central and Eastern European member states this is a red rag. They saw Borrell's self-defeating [Moscow visit](#) in February 2021 as the last of many examples showing that Europe needs to toughen up and that they – EU members with vital interests under threat – should be listened to. To forge a common European position on Russia, France and Germany will have to review their own approach

to dialogue and economic engagement. As suggested by [Beaune](#), France should undertake greater efforts at engaging Central and Eastern Europeans before unilaterally reaching out to Moscow. Germany, instead, should acknowledge the geopolitical repercussions of the pipeline. This could for instance mean committing to investments in renewable energies in Central and Eastern EU member states and Ukraine, [as proposed by Wolfgang Ischinger](#), making them less reliant on Russian gas in the long run.

The other key agenda issue is **Turkey**. French and German reactions to Turkey's gas drillings and territorial claims in the Eastern Mediterranean can be seen as an example of strategic complementarity. Although Berlin sided with Greece and Cyprus, it has taken a soft and diplomatic approach. This has to be seen against the backdrop of two domestic issues: it hosts the largest overseas Turkish community and is keen on preserving the EU's migration deal. France has been much more assertive regarding Turkey on several accounts. It has for example dispatched naval forces in support of Cyprus and denounced an [accident in the vicinity of Libyan waters](#). Different French and German approaches have in this case proven to be a positive example of strategic complementarity, as they both contributed to pushing Turkey towards negotiations instead of creating a *fait accompli* by military means. As this complementarity unfolds in an uncoordinated manner, it is a difficult exercise that will have to stand the test of time against a Turkish president known for unpredictable and aggressive moves. The fact that Macron publicly [accused](#) Turkey of planning to interfere with the French presidential election shows how easily tensions could flare up. [The March European Council](#) sent out signals of good will in case Turkey stays committed to diplomacy and clearly warned about reverting to power politics. As Greece and Cyprus need to be closely involved in this process, a prudent approach to Turkey whilst averting direct threats to Greek and Cypriot sovereignty is all that can be expected for now.

Overall, Europe's 2021 security agenda is crowded and the clock for France and Germany is ticking. Their differences regarding tactics make it difficult to chart a common European path. They do not face insurmountable odds, but this tactical imbroglio also stems from their different strategic cultures.

2. Strategic cultures: between rapprochement and red lines

“What Europe, Defence Europe, lacks most today is a common strategic culture.” These were Macron's words during his Sorbonne [speech](#) of 2017. He conceded that this would not emerge overnight but promised he would try building it gradually. The development of a common European defence culture is also an overarching aim of the Strategic Compass. France and Germany are the core actors here, not least because they stand for different cultural camps in Europe. Germany is more Atlanticist and wedded to a culture of military restraint, backed by public and legal constraints. France leads the Europeanist camp. Its strategic culture is characterized by a strong sense of international responsibility, including the willingness to use force if necessary, as well as the notion of national strategic autonomy regarding military capabilities. These characteristics are reflected in the President's virtually unrestricted power as *chef des armées* and the State's prominent role in the defence industry.

Even so, French, German and European engagement in the Sahel zone shows that strategic cultures can **converge over time**. Initially, France struggled to convince

Germany and other European partners of the strategic importance of the region as a safe haven for terrorists. This changed in 2013 with the terrorist attack on Mali's capital. 2015 was another turning point as the region became a major transit route for migrants heading towards Europe. From then onwards, France and Germany slowly converged in terms of threat perceptions and approach. Germany increasingly recognized the importance of military stabilization and training. With up to 1,100 soldiers stationed in the UN Mission MINUSMA and the EU Training Mission (EUTM), Mali hosts the biggest German troop contingent after Afghanistan. Meanwhile, France recognized the need for a comprehensive approach going beyond military counter-terrorism operations. The decision to match last's year's military surge with a civilian one at the N'Djaména Summit in February 2021 exemplifies this strategic convergence.

Once more, however, this strategic convergence cannot hide **tactical divergence**. The deployment of the Franco-German Brigade to Mali is a good example: French and German troops are deployed together but have different tasks. While the former support the French counter-terrorism operation Barkhane, the latter have not been given a robust mandate and support MINUSMA and EUTM Mali. Similarly, Germany will not contribute troops to the French-led Takuba Task Force bringing together European special forces to support Sahelian counter-terrorism efforts. And it cannot. The German Constitution only allows out-of-area operations if they take place within a system of collective security. French officials have a lot of understanding for Germany's red lines. However, there is growing domestic discontent about the French engagement. [Polls](#) taken in January 2021 show that Operation Barkhane is losing support (49% were favourable, down from 73% in 2013). Macron is under pressure to downsize and Europeanize the costly and deadly operation. This could herald a highly political debate on intra-European burden-sharing.

To avoid this in future, we need deeper convergence between France and Germany. Reflections on bringing together intergovernmental and European frameworks are underway. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, the German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer proposed using **Article 44 TEU** whereby the Council can entrust the execution of a military or civilian mission to a group of willing and able member states that would then decide among themselves. This option is also being discussed in the framework of the Strategic Compass. In theory, it could make for a good compromise between the flexibility brought by a coalition of the willing, often favoured by France, and the legitimacy Germany requires to be able to join in. The problem is that the act of delegation itself requires unanimity. The French would thus have to cede some flexibility and leadership on the broader political framework. The Germans would instead have to co-lead when it comes to giving a European cloak to a potentially risky and costly military engagement. This would also mean showing greater willingness to defend such engagements before an often-reluctant public.

As Macron said, this kind of cultural convergence does not happen overnight. However, it can be built gradually through dialogue. While this dialogue is very developed at the level of the executives, there is a strong case for **involving the legislative arms**. This is the aim of the [Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly](#), which was established in March 2019 and brings together 50 German and 50 French parliamentarians. It is designed, inter alia, to make proposals on foreign, European and defence matters. While these are not binding, they

can help prepare compromises and set the agenda. In addition, continuous exchange can foster greater mutual understanding and learning. While German parliamentarians may learn what an open discussion of defence matters can look like, their French counterparts could learn how to make use of the full range of their limited prerogatives.

3. Capabilities: sharing sovereignty and money

To shape Europe's security agenda, you also need the necessary means. As France and Germany are the EU's leading defence players, their cooperation will be key for the consolidation of Europe's fragmented defence industry. With an estimated cost of as much as €300 billion up to 2040, the **Future Combat Air System (FCAS)** is Europe's biggest military capability project. It was launched by France and Germany in 2017 together with the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) and Spain joined in 2019. The FCAS has been conceived as a "system of systems" linking sixth-generation combat aircraft to related components such as swarming drones and a secure "combat cloud". Considering its size and scope, it could become an important driver for innovation, including in the civil domain. FCAS success is thus an important ingredient for Europe's technological sovereignty. Its failure would, however, deal a huge blow to the Franco-German relationship and to their ambition of [spearheading a European Defence Union](#). FCAS has therefore been [described](#) as being "too big to fail".

Even so, different French and German perspectives have repeatedly brought it **to the brink of failure**. In early 2021, negotiations on the development of demonstrators for the aircraft up to 2026 got bogged down due to differences on the division of labour and intellectual property rights. The French insisted that the division of labour was based on the previously agreed "best athlete" principle, assigning the lead for developing the aircraft to Dassault. The German side, represented by Airbus, feared that Dassault's tight grip on intellectual property rights would exclude it from the most costly and innovative elements of this co-financed mega-project. In an article entitled "the alliance of mistrust", the German weekly magazine [Der Spiegel](#) brought it down to the formula: "the French fear for their sovereignty and the Germans for their money". In early April, Dassault and Airbus [reportedly](#) reached a general compromise on the industrial terms and conditions. However, after the finalisation of contracts, the Bundestag still has to approve the respective financial tranche. If this does not happen before the end of June, there is little chance for it to pass before the German election, implying a substantial delay of the demonstrator phase.

Election campaigns could then turn the issue into a **poison pill**. French Eurosceptic right-wingers have already jumped on it. They suggest that a foot-dragging Germany is seeking to [plunder](#) the French defence industry, [underline](#) the need for national autonomy and call for an exit. During the [hearing of Inspector General of the Bundeswehr Eberhard Zorn](#) at the Assemblée Nationale in March 2021 (a novelty in Franco-German relations), doubts about the German commitment to FCAS were palpable across party lines. Failed common procurements where Germany abandoned projects were recalled, and memories of France leaving the Eurofighter consortium to develop the Rafale on its own were never far away. Although the push for Franco-German cooperation in defence has become more commonplace since the Rafale episode in the 1980s, sovereigntist doubts about its viability linger in government parties.

In Germany, the issue has **campaign potential** for left and right. The FCAS is attached to two highly controversial questions. The first is its future use in Germany's role in NATO's nuclear sharing. This very role already divides right and left. The next question is whether France would certify FCAS for this NATO role given that it is due to carry nuclear weapons. This is where the desire for national and European strategic autonomy clash. The second controversial issue concerns arms exports where Germany has a much more restrictive approach. In 2019, France and Germany reached a bilateral [agreement](#) whereby they would not prevent each other from exporting jointly developed defence industrial goods unless immediate interests or national security were affected. If one side had concerns, they were to rapidly reach "appropriate solutions" through high-level consultations. The question is what a Green coalition partner would make of these clauses in future.

The combination of significant delays and politicised debates would cast a **shadow on future collaborative European armaments projects**. All sides would thus be well-advised to finalise the package before summer and work on restoring trust. Politicians on both sides of the Rhine should continue to underline the longer-term and mutual benefits of sharing funding and sovereignty. As [Dominic Vogel](#) suggests, taking these projects forward should be part of the next German coalition agreement. Germany could send an important signal of trust by reforming the armaments process and moving towards multi-annual financing. Reaching convergence on exports and nuclear sharing will require intense political dialogue going well beyond both upcoming elections. The Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly could play a role in fostering convergence. These fundamental questions should not be solved in political or industrial backroom talks.

Conclusion

Europe's security agenda is crowded and despite the sense of relief that Biden's election has brought, priorities will not always align. France and Germany thus have to propel an ambitious European security agenda. This concerns short-term developments as much as the longer-term vision that the Strategic Compass should sketch out. This policy brief shows that there is indeed a "decent level" of Franco-German strategic convergence regarding the US, China, the Indo-Pacific and Russia as well as good examples of strategic complementarity as in the case of Turkey or the Sahel. However, the devil is in the detail as illustrated by tactical divergences regarding Nord Stream 2 or FCAS. With two elections ahead, these issues could easily spur bilateral tensions and thus prevent France and Germany from playing their role as the driving force for European convergence. However, this is no time for France and Germany to go missing in action. Instead, they should work towards deeper convergence, strike compromises and learn from each other. This means, for instance, that France's leadership within the EU should become more inclusive while Germany becomes more reactive and strategic. The pair could also make better use of their respective strengths and enhance the benefits of their strategic complementarity. These changes will not happen overnight and require continuous consultations at the level of both executive *and* legislative arms. They also demand the courage to explain the long-term benefits of European security and defence cooperation to respective domestic audiences. This is not about feeding citizens with vague visions of a European army or soothing narratives of a Europe that protects. It is about explaining concrete choices and actions and, not least, why this requires spending money in tandem or sharing sovereignty.

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