Strategic Autonomy for Europe
Can Berlin and Paris Agree?

by Detlef Puhl

In Germany, there has been hardly any public discussion of France's new national defence and security strategy, which Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly submitted to President Emmanuel Macron on 13 October 2017. The coalition agreement for German government Merkel IV does not include visions of strategic autonomy for Europe with its own intervention forces. These however form the heart of the French strategy. Germany's idea of Europe as a force for peace, and France's visions of autonomous intervention capabilities for Europe – how is that supposed to fit together?

2018 is a very important year for Europe's future, and not just because important positions in the European Union have to be filled, the Brexit negotiations have to be completed, and preparations have to be made for the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Since the EU's decision in December 2017 to establish Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in security and defence policy, to which 25 of the 27 member states remaining after Brexit have committed themselves, there is now discussion of a "European Defence Union", though it remains unclear what shape this union will take.

Discussion of this is all the more urgent because security and defence policy is the first of the "six keys to European sovereignty" that France's President Emmanuel Macron defined in his speech at Sorbonne University on 26 September 2017. The "re-establishment of Europe", which the candidate Macron called for in his electoral campaign, and whose implementation President Macron sought to start with his "Initiative for Europe" speech at the Sorbonne, starts with "European sovereignty" in the field of defence. This sovereignty requires the ability to take autonomous strategic action.

But what is "European sovereignty"? Who exercises it? In which political and legal framework? Are Berlin's and Paris' ideas of it even compatible? The necessary debate should revolve around three issues: firstly, the political definition of what "European sovereignty" means as opposed to the term "national sovereignty" (which is how the term "sovereignty" is usually used, in particular with regard to defence), secondly, the legal framework for exercising this sovereignty, and thirdly, the military capabilities considered necessary for this purpose. Each of these issues is important in and of itself, but all three are dependent on each other, meaning that they cannot be handled one step at a time, but must be addressed simultaneously and in context.

1. European Sovereignty – A Matter of Political Culture

At the heart of Macron's visions of the requirements for "European sovereignty", which is European strategic autonomy, is what he calls a "European intervention initiative". It is intended to lead to the establishment of a "common intervention force" that will provide Europe with "autonomous operating capabilities". These are different ways of describing a state of affairs which, Macron says, "lacks [...] a common strategic culture." He is right. However, this is nothing new.

It has been a topic of discussion for years, but these discussions have yet to result in serious attempts to overcome this situation. Macron is also right to say "that cannot be changed over night". But work should get started. After all, a culture, whether it is "strategic" or "political" in the broader sense, cannot be imposed, nor does it simply fall from the sky. So what could be done to better align Germany's and France's political cultures in strategic matters? That is the key to developing a shared concept for Europe's future.

In Germany, most people hesitate to pursue strategic autonomy for Europe. They say it is far too ambitious and therefore unrealistic, and probably too expensive anyway. There is even less discussion of autonomous "intervention forces". Many, in particular on the social democrats' side, prefer talking about Europe as a "force for peace" which prioritises civil crisis prevention over the use of military means. And indeed, what could be more sympathetic than a force for peace which works to prevent crises? France would certainly not be opposed to efforts of this nature. The only problem is that these ideas clash with the reality. All too often, civil crisis prevention is not enough, and crises still emerge, which the two countries then have to face, in many cases together.

In other words, it would be necessary to align the German culture of military restraint, which the majority of Germans support, and the French culture of autonomous military operating capabilities, which goes without saying for the French. Therefore, the two countries should start working on a common security strategy which could serve as the basis for a common, or at least compatible, military doctrine to provide the necessary framework for the "common intervention force" Macron calls for. This process should start soon.

It would be wise for both countries to work on it at two. Germany and France should start quickly, without waiting for the other EU member states, but still keep the other member states always up to date. This would be a far-reaching, extremely important, most likely controversial political decision which goes far beyond the most recent decision on PESCO. Lest we forget, for Macron, PESCO, the cornerstone of German policy for "strengthening" European security and defence policy (according to the 2018 coalition agreement), is merely the foundation on which to build the common European armed force for intervention, the "autonomous operating capabilities".

With that in mind, is it possible to develop a common political interest for both countries aiming at the common ability to take autonomous military action, yet exercising restraint in using this capability? This step is inevitable if Berlin and Paris want to adhere to their own words: a "new start for Europe" here, and a "re-establishment of Europe" there. Nothing new will be established or start if the countries do not succeed in developing a common strategic or political culture, as arduous and time-consuming as this process may be. This would mean an agreement, or at least compatible ideas of what "European sovereignty" should look like. After all, the problems with the Eurozone and its management clearly demonstrate what happens when there is no common political culture.

2. European Sovereignty – A Matter of Institutional Responsibility

Admittedly, a common political and strategic culture, as vital as it is, is not enough. Who would decide on the use of these common "autonomous operating capabilities", the intervention force? France's proposals are not separate from the EU, but rather an integral part its programme for the "re-establishment of Europe", including democratic control within the framework of the EU and expanded rights for the European Parliament – as we can read in Macron's Sorbonne speech. The German government's coalition agreement also calls for expanding the European Parliament's rights in order to achieve the intended "new start for Europe". Does this also mean handing over authority to the EU in matters of defence? Neither Berlin nor Paris have ever advocated transferring such powers to "Brussels". But who, then, would be responsible for deploying the "common intervention force" (French plan) or the "European army" (German plan according to a proposal put before the Bundestag)?

Should it be the European Council in accordance with the Treaty of Lisbon? Or the Council of Ministers? Or would it remain the responsibility of the national governments only? And if so, in which configuration? Or should the EU create, besides the Eurozone and the Schengen Area, another subgroup with its own substructure, a defence zone, the "Defence Union", which would not be exactly the same as the EU, but almost, because it is supposed to be "inclusive"? These questions remain completely unresolved, but must be addressed.

It is obvious that the EU's institutional framework in its current form no longer covers all of the Union's range of activities. Now, there does not necessarily have to be only one single authority – either that of the Union or that of the individual nations – especially when it comes to defence policy. However, there should certainly be clearly defined responsibilities that are compatible with each other and have democratic legitimacy. This issue is not just a theoretical exercise. It is a *conditio sine qua non* for a democratic European Union whose member states and whose institutions are accountable to the citizens' elected representatives. They are in charge of the budgets needed to fund capabilities and actions of any kind. An autonomous European intervention force must be part of an institutional framework with a clear legal definition and democratic legitimacy. At the same time, parliamentary control represents a particularly delicate matter because the German requirement for parliamentary approval of military engagement has a virtually constitutional status and cannot simply be suspended. Ultimately, an agreement will also have to be reached in this regard. Waiting it out is not an option.

3. European Sovereignty Means Cooperation and Competition

We must account for yet another discrepancy if we do not want to get lost in illusions: Paris' visions of strategic autonomy for Europe include a strong and solid industrial base of its own in armaments and high technology. The new strategy reaffirms this concept. Therefore, government ownership or government influence on the defence industry has always been a distinctive characteristic of France's security policy. For that reason, French policy has always been at odds with German policy, which, as in other fields, prefers dealing with a competitive private sector, holding government influence to a low level. This always affected and still affects the status and organisation of armaments policy in both countries, which, after all, have to take the decisions on the procurement and maintenance of military equipment. In other words, this issue, which is not altogether unimportant for a common European intervention force, reflects more than two very different, if not opposing strategies of the governments and parliaments in Paris and Berlin.

It is also a matter of national economic interests, including opportunities to export military equipment, which are shaped not only by the political desire for cooperation , but also by competing business interests. This fundamental conflict will remain, and its effects must be handled on a case-by-case basis for individual projects. The debate alone will certainly not lead to solutions for dealing with all the problems associated with European "sovereignty" or the ability to take autonomous action, not soon and definitely not in a perfect manner. Yet it is urgent that this work gets started – and that it is continuously pursued, where it has already begun, in order to take into account the comprehensive economic, legal, political and cultural context of the discussions to be held in Germany and France.

Of course, it helps that both countries' ministers of defence, Ursula von der Leyen and Florence Parly, expressed their resolve at the 2018 Munich Security Conference to take this way together – to help give Europe "more independence and self-reliance" through an "Army of Europeans", as von der Leyen said, or to "share situation and threat analyses" and "develop a shared concept of crises", "a common assessment of the necessity to act" and a "common plan of action" as called for by Parly. The only problem is that the two countries are still very far from achieving these objectives. It is up to the ministers to get them underway.

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