

#37

PeSCo

The French Perspective

By

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*The views expressed here are solely those of the author.
They do not reflect the view of any organisation.*

Policy Paper

ABSTRACT

Europe usually assumes that Paris has a clear view and consistent purpose set out for EU defence. As in any self-respecting democracy however, the French position represents a hard-won compromise between its own national disagreements, which PESCO merely brings into relief. Although these ideological tug-of-wars are seldom perceived as such outside of France, they do have tangible effects.

The first is that French priorities do not flow from some god-given, quasi-teleological blueprint for European defence: they can, and do, fluctuate across time. The second is that they can, and do, fluctuate across national administrations. The third is that they will not always, therefore, make for a clear position. The fourth is that they will accordingly create a number of routine misunderstandings with France's closest European allies – the latest in date revolving around the European Intervention Initiative, and the wider-ranging notion of strategic autonomy.

France's conflicted attitude towards PESCO is born out of two major different lines of thinking. They are tricky to pin down because they do not run strictly along administrative lines. They cannot be said to boil down to different foreign policy doctrines, each complete with their own fixed checklist of strategic priorities – nor are they explained away by a split between realists and idealists. In fact they derive less from a strategic *doctrine* than a strategic *disposition*: a way of viewing the world and of addressing the problems it throws up.

One line of thinking might roughly be said to be *political-military* in its inspiration, and *bilateralist* in its output. The other is primarily *diplomatic* in its inspiration and could be termed *eurolateralist* in its output. Looking at PESCO in Paris from these two different angles yields two different conclusions. From the political-military standpoint, PESCO will appear to have already failed on most counts – legal, institutional, capability, operational, and financial. From the eurolateralist perspective, PESCO constitutes on the contrary an encouraging development in most of these areas.

If this double assumption is valid, it would help explain some of the tensions that surface in France's most recent defence review – but also why president Macron's best efforts to normalise a European mindset within the military are ultimately likely to be frustrated. The country's latest strategic document may indeed be interpreted as a bid by Emmanuel Macron to implement a "European reflex" across capability, industrial and operational sectors of French defence – with a view to making Europe less of a strategic afterthought than a structuring principle of national strategy. But in matters European, France remains a strategic schizophrenic: a relapsing patient, apt at ditching its own resolutions, and always happy to revert back to default behaviour when given the opportunity.

Keywords: PESCO, Common Security and Defence Policy, European Defence and Industrial Base, France.

INTRODUCTION: THE ODD CASE OF THE MISSING PESCO

In late 2017, national military chiefs from across the continent descended upon the new EU offices in Brussels to take a photograph solemnly marking the activation of a Lisbon treaty mechanism known as “Permanent structured cooperation” (PESCO). To promote the occasion, the European Council issued a video that opened with imagery lifted from the Bataclan massacre of 2015 in France¹.

What the devil was afoot in the peaceable corridors of EU officialdom? Were Europeans, in reaction to the Paris attacks, about to push through a major counter-terrorism initiative? Or were the generals plotting a coup on Jean-Claude Juncker’s office across the Schuman roundabout? Neither, as it turned out: the EU was instead announcing that it had decided to do what it had already said it would do back in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty² – except in a slightly less ambitious way. The president of the European Council proceeded to celebrate a “dream that had become reality”³, and Federica Mogherini a “historic day for Europe”⁴.

So, where was the catch? Had Brussels simply lapsed into cognitive dissonance, or did PESCO have enough to live up to expectations? Have the virtues of the EU process generated since 2017 a worthwhile political outcome all of their own? Or will the “sleeping beauty” of European defence, as Jean-Claude Juncker nicknamed PESCO, wake up with a slight hangover in what the French defence minister dubbed a “Club Med of bureaucracy”⁵? The view from Paris is of some importance in answering these questions, because of France’s unique position as both a major tailwind and revealing weather vane of the state of

¹ See: <https://councilnewsroomvideo.azureedge.net/video-files/d8c8430c-c5f6-11e7-bb1e-bc764e093073.mp4>

² « The permanent structured cooperation referred to in Article 42(6) of the Treaty on European Union shall be open to any Member State which undertakes, from the date of entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, to: (a) proceed more intensively to develop its defence capacities through the development of its national contributions and participation, where appropriate, in multinational forces, in the main European equipment programmes, and in the activity of the Agency in the field of defence capabilities development, research, acquisition and armaments (European Defence Agency), and (b) have the capacity to supply by 2010 at the latest, either at national level or as a component of multinational force groups, targeted combat units for the missions planned, structured at a tactical level as a battle group, with support elements including transport and logistics, capable of carrying out the tasks referred to in Article 43 of the Treaty on European Union, within a period of five to 30 days, in particular in response to requests from the United Nations Organisation, and which can be sustained for an initial period of 30 days and be extended up to at least 120 days. » *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*, Protocol (No 10) on permanent structured cooperation established by Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union.

³ See: <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/941352204740497410>

⁴ See: <http://www.federicamogherini.net/historic-day-pesco>

⁵ Florence Parly, *Discours de cloture de l’Université d’été de la défense*, 11 septembre 2018

European defence.

Overall, everyone is essentially wrong about Permanent structured cooperation. But everyone is also a bit right – and with good reason. PESCO is a tool that the European Union activated to increase European defence cooperation: considering it is essentially a legal mechanism, one might be forgiven for assuming there is a shared vision of what it is. Yet this is not quite the case: PESCO has this in common with a number of other EU initiatives that it has tended to become all things to all European countries. Seven or eight forms of PESCO exist alongside one another, some of which are mutually incompatible: a legal PESCO, an institutional PESCO, a political PESCO, a strategic PESCO, a capability-geared PESCO, an industrial PESCO, an operational PESCO, and a financial PESCO. Like Being in Aristotle’s metaphysics, PESCO comes in very different guises.

Such predictable confusion is by no means the sole preserve of the European debate, however. It also exists – and indeed sometimes results from – similar confusion at national level. Despite its reputation as a leading light for Europe in the realm of strategic affairs, France is no exception to the rule. Europeans will usually assume there exists a blueprint for EU defence (or “hidden agenda”) somewhere in a dusty drawer of Clemenceau’s old desk at the Ministry of Defence – a suspicion that resurfaces when France comes up with cerebral notions with any potential to undermine NATO (think “strategic autonomy”) or conjure up African adventure (think “European Intervention Initiative”).

WHAT FRENCH PERSPECTIVE?

But it would be fairer to say of the French perspective that it does not actually exist as such. This is not to say there is no national position. As in any self-respecting democracy however, the official French standpoint represents a hard-won compromise between ideological tribes that have the tendency to spar, and sometimes heatedly disagree. Contrary to a common perception, France therefore does not differ greatly from key European partners in this, including Germany⁶.

⁶ See Christian Mölling, *PESCO: The German Perspective*, Ares, 2019

Although these differences may be seldom perceived as such outside of France, they do have four ready consequences: firstly, that the French position can and does fluctuate over time; secondly, that it can and does fluctuate across administrations; thirdly that it will not in fact always be clear; and fourthly that it will therefore tend to create slight misunderstandings with France's closest European allies – the latest in date revolving around strategic autonomy and most especially the E2I.

Two main lines of thinking run through the French defence administration. They are difficult to pin down, because they do not run strictly *along* administrative lines. They run *across* such administrations as the defence ministry, the foreign office, the general staff, and the national armament agency. They do not boil down to different foreign policy doctrines, each with their own checklist of set strategic priorities – nor are they explained away by a split between realists and idealists, or between “neo-conservatives” and “gaullo-mitterandists”.

They are much closer to a strategic *disposition* than to a strategic *doctrine*: a way of viewing the world and solving the problems it throws up: indeed “not so much a range of ideological views as a way of seeing life, a set of values” – as a well-known contemporary strategist might put it⁷. One line of thinking is primarily *political-military* in its inspiration and *bilateralist* in its output; the other is *diplomatic* in its inspiration and *eurolateralist* in its objectives.

IS FRANCE A STRATEGIC SCHIZOPHRENIC?⁸

The first worldview starts and ends largely with France. It relies on the notion of French *grandeur* and seeks to uphold France as a confident, first-tier, nuclear deterring, human rights touting, Security Council veto-wielding power in world affairs. It is partial to viewing Europe as a *palliative* to the potential deficiencies in French power – but also as a threat that might dilute French power in the areas where France is strongest, like military

⁷ Sir Alex Ferguson, *My Autobiography*, Hodder, 2014, p.117

⁸ This section is based in part on discussions within the defence team at Iris, although I am solely responsible for the views it articulates.

operations.

It will prefer bilateral alliances with partners who have similar operational cultures like the UK and the US – or other partners that can complement French power in a given area, and in strict keeping with French national interest. Contrary to what one might think, the older generation is by no means the sole repository of this worldview. It has currency amongst the emerging strategic, military and diplomatic elite, which is young enough to have witnessed first-hand the difficulties of making progress within the European Union, but not old enough to have experienced the enthusiastic heydays that built the European project.

The second worldview, although it also starts with France, does not necessarily end with it. It rests upon the assumption that Europe is at the heart of France's vital and strategic interests. It argues that the integrity, vitality and political cohesion of the European Union is part and parcel of the French role in the world – and too intertwined with its national interest to disregard in the short term. Europe is not solely a power multiplier, or indeed a potential palliative destined to paper over national inadequacies, but a common political project with a shared purpose, which France partook in creating.

Euroilateralists will usually contend that bilateralists have limited interest in, understanding of and patience for the EU's political process – or for how it comes to consensus-based decisions. Bilateralists will consider that eurolateralists have limited interest in or understanding of the essence of military operations, nuclear deterrence, or political-military affairs. These two worldviews have more to do with strategic cultures than with foreign policy doctrines *per se*: they simply look at European issues with different lenses. They are also over-simplifications: a staple of the French strategic debate like former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, for example, would likely reject both.

THE MACRON AGGIORNAMENTO

Both worldviews have sufficient currency, however, for President Macron to have attempted to reconcile them in France's latest strategic review – with only partial success. The 2017 Strategic Defence Review attempted to translate Macron's European outlook into French defence strategy by normalising a "European reflex" across the defence

administration – so that Europe could become a structuring principle, rather than a strategic afterthought.

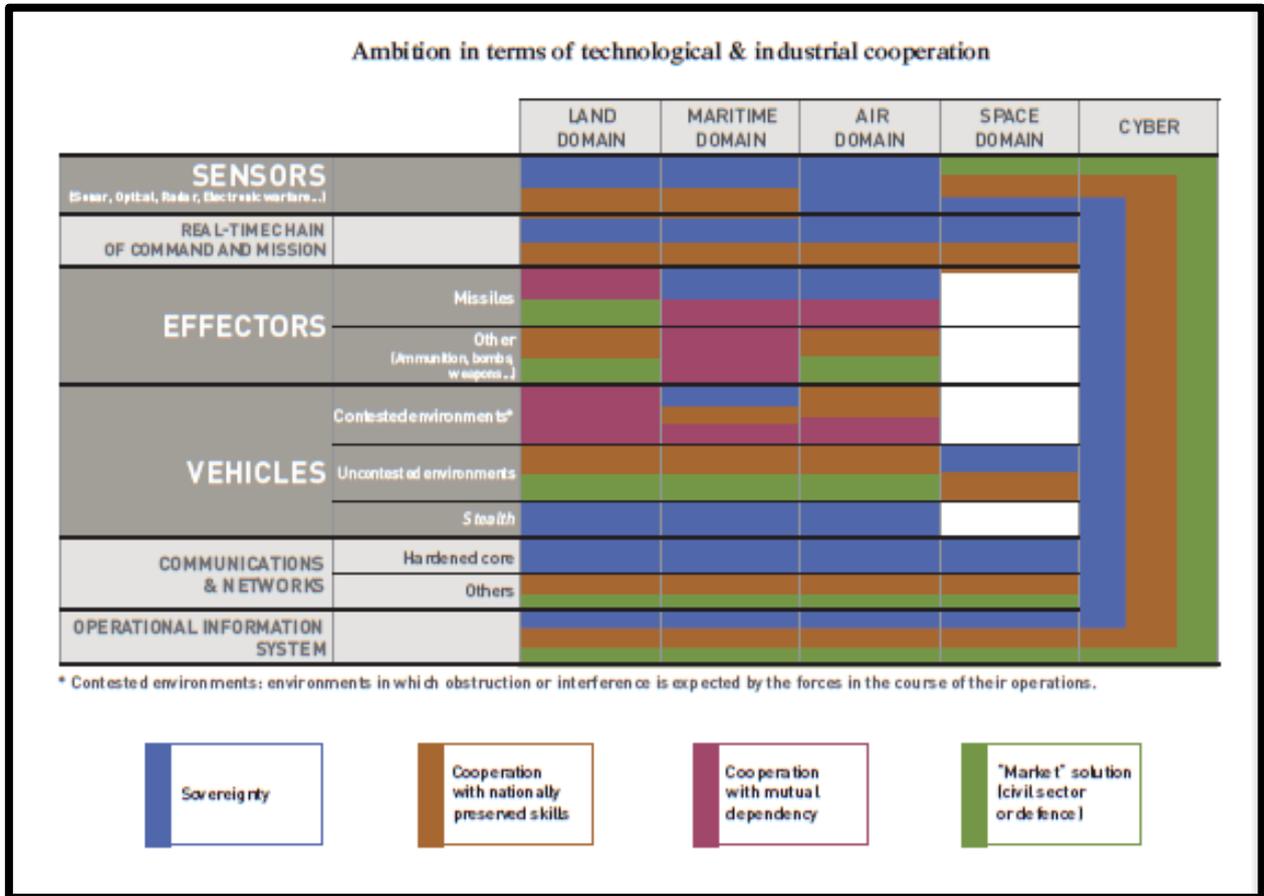


Figure 1: What Does France Really Mean By Strategic Autonomy?⁹

Whether Emmanuel Macron’s efforts succeed depends on whether they are translated in operational, capability and industrial terms. Fresh EU money over the coming decade in defence research and capability development will help to lend ill-needed muscle to this putative “European reflex”. Much will depend however on the new leadership at the powerful Armement Agency and the General Staff. Under the previous directorship, France opted for big, far-flung industrial contracts with countries such as India and Australia, whilst concomitantly closing its defence attaché positions closer to home in Eastern Europe – thereby further tipping the countries of the region towards the United States and Germany. The former leadership of the agency was usually quick to consider multilateral EU cooperation corseted French industrial freedom of action.

⁹ Source: *Defence and National Security Strategic Review*, 2017, p.67

Conversely, the new leadership offered up a very useful table to the 2017 strategic review¹⁰, which maps French strategic autonomy and distinguishes sovereign areas from others where the country is open to cooperation without dependency, cooperation with dependencies, or straightforward recourse to the market. Former leadership of the General staff similarly considered that EU cooperation hampered French military freedom of action, and consequently prioritised tailored bilateral arrangements over multilateral forums¹¹. Over the years, the muscle memory required for a European reflex to take hold at the Armament Agency and the General Staff suffered accordingly.

Whether Emmanuel Macron's efforts leave a lasting trace is therefore uncertain. Some would consider the 2017 *Strategic Defence Review* to be disjointed, even to the extent of rendering its different sections incompatible. The document does look in places like a superposition of political-military bilateralism and diplomatic eurolateralism: whilst the "European reflex" is presented in some parts as a real game-changer, it comes across in others as a perfunctory, rhetorical gesture towards France's partners to show how European-minded the country is. As such, instead of laying out a consistent worldview, it may represent the latest iteration of the underlying French "schizophrenia"¹² in matters European.

PESCO FOR GRUMPS

The distinction above makes it easier to understand the outlook in Paris: looking at Permanent structured cooperation from these two different standpoints will indeed yield two different results. From the French political-military angle, PESCO will appear to have already failed on most counts – legal, institutional, capability, operational, and financial.

In legal terms, it is no secret that France considers that the 2017 avatar of PESCO has watered down the binding requirements of the 2009 version. In place of mandatory criteria, Member States decided to join PESCO in 2017 on a voluntary basis. As the EUISS

¹⁰ See *Figure 1* above.

¹¹ The views above were articulated in interviews held with officials under the previous leadership at the Armament Agency and the General Staff.

¹² I quote in this my colleague from the defence team at Iris, Jean-Pierre Maulny.

put it in a recent report on the matter, the new PESCO's emphasis is on "inclusion (rather than restriction), future commitment (rather than past performance), benchmarks and deliverables (rather than strict criteria)"¹³. Paris puts this shift down to the fact that stringent commitments were never really what Berlin had in mind, because they would shift PESCO away from an EU "forum" for defence towards a "stability pact" for defence. PESCO gave Germany something to legitimise its efforts on the European Security and Defence Union and satisfy its Parliament.

In institutional terms, the way the PESCO secretariat is set up will do little to allay fears in French political-military circles that the endeavour is likely to create more bureaucracy than it will defence output. The concern is grounded in PESCO governance, which insists that the assessment of Member States will be "based on the national Implementation Plans, through the PeSCo Secretariat under the High Representative's authority (supported by the EDA as regards the defense investments and capability development and by the EEAS, including the EUMS, as regards the operational aspects). Under the responsibility of the council, this assessment shall be sent to the PSC (in PeSCo format) as well as to the EUMC (in PeSCo format) for its advice"¹⁴, as per Annex III of the PESCO notification on governance. Apart from the intricacy of the decision-making itself, the added value of PESCO compared to the Board of the European Defence Agency or an informal Council of defence ministers remains unclear – despite the fact it will persist as a go-to, catch-all phrase that will fuel the defence debate in Europe.

¹³ Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli, Thierry Tardy: *Permanent Structured Cooperation : What's In a Name?*, Chaillot Papers, November 2017, p. 21

¹⁴ Ibid., p.66

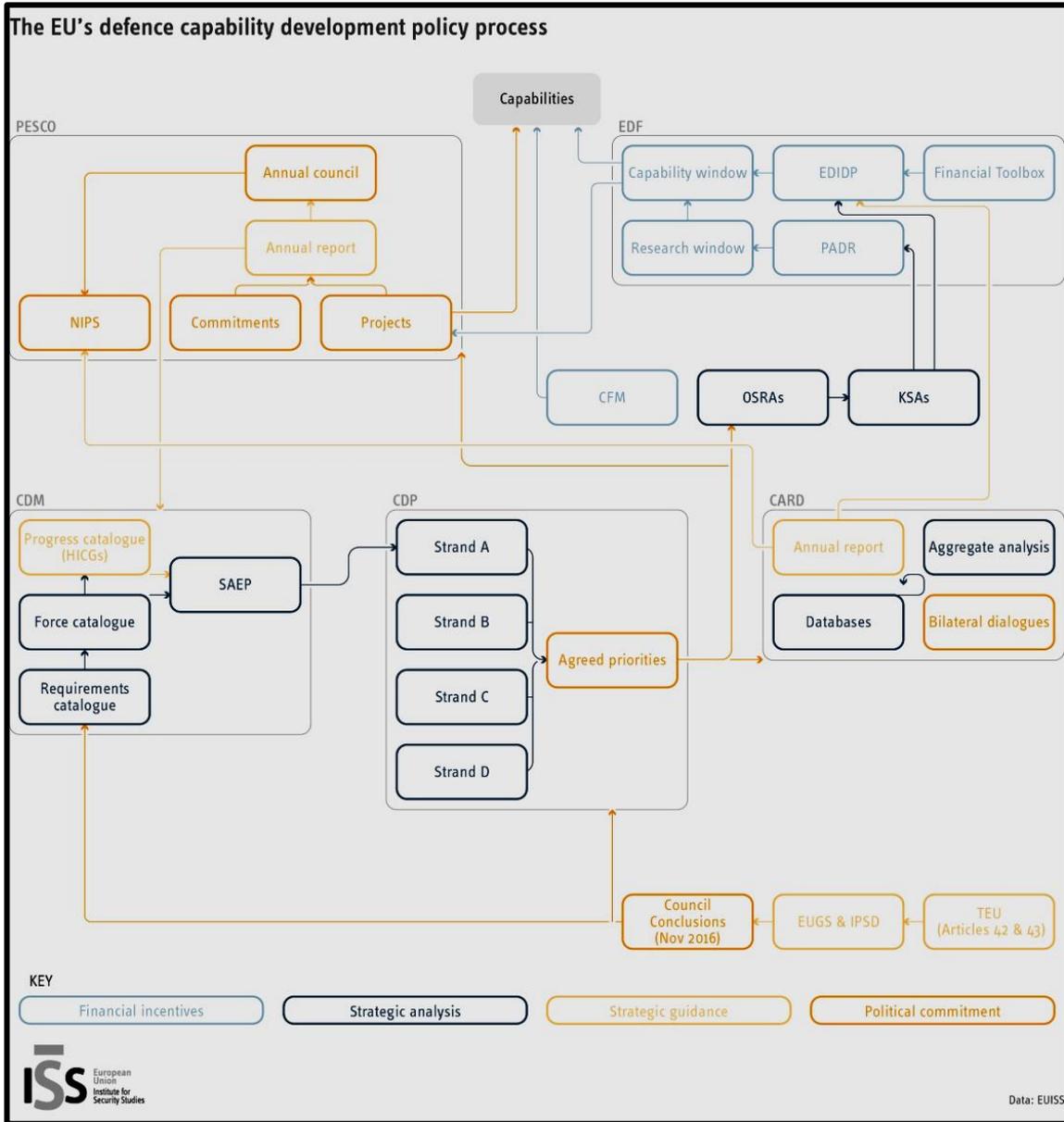


Figure II: The EU's defence capability development policy process¹⁵

In the capability realm, perception from the French political-military perspective is that the first batch projects put under the PESCO umbrella were either cooperative projects which would have existed without PESCO, or an array of national-minded initiatives which may result in more duplication than European rationalisation. In this view, PESCO constitutes less of a prescriptive, qualitative leap forward than an *ex-post*, descriptive marketing façade applied to the existing defence landscape in Europe. This helps explain why officials in Paris

¹⁵ Source: Daniel Fiott, *EU defence capability development – Plans, priorities, projects*, EUISS, 2018.

readily admit that France did not hugely invest in the first wave of PESCO projects.

France's investment in PESCO has contributed to increasing the scale and ambition of the projects. It is now the European country partaking in the highest number of projects (twenty-one in total), alongside Italy. It fronts multinational efforts for the Tigre Mk III helicopter, which consolidates previous trilateral cooperation in the field, the medium-range anti-tank missile, the networking of European test centers, the future European radio navigation system, and the co-basing of contingent deployments. More importantly perhaps, it now has much invested in projects that fill a number of European capability vacuums, and have the potential to have structural ramifications for the continent's strategic autonomy. Chief amongst them is the MALE RPAS (Eurodrone), which will fill a sizeable gap that has persisted since the middle of the noughties, and which involves France's key EU partners (Germany, Italy and Spain).

In operational terms, PESCO is perceived in French political-military circles as a tool of little relevance, despite some of the small tangible projects it includes. But then it is uncertain that it was ever set up for having any. It is not always widely known for instance that when PESCO criteria were negotiated for the first time in 2002 in the run-up to the European Constitutional Treaty, the end result turned out to be very similar to the 2017 outcome. The discussion started as a Franco-British push to define high-level criteria for high-intensity combat and force projection, then fell on deaf ears in Berlin and was subsequently diluted.

In industrial terms, despite the boon that fresh European money may represent for the French industrial and technological base on the domestic stage, the concern on the continental stage is that the conjunction of PESCO and the European Defence Fund may be seen in parts of Europe as an opportunity to revive or keep afloat industry that is either obsolete, has little to do with European strategic autonomy, increases duplication, or is caught up in vested interests. In budgetary terms, finally, it is hard to see PESCO faring any better in budgetary terms than NATO's 2% spending target, which has always had the greatest difficulty in getting in the way of national priorities.

IT'S THE POLITICS, STUPID

But if there is something that even a hard-nosed political-military approach cannot fail to acknowledge, it is the political dimension of PESCO. It is difficult to deny that it gives European cooperation a *sui generis* capability club, a recognisable umbrella and a process preciously enshrined in the stability of EU treaties, at a time when solidarity and cooperation are creaking under the blows of Brexit and the migration conundrum.

“Why do you think we named a Char Leclerc and a Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier?” a French senior civil servant once asked me with a conspiratorial look. It is because the branding makes it much more difficult for political leaders to renege on their spending commitments, and therefore for the project to fail. Permanent structured cooperation may wind up with a similar virtue: a PESCO seal on a cooperative project will increase political pressure at the onset, oversight and accountability at the outset, and follow-through in between. Its potential for naming and shaming should not be dismissed, given that the Union is ultimately a political machine, whose processes are by nature more transparent than a military one like the Atlantic Organisation.

So the value of PESCO lies less in itself than in the political momentum it creates and will hope to sustain. In a word, it channels extra energy into cooperation, which increases the chance that tangible results will materialise down the line. Is this sufficient? No. Is this necessary? Probably. It may be true that three quarters of Europe wanted the UK in PESCO and the US in the European defence fund, by the despondent count of one French diplomat. But Brexit and of the Trump presidency may yet coalesce into the two most significant and unwitting supporters of EU political unity and European defence.

PESCO FOR OPTIMISTS

If one allows then that defence is not simply about defence, but also about politics, one will find in PESCO a process which is liable to create added value. French officials have noted with interest that PESCO national implementation plans have forced countries that seldom think about defence outside the transatlantic context (or indeed in any context) to so do in a European forum. They have also forced national players that are not usually associated

with defence issues to chip into the debate. The National Implementation Plan in Bulgaria, for instance, sparked a whole-of-government discussion which extended all the way to the ministry of Finance: it is unlikely such an inclusive debate would have occurred without PESCO.

In institutional terms, the Brexit discussions are living testament to the fact that the bureaucracy in Brussels does have a number of perceptible benefits. Eurolateralists can point to how powerful the single market's *acquis communautaire* has proved in staving off British endeavours at undermining the European consensus. In fair weather, treaty mechanisms may not make for the most entertaining politics, but they certainly ensure precious protection against political division in rougher climates, as well as a ready rallying point and common referential. It remains true that little happens in Brussels without a process, and that much can happen when bureaucratic process is seconded by political will. Unfortunately, PESCO's 2009 legal dispositions came without an implementation process in the Lisbon Treaty, and the ensuing economic crisis ensured they also came without political will.

In capability terms, there have been signs that the political value of PESCO that French eurolateralists point to is translating into defence output. In an unexpectedly short period of time, for example, the development of European Secure Software Defined Radio (ESSOR) in the first wave of project has accrued a slew of European partners which France had not anticipated (Spain, Eastern Europe, Ireland as an observer). With the process more politically mature, the second batch of PESCO projects has proved more gratifying than the first, which is both a factor and a result of increased French involvement. All in all, now that defence cooperation is back on the menu with EU money to boot, France's main concern is to make sure projects are both useful in capability terms and efficient in industrial terms.

There is hope on the industrial side that the European Defence Agency can play a meaningful role as adjudicator to weed out unhelpful projects. This does not simply involve discarding those whose focus is primarily national or backward-looking. It also means providing top-down guidance, by choosing shrewdly between big projects that have significant value for European autonomy, and smaller ones that sustain innovative technologies that fill current or future capability gaps.

It is the equivalent for diplomatic eurolateralists of walking a diplomatic tight-rope: adding

palpable European value without giving off the impression that PESCO-tied Commission money is there to fund the defence industry in the bigger countries – and therefore fuelling the accusation of a “protectionism without protection” for the smaller countries. The credibility of the EDA, its capacity to remain at the centre of the new game in town, and ultimately its long-term survival in the face of powerful Commission budgets depend upon its willingness to make these choices. In such cases, this type of “institutional Darwinism” usually spells good news for the broader outcome, and is cause for moderate optimism. Operational and financial output, finally, are not central to the French eurolateralist view since the key added value of PESCO lies elsewhere at this stage.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL-MILITARY BILATERALISM, DIPLOMATIC EUROLATERALISM

The instincts towards political-military bilateralism and diplomatic eurolateralism will continue to coexist within the French defence establishment. They are the products of domestic differences in appreciation on Europe and its international environment. As such, the resulting French position will continue to fluctuate to some extent according to the political centre of gravity of the domestic debate and to external circumstance. The internal outlook on PESCO, for example, is far more positive on the second batch of projects for 2019 than it was in 2017.

Ultimately, the hope in Paris is that combining PESCO with a strategic review mechanism at European level, a fund for developing capabilities as well as an operational command centre will ultimately prove a coherent, rational mutually reinforcing division of labour, rather than a “Club Med of bureaucracy”. The typical paradox is that it will require Member States – France chief among them – to invest enough belief and political capital to bring this outcome about. If such conditions are met, which is a big ask, the new set of European tools is liable to increase collective strategic culture, operational nous, and the structuring of long-term capability programmes.

Of course, these competing domestic narratives can cause misperception on the outside. The confusion with which the European Intervention Initiative was received by French allies is due in part to a botched domestic compromise between political-military

bilateralism and diplomatic eurolateralism. Both contrasting instincts are likely to persist in Paris and to fuel its old paradoxes when it comes to EU defence. As such and in matters European, France will remain a strategic schizophrenic for some time yet – a relapsing patient, apt at ditching its own resolutions, and always happy to revert back to default behaviour when given the opportunity. ■

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ARES GROUP

The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group) was created in 2016 by The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (Iris), who coordinates the Group. The aim of the Ares Group, a high-level network of security and defence specialists across Europe, is to provide a forum to the European armament community, bringing together top defence industrial policy specialists, to encourage fresh strategic thinking in the field, develop innovative policy proposals and conduct studies for public and private actors.

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