

# Viewpoint from Paris



## France is Re-Evaluating its Defence Posture

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A few months after Emmanuel Macron won the presidential elections in France he appointed a commission to draft a new White Paper on defence. This rapidity is due to the massive engagement of French troops in current missions both abroad and at home. Some 30,000 French soldiers are permanently deployed on missions ranging from Operation “Barkhane” in Mali and the NATO-led reassurance mission on the Alliance’s eastern flank to Operation “Sentinelle”, carried out on France’s national territory and aimed at protecting vital state institutions from terrorism.

Such an extensive use of France’s armed forces in current operations has brought into question their ability to respond to additional crises or emerging threats. For instance, in September France’s Chief of the General Staff, General François Lecointre, underlined that the ability of the French army to carry out an operation on a short notice, similar to one already in place in Mali, is under question. This is why the authorities have to re-evaluate the country’s defence policy.

The new White Paper on defence, titled “Strategic Review” (Revue Stratégique) and published on 13 October, re-evaluated the threats that France is facing and proposes new approaches to navigate the French Republic’s defence policy and forces in the unstable and unpredictable multipolar environment which has replaced the Post-Cold War order.

The Strategic Review will also serve as the basis for a new law on military programmes for 2019-2025, which would increase the military budget by €1,7Bn annually. This increase would bring France closer to the NATO defence spending criteria of 2% of GDP, but to fully meet that standard, France would have to spend €50Bn per year instead of the current €32Bn. This figure is a distant goal even with the additional €1.7Bn per year.

In addressing security threats, the document recognises that the security climate has deteriorated much faster than foreseen in the previous version published in 2013 under François Hollande’s administration. The document defines terrorism as the main and immediate threat to the French state; this is not surprising given recent events, including the terrorist attacks (Bataclan and others) of

13 November 2015, which shook the French nation. The Strategic Review also recognises that a return of coercion by demonstration of force and even the potential for open war in Europe constitutes a major threat for Paris as well.

The Review mentions Russia only 13 times but the document clearly considers Russia a threat – maybe not directly to France but to the world order. Moscow has challenged the EU and NATO and actively blocks international institutions, including the UN and the OSCE, while promoting alternative regional projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Regarding the Middle East, the Strategic Review sees Russia, Iran and Turkey as the dominant forces that are shaping the future of the region.

The Strategic Review outlines two main ambitions for France in its role as a UN Security Council permanent member and a nuclear power: first to preserve strategic autonomy, and second to build a stronger Europe.

Maintaining and upgrading its nuclear weapons is of paramount importance to Paris. Nuclear deterrence gives France strategic autonomy that is a key issue for Paris as it allows France to make independent decisions regarding the protection of its national interests. Speaking of the Euro-Atlantic space, the Strategic Review recognises the importance of NATO and seeks to strengthen the European security. The recently established Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence (PESCO) by 23 EU members obviously agrees with France’s vision. Moreover, Paris confirms its commitment to all responsibilities within NATO, including the collective defence clause of the Washington Treaty as well as reassurance measures and the strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank. It is worth noting that earlier this year France sent a contingent of around 306 soldiers, LECLERC battle tanks and IVFs to Estonia.

We can assume that France will be more open to cooperation in defence matters with the EU and NATO partners. This cooperation covers, for example, strategic air transport and, more generally, cooperation in the logistics and defence industries and joint military operations. However, much of this cooperation is likely to focus on France’s neighbouring countries.