



Defense matters

Ifri contribution on France

Public messages

- ✦ Armed forces are important for a European and global power such as France
- ✦ The French defense industry is a cornerstone of French economic success
- ✦ European defense cooperation requires French participation and leadership

Political recommendations

What NATO should tell France

- ✦ The new *Loi de programmation militaire (LPM)* needs to be fully implemented
- ✦ Strengthen the quality of the strategic debate

What we recommend to NATO

- ✦ NATO should acknowledge that national ambitions remain the backbone of public support for defense spending and the military
- ✦ NATO should recognize that Allies possessing a national defense industry tend to pursue efforts in defense more seriously
- ✦ NATO should encourage pragmatic cooperative solutions as a way to curb demilitarization
- ✦ NATO should help advance the strategic debate in France

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The French people hold their armed forces to a high standard. They understand the importance of maintaining a military able to defend the national territory, as well as to deploy abroad, and a competitive defense industry that serves the interest of the armed forces and of the French economy more generally. However, debates on defense issues remain confined to a group of experts, as if they were too arcane to be discussed among the wider public. It provides an almost paradoxical picture: the French have positive views on their military, but they do not discuss or consider it as a priority issue for the country. This report explores what the French public opinion thinks on the relevance of the military, before laying the outcome of and the lessons learned from this project. The last two sections are devoted to public messages and political recommendations.

I. Context

Polls regularly confirm that French armed forces benefit from a positive reputation. In 2013, a poll conducted by the Ministry of Defense shows that 80 per cent of the French have a positive opinion of the armed forces, compared to 74 per cent in 2012.¹ In 2011, a poll showed that 62 per cent of the French would have been favorable to establishing a pledge of allegiance to defend the nation in times of crisis for all new 18 year-olds.² An important reason to understand this continued support is the linkage between the role of France in the world and its armed forces. According to a recent poll, 90 per cent of the French think that it is essential – or at least important – that France remains a global military power if it wants to retain influence in the world. Interestingly, those under 35 years old are keener to say that it is essential.³

Additionally, the defense industry is considered a key element of the French industrial complex. Official figures show that 165,000 people are directly employed by defense companies and France accounts for 4,000 defense SMEs. The aerospace industry is French leading exporting industry. A recent poll shows that 83 per cent of the French agree that it is important to support the defense industry.⁴ Relatedly, the industry is the sector that the French think should be a priority for the political leaders. 35 per cent of the French rank it first, compared to 28 per cent for the agricultural sector and 12 per cent for the services. This poll also reveals that a large majority considers that their political leaders do not support the industry adequately and that French industrial weight has considerably decreased.⁵

However, the French have been ambivalent about the defense budget. 51 per cent think that taxpayers' money is not efficiently used by the government. This figure is actually quite low – the French tend to harshly judge how their money is spent. On a closer look, two contrasting lessons emerge: the first is that under 65 year-old people have harsher opinions on the efficiency of defense management; the second is that mainstream political party supporters (the Socialist Party and the right-wing *Union pour la majorité parlementaire* or UMP) are generally more satisfied with the way the budget is managed than extreme party supporters.⁶ The ambivalence

¹ Dicod, *Baromètre externe de la Défense 2013*, April 2013.

² Ifop, *Les Français et le serment d'allégeance aux armes*, September 2011.

³ Synopia, *Livre Blanc sur la Défense et la Sécurité : la France va devenir un pays manchot ! À moins que...*, 25 March 2013.

⁴ Ifop, *Observatoire des politiques publiques : les Français et la politique de Défense nationale*, February 2013.

⁵ « Sondage exclusif : Priorité à la défense de l'industrie », *Usine nouvelle*, 11 July 2012.

⁶ Ifop, *Observatoire des politiques publiques*.

is patent when asking the French about potential reductions of the defense budget. In 2012, 37 per cent of the French ranked it first among the budget lines where cuts should be applied, and 73 per cent were in favor of reducing the defense budget.⁷ A year later, another poll showed that 67 per cent of the French agreed to maintain the defense budget at current level considering the international context. This sentiment is shared across the political spectrum with only small variations. 28 per cent also said that the means at the disposal of the Defense ministry were not sufficient – compared to 23 per cent who said they were too great.⁸ It seems very likely that the French operations in Mali played a key role in this reversal. Another poll, conducted after the military intervention there, supports this argument. A growing majority of French people agree with the fact that the international context justifies an additional budgetary effort – 44 agree while 30 per cent say that it warrants a gradual reduction.⁹

Yet, this debate hardly takes place in the forefront. Only 3 per cent of the French consider that defense is a priority issue for the French government, ranking far below employment (64 per cent), education (48 per cent), or justice (13 per cent).¹⁰ During national elections, defense rarely features among the issues discussed by the candidates. For instance, François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, in their debate during the two turns of the presidential elections, almost never pronounced the word “defense” or “armed forces”. François Hollande never once said any one of them and Nicolas Sarkozy only twice in the context of the French presence in Afghanistan.¹¹ This could in part explain why French armed forces have been downsized by 35 per cent in the past 15 years without public concern – it is hardly imaginable that any other public sector would have undergone such important personnel and budgetary reductions without significant public and political resistance.

Besides, the French rarely protest against military interventions. The last major protests date back to 1990-1991 against the French participation to military operations in the Persian Gulf – at the time of the Gulf war and until 1996, conscription was still mandatory in France. Despite growing disapproval of French presence in Afghanistan, there were never large protests to demand the termination of French participation to the NATO mission. It can arguably demonstrate both the resilience of French public opinion vis-à-vis expeditionary missions, and its relative lack of interest in defense.

II. Lessons learned from the project

Considering those data has helped us in our effort to better capture which messages on defense can hit the right chord with a French audience. We organized a small working luncheon with 25 participants selected from a variety of sectors (public administration, political party secretariats, media, NGOs, unions, and private sector). They were invited because they are key opinion-makers in their field and have only tangential links with the security and defense sphere. We

⁷ Ifop, *Election présidentielle : les Français et les dépenses militaires*, March 2012.

⁸ Ifop, *La perception de l'armée et de la Défense par les Français*, July 2013.

⁹ Ifop, *Baromètre externe de la Défense 2013*.

¹⁰ LH2, *Les domaines prioritaires de l'action gouvernementale*, 9 November 2011.

¹¹ « La retranscription du duel entre Hollande et Sarkozy », *Ouest-France.fr*, 3 May 2012, <http://presidentielle2012.ouest-france.fr/actualite/le-verbatim-du-duel-entre-hollande-et-sarkozy-03-05-2012-1500>.

gathered them around two French Senators, Jacques Gautier and Daniel Reiner, both members of the Senate Foreign Affairs and Armed Forces Committee. Our objective was to initiate a wide-ranging discussion on the relevance of a significant defense for France. Though most helpful for our exercise, this discussion was held in isolation and therefore this single instance broached too many topics to yield definitive results and assured answers. These limitations notwithstanding, several lessons emerged from this exercise.

The *first lesson* is that no one questioned the need to maintain a strong defense apparatus. Perhaps because of the absence of antimilitarist voice within the audience, there was no debate on this issue. We did not have critical voices arguing that it should be evident to cut the defense budget in times of economic crisis and budgetary scarcity.

The *second lesson* is that there was an important focus on the weight of the defense industry. It allows France to maintain a unique set of high-skilled expertise, that only very few countries possess, which cannot be relocated abroad, and allow for synergies with the civilian sector. International standing is also at play here: France has a strong defense industry and it needs to remain competitive in the face of growing global competition. The more important point is that there was a clear understanding of the value of a defense industry to develop capabilities that spill over in the civilian domain. The synergies between the civilian and defense sectors as well as the use of dual technologies and capabilities have been recurrent themes in our discussion.

Thirdly, the participants agreed that the time was ripe to develop more cooperation with European partners. Yet the debate over which partners should be involved and what the consequences would be remains inchoate. Most participants agreed that cooperating either as a strategy or by default – the national resources are too constrained for defense to strive – needed to be further exploited, but the format is less clear. French participation within NATO is not an issue any longer, but it was not prominent in our discussion. There seemed to be a consensus over the fact that it is not yet possible to develop European-wide armed forces or defense cooperation, but some stated it as an objective. Others doubted that it could be feasible, because they consider France to be the only European country that still harvests both European and strategic ambitions. In a way, the participants seemed to imply that defense budgets were unlikely to grow anytime soon.

The last lesson is that the French public is suffering from a lack of information and education on defense. Some voices were critical of the fact that the media were too prone to report bad news about the defense industry or armed forces. Perhaps more interestingly, a consensus emerged that education on defense was lacking. This information-education complex could explain the overall disinterest in defense issues in France. A lot less French families have a direct appreciation of what armed forces do, now that the conscription has ended. Despite the longstanding objective to promote *l'esprit de défense* at school, there has been a continued decrease of attention to national defense in national education's syllabi.

III. Public messages

Defense does matter for the French. The issue is not so much to convince them of the relevance of armed forces and of a defense industry, than to explain why the economic crisis should not mark a sudden shift toward a lessening of ambitions and resources. More generally, however, defense is not a priority for the French public.

Three messages would appeal to the French:

- 1) Armed forces are important for a European and global power such as France: Armed forces are indispensable to defend the national territory, as well as those of its allies, and its interests abroad. France is one of the most prominent European nations and it needs to lead by example if it wants its partners to play their part.
- 2) The French defense industry is a cornerstone of French economic success: It is an important source of high-skilled and France-based jobs that contribute to maintaining a strong industrial sector at a time when France wants to revitalize its overall industrial policy. Moreover, French defense industry is a global leader in this field and it helps France to keep a good and competitive standing in the world. Additionally, synergies between the civilian and the defense sectors need to be fully appreciated and better explained to the French people. It is important to maintain that effort, which serves the interest of the French industry at large: it creates skilled jobs, expertise, and a competitive edge in a world where Western countries will find that their edges over emerging powers are few, and likely to shrink.
- 3) European defense cooperation requires French participation and leadership: Various forms of cooperation with European partners are likely to intensify in the coming years. Because of its current capabilities and its strategic ambitions, France is expected to lead the process. That would also help the country to better exploit the opportunities that cooperation can offer.

IV. Political recommendations

National policymakers tend not to be very familiar with, or interested in defense matters outside dedicated parliamentary committees. Within the government, the balance of power seems to have so far enabled the Ministry of Defense to safeguard its budget more successfully than other ministries in their confrontation with the Ministry of Finance. In this report, we present recommendations for NATO to France, as well as recommendations specifically for NATO.

a. *What NATO should tell France*

- 1) The new *Loi de programmation militaire (LPM)* needs to be fully implemented: The new *LPM* will cover the 2014-2019 period and it forecasts that the defense budget will level off until 2016 (which will actually translate into a relative decline, because of yearly inflation) and will then experience a 1% increase from 2017 onward. Were France unable or unwilling to abide by its commitments, it would exact a heavy toll from its armed forces that would experience yet again important downsizing and restructuring measures, and from its defense industry, especially SMEs, who greatly rely on government contracts. Such a failure would also squeeze French capacity to act.
- 2) Strengthen the quality of the strategic debate: The strategic debate in France remains too confined. Parliament is often devoid of strategic debates over the role of the armed forces or over French strategic ambitions, which breeds the public and media disinterest for those issues. It is important to ensure that debates take place on a regular basis to discuss foreign and security issues within plenaries at the Parliament. It might

consequently increase the general interest in those issues. Moreover, it is important to raise awareness among the wider public. It starts at school: the post-conscription, post-Cold War generation may not appreciate the importance of French armed forces as much as older generations do, and this trend could further accelerate if *l'esprit de défense* and the role of armed forces are not more present in syllabi. It is therefore critical to tackle the information/education issue with this post-conscription post-Cold War generation: the role of think tanks and the media could be invaluable in this regard.

b. *What we recommend to NATO*

- 1) NATO should acknowledge that national ambitions remain the backbone of national support for the military: It is probably not a coincidence that public support for defense has increased after the French intervention in Mali. Despite the overall erosion of national power, in France at least, the public and political support for the military, and for an adequate defense budget, remains intertwined with national efforts. The patriotic bond is seemingly less evident than earlier, but it remains a core identity component that cannot be discarded.
- 2) NATO should recognize that Allies committed to pursuing efforts in defense tend to have a defense industry: In the absence of imminent threats to the Euro-Atlantic region, it has become challenging to aggregate support for the military. One reason that helps to understand why France has been keen to remain a top-notch military nation is the importance of its defense industry for its economy, as well as for its international standing. Besides, it is a lot more sensitive for politicians to cut defense spending when that decision leads to hundreds of people losing their job in their country.
- 3) NATO should encourage pragmatism as an attempt to curb demilitarization: Despite recent attempts at taking the heat out of debates over the CSDP and NATO, French positions remain sometimes pervaded by grand stances. They tend to either twist Gaullist ideas to promote a strong national rhetoric or to argue that the only solution is to further integrate European militaries. It has become urgent to shift away from old habits and shed inappropriate dogmas. In the short-to-medium term, ideology will certainly not help mitigate demilitarization in Europe – pragmatic approaches, such as “minilateral” cooperation, might; and there is accordingly an increasing vacuum left for Europeans to come together and ponder hard questions about ambitions, ways and means, about which stakes really matter and what some Allies are ready to do to fulfill them.
- 4) NATO should help advance the strategic debate in France: As a political-military organization, NATO carries the responsibility to participate to and foster national strategic debates. The French strategic debate often gathers an expert crowd, but the value of defense needs to be appreciated beyond this small group of people. In line with the seminar we organized for this project, regular occurrences with smaller scopes would help disseminate ideas across non-expert spheres and refine our understanding on where potential points of friction exist, which in return would help to tailor adequate messages.