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NATO and CSDP: party and public positioning in Germany and France

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On the eve of NATO's 70th anniversary, French President Macron called NATO “brain dead” while advocating for increased European defence capacity, possibly alongside NATO rather than through it. The German reaction was cold. Defence Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer responded: “If we reinforce Europe's defence, we have to reinforce the European presence within NATO”.¹ Which path is the future of European security likely to take, and do elites and the public see these paths as mutually exclusive?

Considering domestic politics is essential when thinking about the future of European security and defence. Governments of differing political outlooks shape policy agendas. The political parties that form governments, in turn, are constrained by the prefer-

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1 S. Johansson, “NATO dismisses French president's call for ‘strategic’ nuclear dialogue”, *The Brussels Times*, 17 February 2020.

ences of voters who put them in power.

This *Policy Brief* summarizes German and French party positions towards NATO and European defence, and examines public opinion in both countries using survey data we collected in the fall of 2019.

In both countries, there is space for building greater European military capacity. Key parties support building a stronger Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). A large majority of citizens in both countries supports some European military cooperation independent of NATO, and few in the public believe that NATO alone is sufficient for European security and defence. That said, not many parties (and only a minority of the public) actively share Macron's vision of a French-led European defence co-operation to serve as an alternative to NATO. The particular configuration of French parties and voters (which are more hawkish and more sceptical of NATO) and the semi-presidential system that leaves security and defence issues as a prerogative of the president mean Macron faces fewer domestic constraints than German leaders in trying to re-envision European defence.

Political parties, NATO, and European security and defence

Germany, mostly NATO-friendly

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Germany developed a strategic culture that emphasizes alliances and (mostly) eschews national military capacity. One facet of this *weltanschauung* (world view) is Germany's strong support of NATO. Germany's biggest party, the CDU/CSU, is also the most NATO-friendly, though the SPD favours membership as well.² Both parties share a common view on the purpose of

2 The CDU/CSU has been more united on this issue than the SPD, where some factions of the party are more NATO-sceptical.

NATO: serving as a deterrent against aggression and minimizing the possibility of involvement in protracted armed conflict. The key difference is one of degree: the SPD sees NATO as a key element of German security and defence that sits *alongside* other international organizations, while the CDU/CSU views NATO as *the* cornerstone of the country's defence posture. This difference matters when it comes to CSDP – both parties support the European institution, but the CDU/CSU is critical of policies that would make CSDP a competitive alternative to NATO.

As is common in parliamentary systems, other parties may hold the key to government formation. Similarly to the SPD, the Green Party emphasizes various institutional options such as NATO and CSDP but overall gives primacy to the more inclusive UN in security matters. The far right populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* is sceptical of European institutions, but is able to “tolerate” NATO. The far left *Die Linke* is in even starker contrast with the *status quo* in opposing NATO altogether. The classically liberal Free Democrats strongly support NATO membership, and like the CDU/CSU are willing to contribute to CSDP as long as it does not compete with NATO.³

Overall, NATO is widely supported in Germany, especially by parties who have been in government at least once. Political opposition typically is rooted in a combination of ideological opposition to military alliances and generalized preferences for other international organizations (most notably the UN).

France, mostly NATO-sceptic

France has a more interventionist strategic culture compared to Germany. Debates over military intervention mostly revolve around French “autonomy” versus “influence”. This tension is reflected by French oscillation between preferring “to go it alone” as the best way to accomplish security and defence policy goals and preferring NATO or the EU. Macron's recent efforts clearly come down on the side of influence, and greater European capacity within a CSDP framework offers opportunities for France to become the driving force behind EU defence posturing.

The party system in France is more fluid than in Germany. President Macron's recently constituted party, *La République En Marche* (LREM), is a “catch-all” centrist party with former members of centre-left and centre-right parties. Macron – a committed Europhile – has advocated for greater EU security and defence capacity and integration, with France leading the way. Although supportive of NATO, his LREM party believes in separate military projects led by the EU (or not) and that Continental defence should not

be left solely to NATO, particularly in the Trump era.

French Socialists traditionally express scepticism towards NATO, viewing it as an American-dominated project that prevents France from having a distinctive foreign policy. Like LREM, the Socialists ponder a European alternative where the French voice can be heard more loudly.

Currently, the largest opposition party is *Rassemblement National* (RN), led by the right-wing populist Marine Le Pen. Whereas Macron clearly emphasizes the influence side of the French debate, the RN stridently prefers autonomy, favouring withdrawal from NATO and opposing deeper European integration in all areas, defence included. France's two-round voting system makes it unlikely that RN will lead – or even participate in – government, so we consider RN a “fringe” opposition party despite its strong standing in the polls. A smaller Eurosceptic fringe opposition party, *Debout la France*, is a right-wing Gaullist party deeply sceptical of the European Union.

On the other side of the spectrum, *La France Insoumise* and the Greens (EELV) are deeply NATO-sceptic. Those left parties advocate a fundamental rethink around the European Union. Similar to the German Greens, they believe that defence-related actions should take place under frameworks established by the United Nations.

The traditional mainstream right party is *Les Républicains* (LR) who reintegrated France into NATO's command structure under President Sarkozy in 2009 but shows less commitment to deep European security and defence integration than *En Marche!*. That said, the party is willing to discuss the prospect of the EU as a force to defend the Continent's borders. The centrist *Union of Democrats and Independents* (UDI), which is a shadow of its former self, generally supports deeper integration.

As with Germany, parties traditionally considered to be on the left are NATO-sceptic both because they are more dovish generally and mistrust US power (e.g. Socialists). Parties on the extreme right oppose NATO not out of dovishness, but because they prefer French autonomy. Parties that are centre to centre-right generally favour a range of action for France, hence support both NATO and CSDP.

Not many parties actively share Macron's vision of a French-led European defence co-operation to serve as an alternative to NATO

Public opinion towards military cooperation

In August 2019, we fielded public opinion studies in France and Germany through an online survey. Re-

³ In the public opinion data – fielded from 15 August to 3 September 2019 – employed below, we break respondents down by their identification with each of these political parties, measured by profile variables obtained from YouGov respondents in 2017.

spondents evaluated statements about their nations' defence relationships with NATO and the European Union. Table 1 presents three of these items that focus on NATO. Specifically, we report the proportion that agrees with each statement, subdivided by the respondents' partisan identification, including those without any party identification. The parties are grouped by type: governing, "mainstream opposition", "extreme opposition" and "unaffiliated".⁴ Data are weighted to better reflect the underlying population.

Several key points emerge from the survey. First, consistent with the positions of German parties, the German public shows much higher agreement that "NATO is essential for national defence" than the French. Among Germans who identify with a party in government or a mainstream opposition party, a majority of respondents agree with this statement. In France, however, only 38 percent of government party identifiers see NATO as essential, and less than 40 percent of identifiers of mainstream opposition hold that view. In both nations, the tendency of voters of the far left and far right to fall away from NATO is

4 For Germany, we classified those identifying with CDU/CSU and SPD as identified with the government, identifiers of the Greens and the FDP as supporters for the mainstream opposition and voters for the Left and AfD as extreme opposition. For France, LREM identifiers are classified as supporting government, voters for *Les Républicains*, EELV, Socialist and UDI as mainstream opposition and voters of *La France insoumise*, *Debout*, and RN as fringe opposition.

evident, and reflective of party positioning. While NATO support is substantially lower among these groups, it remains above 25 percent for all fringe parties. Finally, few supporters of any party agree with the statement that "NATO is sufficient for European military defence, the EU does not need to get involved in this".

Table 2 reports results from a question that asks voters to make a choice between defence cooperation *within* NATO and *independent* of NATO. A plurality of respondents in both nations want a mixed effort. However, German respondents are almost twice as likely to answer "it is better to strengthen military cooperation within NATO", while French respondents are more likely to answer "it is better to create European military cooperation independent of NATO". Interestingly, the responses to this question are similar across the different partisan groups within each country.

A wide support for European capacity

Table 1 shows that less than 20 percent of the public in Germany or France believe that NATO is sufficient for European security and defence. Table 2 tells a remarkably similar story. The plurality of voters in both countries prefers a "mixed" approach to addressing security problems – military cooperation should be

Table 1: Attitudes towards NATO in Germany and France by party identification

	Party (% of sample)	NATO essential (%)	Make NATO obsolete (%)	NATO sufficient (%)	
Germany	Governing Parties	CDU/CSU (19%)	55	24	18
		SPD (12%)	53	26	16
	Mainstream Opposition	FDP (5%)	49	30	13
		Greens (11%)	56	24	17
	Extreme Opposition	AfD (10%)	36	29	20
		Die Linke (6%)	27	33	18
Unaffiliated	No party ID (29%)	37	17	11	
France	Governing Party	LREM (11%)	38	47	14
	Mainstream Left Opposition	Socialists (6%)	38	38	20
		EELV (7%)	37	41	17
	Mainstream Right Opposition	Republicains (10%)	42	37	15
		UDI (1%)	21	42	0
	Extreme Opposition	Debout (2%)	31	40	19
		Insoumise (6%)	32	38	19
		RN (12%)	28	36	18
Unaffiliated	No party ID (25%)	25	34	11	

Note: Percent agreeing with statement. The original statements read as following: 1) NATO is an essential part of [country's] national security; 2) Eventually, European defence should make NATO obsolete; 3) NATO is sufficient for European military defence, the EU does not need to get involved in this.

Table 2: Preferences for European security in Germany and France by party identification

	Party (% of sample)	Strengthen NATO (in %)	Mixed (in %)	European military co-operation (in %)	Don't know (in %)	
Germany	Governing Parties	CDU/CSU (19%)	21	42	27	12
		SPD (12%)	19	44	25	13
	Mainstream Opposition	FDP (5%)	14	46	29	10
		Greens (11%)	18	45	28	9
	Extreme Opposition	AfD (10%)	19	22	22	24
		Die Linke (6%)	18	40	29	14
	Unaffiliated	No party ID (29%)	14	37	18	32
France	Governing Party	LREM (11%)	10	43	36	12
	Mainstream Left Opposition	Socialists (6%)	6	43	33	17
		EELV (7%)	8	44	35	17
	Mainstream Right Opposition	Republicains (10%)	12	45	36	6
		UDI (1%)	20	42	14	23
	Extreme Opposition	Debout (2%)	4	27	52	17
		Insoumise (6%)	11	47	31	12
		RN (12%)	17	31	38	15
	Unaffiliated	No party ID (25%)	7	36	26	31

Note: The endpoint anchors to this question read as following: 1) To address security problems, it is better to strengthen military co-operation within NATO; 2) To address these problems, it is better to create European military co-operation independent of NATO.

strengthened within NATO and European military cooperation independent of NATO should be created. When one adds this “mixed” option to those who explicitly prefer EU military cooperation, then large majorities of the public support some kind of increased European capacity.

There is surprisingly wide latitude in both countries to expand CSDP, although Macron probably has more freedom to manoeuvre than German leaders

Our analysis is that public sentiment means there is surprisingly wide latitude in both countries to expand CSDP, although Macron probably has more freedom to manoeuvre than German leaders.

While public sentiment is open to increased European capacity in both countries, there are differences. The French public is less tied to NATO and more open to European cooperation, yet, it may express greater scepticism of arrangements that limit the country’s autonomy. In Germany, there is greater support of NATO, which is part of more support generally for international security and defence institutions.

Despite differences between these two countries, both Merkel and Macron have contributed to building European security and defence capability, for example through the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). This investment would not necessarily only benefit the EU but could also help European contributions in NATO. This said, COVID-19 is likely to affect policy and budget priorities both in Germany and in France, and it remains to be seen how these changes affect investment – in both financial and political capital – in greater European military capacity.



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