

Evaluation of France's ambition to strengthen its role in Western Alliance

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France is fast emerging world power and is now competing to take over the role of the UK despite the fact that France is neither as deeply penetrated in the developing world nor has traditional connections with former colonial states in Asia and Middle East. Nevertheless, France has managed to improve its role as strategic partners with several African, Middle Eastern and Asian states.

Politically French leaders have adopted a strategy that apparently differ from that of the U.S. but militarily the French Government is drawing closer to the U.S. and NATO and seeking to play a major role within the Western strategic and defense alliance. On the other hand, French military is working to rapidly emerge as the fourth most powerful world power and is expanding its influence from Africa to Middle East and Asia-Pacific Sea.

For the United States, France's role and influence may be more beneficial than the UK and other European nations as it has emerged into a strong defense exporting country to compete with Russia and China.

Similarly, France's support to the United States dates back to the U.S. declaration of independence from Great Britain when France provided the decisive support to the United States as an ally during its war of independence. The Franco-American relationship developed into a strategic alliance under NATO and French assumed the key roles in Europe and Africa.

However, the U.S. had several reservations over French quest for independent role and regional in-roads created some confusion leading to the limitation of French interest in NATO's military wing.

The U.S. received a set-back in 1996 when France decided to limit its involvement in NATO's deterrence and collective defense mission. However, in post 9/11 situation the French interest redeveloped as the U.S. agreed to share power and influence with Paris in Europe and Africa.

The second change in French defense strategy was after Crimea crisis in 2014 and the war in Ukraine when France became closer to the defense of NATO states when it endorsed at Warsaw summit of 2016 decision to enhance air policing missions for allies and deployment of an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Poland and the Baltic States. France also backed a NATO decision to strengthen the Forward Presence around the Black Sea. It was during September 2014 that leaders of NATO in Wales Summit gave a serious attention to France's will to overtake challenges with the adoption of a "Readiness Action Plan".

During NATO Summit in Warsaw, in 2016 France played a key role in adoption of Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression". It was during this Summit that the allied nations welcomed a proposal of France to build their national cyber defense capacities and cyber space was recognized as an operational area.

In 2017 France confirmed its adherence to the strategy set by Atlantic Alliance as a "key component of European security" and agreed to fully take part in a balanced sharing of responsibilities and costs. France also committed to increase its defense spending to 2% of its national wealth in 2025. To fulfill its commitment, French government agreed to enhance its military programming bill 2019-2025 an

unprecedented €198 billion for armed forces over its first five years.

Since 2015 over 4,000 French personnel had been deployed in the region round the year in the form of air policing and intelligence gathering missions (including Airborne Warning and Control System flights every month) and increased roles in about 20 NATO exercises in the region.

In addition to that, France also shares responsibility with the U.S., and to show full commitment, France increased its forward position in Baltic countries and Poland with 300-strong armored, mechanized battalion Leclerc tanks and infantry combat vehicles, integrated over eight months over alternate years in a Western-led battalion in Estonia (2017-2019) and Lithuania (2018-2020) joining Germany and Great Britain.

In the Forward Presence Strategy (in Romania and Bulgaria), France deployed vessels in the Black Sea (two to three per year) and maritime surveillance missions using maritime patrol aircraft.

In support of the U.S. global war on terror, France also managed to regain footholds in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria while it reestablished grip in Africa and Mediterranean Sea particularly in Cyprus, Greece and Malta in close collaboration with Israel.

With the U.S. support, France also strengthened strategic alliance with India and secure defense contracts in competition with Russia. French closeness with India and formation of a strategic partnership with Indian leadership has also convinced the U.S. strategists to see France as the future key ally at a time when UK was losing grounds in many areas particularly Asia and Middle East.

Although, terrorism threat and radicalization remains a major threat to France and its interests and French leaders hope to deal with this common threat with other Western allies. However, for France, the basis of cooperation with the U.S. remains the common incentive for democracy, protecting western ideology and human rights values.

More recently, the U.S. Department of State officials have urged French leaders on number of occasions to take tough stance on both Russia and China and seek France's support in protecting western ideology against communist and authoritative systems.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper during his meeting with French Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly on September 7, 2019 also restated the importance of defense relations between the two countries and stressed on jointly dealing the Russia and China threat. However, France is still not ready to support direct involvement in an alliance against China and hopes to deal with China threat through joint initiative by European alliance.

Nevertheless, France is eager to explore new markets for its high quality heavy products in the East Asia, Pacific and ASEAN region and is hopeful that French defense products can reach new markets in South East Asian countries. For France, only if China's grip on Asia Pacific is loosened, France can penetrate into ASEAN defense markets, that would become more dependent on Europe, particularly France. Therefore, France may expand its area of influence and make way for its own Navy from Africa to Pacific oceans, by supporting the U.S. campaign against China.

France also hopes to meet China's emerging rival India's needs and by doing so France can expand its market in India and South Asian region. French policymakers also see India as a growing defense market and a largest importer of French heavy machineries therefore can rely on India to support French interests through mutual cooperation.

On the other hand, France sees China as strong competitor and not as a big market for its own products. So, France under the Western alliance joint actions against China, the country can benefit more from China's rivals including Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Following numerous warnings by the U.S. regarding China threat to French interest in the Middle East and African, French government realizes China's growing role in Africa as a future threat to its traditional influence in many Afro-Arab countries. French

government shares the U.S. and NATO officials' suggestions of combined strategy to contain China and restrict growing Chinese influence in other regions. While, France's mixed approach of imposing selected sanctions on China's 5G and cooperating with the U.S., at the same time continuing trade and maintaining somewhat cordial relations with Beijing could also send a desired messages to Moscow, as France can follow a similar pattern with the Russia in the future engagements.

For France, in order to establish its authority as growing super power, the country need to expand its area of influence from Pacific to Africa within next decade and establish its strong presence. French politicians have realized that with rapidly increasing nationalist trend in political scenario, the country cannot limit its influence within the region and needs to expand which is only possible with tacit approval from the United States.

The French Government under the leadership of President Emmanuel Macron has been striving to emerge as a powerful country not only in Europe but in the world. The politicians in France due to their own local constrains have quite a few differences with the U.S. administration and see themselves as a peace broker which will allow France to regain the footholds in Africa, Middle East and Asia.

Following the intelligence cooperation by the U.S. Africa Command leading to a successful French move on May 19, 2020 that led to the killing of Mohamed el Mrabat, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara jihadist, the French military is ready to cooperate with the U.S. to further strengthen its foothold in Africa. The U.S. officials have also assured the French officials of continued cooperation and that the U.S. would further facilitate France in Africa.

Consequently, France, along with Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad, created a combined force in January, 2020 in the name of Counter Terrorism Operation and France has been maintaining about 5,100 troops in the region.

Both the United States and France became further closer as the U.S. alarmed the European states against

a possible China's expanded influence in African following China-Africa virtual summit.

France considers Africa an important region as the U.S. role is small in West Africa, there are only around 1000 American troops stationed in West Africa, mostly at a base in Niger, however France has a greater presence in the region and can facilitate Western agendas in the region. Therefore, France is eager to strengthen economic ties with Africa, especially at a time when China is strengthening its footholds in Africa and may directly challenge the French influence.

France's on-ground experience and knowledge of Africa is always appreciated and considered irreplaceable by the United States; however, French military strategists feel that without the support of Americans, the European - and particularly French - interests in Africa may be not in a position to counter Russia's military and China's economic challenges.

As France's historical privileged access to African political leaders and markets is now rivaled by other major players, most notably, China. France has adopted a policy of containing China, by demonizing Chinese presence in Africa as debt-trap and a direct threat to African states' autonomy. France has been moving forward to secure French interests in Africa by emphasizing on human rights and protection of the sovereignty of African states.

For France, the U.S. has little interest for military operations in Africa and they want France to replace the U.S. in the region as well as defend the region against any hostile moves by China. Moreover, France shares the responsibility in Africa, as Americans are now moving towards a burden shifting strategy.

However, the strengthening of Barkhane and the G5 Sahel Joint Force is considered important move by France as it can deepen the roots in African states by developing military cooperation, training missions and taking local leaders into confidence. More recently, France and the G5 Sahel countries decided to set up a coalition for the Sahel. France contributes €1.6 billion to the Sahel Alliance projects portfolio, which has already mobilized a total of €12

billion. On February 25, 2020, on the occasion of the Alliance's General Assembly and G5 Sahel Summit, Foreign Minister Drian visited Mauritania, and the move was applauded by the Americans as it can serve the Western alliance' interest of countering Chinese influence in Africa.

France is also gradually interacting with China's neighbors due to its interests in the region as well as established some economic and defense ties with Taiwan due to its fast developing economy. In other words, it is an act of balancing between France relation with China and France relations with America.

However, French officials have taken China's warning seriously that French engagement will harm Sino-French relations by selling arms to neighboring Taiwan. The French foreign ministry officially adheres to one China policy as agreed with Beijing in 1994 and continues to urge both China and Taiwan to hold dialogue to resolve all matters peacefully.

However, French President Macron is under some pressures to choose sides between the U.S. and China; however, it is likely that the official government would continue to play neutral role and would not upset any side. President Macron also hopes to be the right facilitator between the U.S. and China therefore; he would not support any direct involvement in China's internal matters. Nevertheless, the situation would become more complicated for the President Macron if he continues to face pressures from local politicians to take a firm stand against human rights issues.

For French Government, the best possible move is to support the U.S. and Western interests on the backhand as it considers China a threat to French interests and France should gain leverage against both sides. Officially France support Chinese position of no independence of Chinese separatists and only asked China to look into the human rights situation in the country, as Europeans are becoming increasingly concerned about the human rights issues in China.

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