

French Perspectives

Foreign and Defence Review

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OPERATIONS

Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Like many Western nations, France set up a major evacuation operation from Kabul. Fortunately, France started exfiltrations in May, when President Biden confirmed the US withdrawal, assuming security for French diplomats and employees will not be guaranteed anymore by the end of summer. As the operation *Apagan* was running, questions appeared on the lessons of this 20-year presence in the country, with three main axes

1. Regarding French presence in Sahel

Experts and journalists draw a parallel between Afghan's mountains and the Sub-Saharan area, pointing to the degraded security situation and the lack of progress in institution building. Facing growing opposition from local populations and increasing questions from public, and after two military coups in Mali, President Macron announced the adaptation of French military action in the region, in accordance with his commitment at the start of his mandate.

2. European Strategic Autonomy

France makes no exception; its operation was only made possible because of American strong presence and logistics. Like the Belgium Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, Commissioner Thierry Breton or the High Representative Josep Borell, many voices in France called for an actual European Strategic Autonomy after the "Kabul debacle". Europeans need to reinforce their capacities to be the player for their own security and to defend their interests and values, when the American ally is unable or unwilling to act, according to French assessment.

3. Afghanistan: Revival of the Terrorist Stronghold?

There are strong fears that the Taliban regime will allow terrorist movements to prosper again, like it did when it ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. Those fears are reinforced as Al-Qaida's propaganda rose significantly recently. This is of course a concern for French military presence in Sahel, but also for its homeland security, as France is now designated as the main target of Islamic terrorism.

CAPABILITY AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

European Industrial Cooperation

After tensions with Germany on industrial matters, recent progress on FCAS has been welcomed. Still, shadows remain. Experts and high-ranking military officials point out that on other projects, the cooperation is at a standstill. As Eurodrone is way beyond the schedule, France ordered new *Reaper* systems from the USA. France will most likely start alone working *Tigre Mk3* standard, the evolution of the joint attack helicopter, as France felt no response came from across the Rhine.

France also faces important difficulties with Italy. The two countries have tried for many years to bring their manufacturers closer together in the naval and aeronautical fields. But competition seems as fierce as in the past, if not stronger. France is accusing Italy of not respecting formal agreements.

Both situations bring about some teeth-grinding in economic and political circles. Numerous opinion pages denounce the government's pro-European stand, condemning what they find a "naïve" attitude.

DIPLOMACY

Pegasus

In France, more than 1,000 people have been targeted from abroad by the spyware *Pegasus* developed by the Israeli company NSO. Among them journalists, lawyers but also high level officials, including a dozen ministers and the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, himself.

The affair casts a shadow on the relations between Tel-Aviv and Paris. Benny Gantz, Israel's Minister of Defence, visited his French counterpart, Florence Parly, after Emmanuel Macron gathered an extraordinary Defence council in order to keep up to date French authorities. Although the potential involvement of Morocco was widely commented in French medias, Paris kept its reproaches under wraps in order not to create a diplomatic incident with a friendly country and ally in the fight against terrorism.

MILITARY AFFAIRS

Military Working Time

Recent judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) provoked great emotions in France as it intends to extend the European directive on working hours to military personnel - as long as they are not on a fighting mission - and also to police officers. High ranking officers and politicians criticize the CJEU for ignoring the specificity of the military function, especially when it comes to French troops and its motto "available anytime, anywhere". Two Ministers already announced that France is not able to enforce this decision right away and will continue their discussion at the European level.

HOMELAND SECURITY

French Parliament Adopted the Law on the Prevention of Acts of Terrorism and on Intelligence

Despite demonstrations and worries from journalists, the text was largely adopted. The Conseil constitutionnel (constitutional court) censored a provision concerning the tracking of ex-prisoners convicted of terrorism but confirmed the majority of the law, including a reform of the declassification of secret archives and the strengthening of Internet surveillance tools.

This law is the 28th antiterrorist law since 35 years, the 10th since 2015.

PUBLICATION NOT TO BE MISSED:

The Twenty Years' War. Jihadism and Counter-terrorism in the 21st Century

by Marc HECKER and Elie TENENBAUM

Just before the fall of Kabul, and while France is still deeply involved in Sahel, the two French senior analysts from the Institut français des relations internationales (French Institute of International Relations – Ifri) published an in-depth analysis on the war against terror. The analysis received great recognition from experts and received the Prize for the best book on geopolitics in July 2021 from the French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian.