The Franco-German push for strengthened European security cooperation has intensified, especially after Brexit. However, the principles and approaches of these two allies diverge. Denmark needs a strategy for influencing the collaboration.

EU member states have strengthened their security and defence cooperation considerably over the past year due to a rapidly changing security context. This is not least fuelled by Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the perception of migration and terrorism as linked to instability in Europe, and the American disengagement from Europe with the election of Donald Trump. In December 2017, twenty-five EU member states

RECOMMENDATIONS

Denmark should:

- Reorient its security cooperation towards continental Europe within the boundaries of its national EU opt-out.
- Use its capacity to swiftly provide financial and personnel support to the civilian areas of European security and defence collaboration.
- Promote traditional Danish foreign policy principles of good governance, human rights and rule of law to strengthen its influence in new European defence structures like the E12.
PESCO and EI2 reveal longstanding differences between German and French strategic cultures and willingness to use force

Danish needs to consider how to approach these new partnerships, potentially strengthening its influence and identity as a small-state actor. Recent developments in the Sahel region illustrate the growing schism in European security collaboration that calls upon clear Danish strategic priorities.

launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation on Defence (PESCO) allowing for enhanced defence coordination and increased investment in developing defence capabilities. Meanwhile, France was concerned that the inclusive structure of the PESCO could lead to lengthy bureaucratic procedures to the detriment of prompt action. As a result, in June 2018, France proposed yet another European defence initiative outside the EU framework: the EI2. The EI2 is intended as a separate forum of cooperation among nine European countries, including France, Germany, the UK and Denmark. Beyond the objective of developing European strategic autonomy, which also allows the UK to maintain participation in wider European security and defence cooperation after Brexit, the EI2 aims to prepare a group of willing states for joint military crisis management in the EU’s neighbourhood.

The purpose of these initiatives is to allow the EU, and the European countries, to act autonomously from the US with the aim of protecting the European continent and its citizens. Such developments rest on the German-French motor, which is and has been historically vigorous. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, and the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, both see the domain of security and defence as an opportunity to further integrate the EU at a time where the union is on the lookout for a new unifying project to demonstrate the continuing value of the EU in a time of crisis.

However, the two initiatives, PESCO and EI2, reveal longstanding differences between German and French strategic cultures, willingness to use force, as well as broader visions for the purposes of European security cooperation.

As Denmark strives to find a way out of an impasse, with increasingly unpredictable transatlantic partnerships, the Franco-German axis seems like an ideal pathway forward. However, Denmark’s national defence opt-out excludes it from participating in the EU defence framework. Thus, Denmark needs to consider how to approach these new partnerships, potentially strengthening its influence and identity as a small-state actor. Recent developments in the Sahel region illustrate the growing schism in European security collaboration that calls upon clear Danish strategic priorities.

Guiding interests: The case of the Sahel

The geographical proximity of the Sahel to the EU has placed its perceived cross-border security threats of terror, migration and organised crime at the top of European security priorities. However, the centrality of the Sahel as an area of interest is driven by different guiding policy purposes. While the French, for historical reasons, consider terrorism in the Sahel a direct threat to French and European identity and security, the focus of curbing migration is increasingly becoming the driver of German engagement in the region.

Although migration and terrorism are increasingly entangled in policy priorities for the EU in the Sahel, the means and instruments to address them remain a point of contestation in France and Germany’s strategic cultures, including their perception of the use of force.

The German approach to security policy and international intervention has its historical roots in the post-war era, where multilateralist responses became the only way for Germany to act on the international
stage. Following this policy, military missions will only take place when these are embedded in a strong multilateral basis under the auspices of the UN, NATO or the EU. Moreover, any decision to engage in conflict management activities has to be taken by a parliamentary majority in the Lower House of the German Bundestag. Germany’s self-perception as a civilian power leads the country to favour civilian instruments over military ones. In the Sahel, Germany has emphasised deployments to the UN stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the EU Training Mission in Mali and supporting a police component in the newly launched regional G5 Joint Force initiative.

In contrast to Germany, France takes pride in its military capacity, its independence of action and the ability to act fast, and unilaterally, if needed. Thus, while multilateral and institutionalised solutions to security challenges are preferred at times, the French are equally willing to engage outside multilateral frameworks. This approach is enabled by an institutional set-up, where the French president is also commander-in-chief of the military and is therefore less constrained by the national parliament when deploying French troops abroad.

The French approach is most visibly reflected in the country’s former colonies in the Sahel, where France has deployed unilateral counter-terrorist missions while ensuring influence through the UN Security Council as pen-holder for MINUSMA. Yet, with the deployment of 5,000 soldiers in the Sahel since 2014, the French military is overstretched, and there is a considerable need for new allies to support a seemingly unending war against jihadist groups that have gone increasingly local in Sahara’s cross-border regions.

Where will Denmark go?
The German and French ways towards peace and stability represent two widely different approaches. While the two may prove valuable and complementary in time, their differences will undoubtedly slow down the ambition of unified European action on the global
stage. And while it seems unwise to completely break with either of the two, Denmark must carefully consider how to strengthen bonds with European allies at a time where the country’s traditional allies – the US and the UK – are less certain bets.

In terms of engagement, Denmark often attempts to go both ways. In line with the German approach and the Danish self-perception as a small state that values multilateral responses, Denmark may continue to support comprehensive approaches combining different types of means with a strong focus on human rights, good governance and the rule of law. There is a catch, though: the opt-out on defence excludes Denmark from participating in the process of strengthening the EU framework on security and defence cooperation. Here, the E12 has appeared as a welcome opportunity for Denmark to circumvent the constraints of being outside the EU framework.

The French militarised approach to international interventions also fits well with the increasing acceptance of military means as a legitimate instrument in international conflict management that Denmark has realised after participating in the American-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, it may very well be that French-led counter-terror operations will not contribute to long-term peace and stability in the Sahel. Despite the often-repeated policy slogan that security and development are mutually constitutive, in the missions, military objectives tend to take priority while sidelining the protection of local populations. However, gaining the support of these populations will ultimately determine whether European-driven interventions in the Sahel will have their anticipated impact. In this case, Denmark should support the German focus on civilian instruments.

The key for Denmark will be to balance the two approaches while ensuring that the institutional arrangements do not leave Denmark outside influence because of the national defence opt-out. Within the framework of EU-led security cooperation, Denmark could further intensify its contribution to civilian aspects within the boundaries of the opt-out. Outside the EU framework, Denmark should participate in new French-led security partnerships like the E12. Yet, beyond just being a willing and able partner, Denmark could strategically enhance its power by adhering to its traditional values of good governance and rule of law.