

The French Chief of Defence on France's Partnership with Sweden

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This is an opinion article written by the French Chief of the Defence Staff, General Thierry Burkhard, for Folk och Försvar. In it, the General outlines France's security policy and his views on the current and future threat environment. He also focuses on the strategic defence and security relationship between France and Sweden and how it is deepening in areas ranging from conflict management in the Sahel region to cooperation in the space domain. A Swedish version of this article will be published shortly. We will also publish commentaries written by Swedish defence and security experts.

“France considers itself as a reliable and credible defence partner of Sweden and of the European States in general“

The international security context has considerably deteriorated in just a few years. We now live in a tougher and more uncertain world, marked by the questioning of multilateralism and international law. Our major competitors, Russia and China, as well as emerging regional powers, intend to play a growing role and do not hesitate to use their military capabilities to assert their claims in an aggressive and complex-free way. This hardening induces obvious frictions and, in some cases, creates a real risk of incidents and escalation. The freedom of action of our countries gets questioned.

I consider the “peace-crisis-war” continuum that we had used as a strategic framework to interpret conflictuality since the end of the Cold War is no longer sufficient to take all the complexity of this new strategic grammar into account. The “competition-dispute-confrontation” triptych now seems more suitable to me.

Competition is the default mode in our world today. It pertains to the economy, the military, culture, diplomacy, and the society. When involved in competition, the armed forces are to be able to respond in a proportionate way to actions which remain under the threshold of the armed conflict. They should also produce effects in the increasingly significant non-physical environments. It is the case, for instance, of the fight against disinformation and cyberattacks. Competition is “the war before the war”: it is not the war, but it is already a form of war, in which we need to be able to prevent escalation risks and to discourage our competitors. Dispute arises when a competitor thinks he can seize an opportunity and impose a *fait accompli*, in violation of international law and with impunity. Crimea is the perfect example of this. The absence of a strong and immediate reaction enabled Russia to reach its objective. We must therefore be able to detect weak signals to be credible and reactive to counter the *fait accompli*.

And finally, confrontation, corresponds to the war.

As the French Chief of Defence, the first two axes of my action aim at strengthening and supporting the armed forces' human community – military and civilians alike – and at developing the capabilities of the armed forces to enable them to conquer a multi-domain and multi-environment superiority. In order to achieve that, the armed forces will need more agile organisation and functioning methods, to think differently and to react rapidly in case of crisis.

The third axis, “turning training into a new combat dimension to be mastered with our partners“, conveys the collective dimension of our action. The raison d'être of the French armed forces is to be engaged within a coalition, alongside their allies and partners, the United States being the first of them. Our priority is to face the most likely threat, i.e. the one posed by the claims, actions and fait accompli policy of our major competitors, at the borders of Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Regarding the strategic interests of European states, it induces a commitment going from sub-Saharan Africa to the Arctic Circle, including the Indo-Pacific region.

Responding to their request, France acts to help stabilise the States of the Sahel-Saharan Strip suffering from the terrorist threat. This is the purpose of the Barkhane force, in which Takuba is integrated, alongside with MINUSMA and EUTM Mali. France relies on its allies and partners. Sweden is strongly committed, since being involved in those three missions. Everyone agrees to say that Lieutenant-General Gyllensporre, who has just handed over the command of MINUSMA's military component, performed remarkably. During his time in command, he strived, without any additional units, to increase the operational capabilities of the UN Force. The Swedish detachment provides Takuba with remarkable operational capabilities and rare competences, which have proven to be extremely precious. Sweden will besides this assume command of the operation next month and I want to salute this commitment.

To focus on our training and mentoring missions for the benefit of the local forces, and because our engagement is a long-lasting one, we are currently adapting Barkhane. The new military set up will rely on strong capabilities and on several thousand soldiers. France will remain the backbone of this new set up – especially within Task Force Takuba – which will fully integrate our European allies and partners.

In Africa, the growing hybrid action of Russia makes the situation more complex. It is part of the exacerbated competition against which we, as Europeans, will have to mobilise together to defend our interests and our values. The assumption that Mali's junta is planning to use Wagner mercenaries bears testimony of the game between strategic competitors, in which we have to impose our position. Wagner has unfortunately shown what it was capable of in the Central African Republic. France is present in the southern flank of Europe, but also in the Middle-East where, with its American and European allies, it supports the Iraqi state in its fight against terrorism and the stability of the Arabian Gulf. France is also a player in the Indo-Pacific region, where 40% of the European trading flows transit and where it has significant interests.

France is also involved in the defence of Europe's strategic interests on its northern and eastern flanks. It thus participates in many NATO missions: we deploy main battle tanks alternately in Estonia with the British and in Latvia with the Germans. We also conduct air policing missions in the Baltic States. In the naval domain, the French Navy helps securing the northern Atlantic with a regular presence in Swedish ports, like the minehunter "Pégase" which made a call in Karlskrona in September. We also deploy together in the Balkans, in Bosnia and in the Black Sea.

These engagements forge our common operational capability, through the exchange of procedures and know-how, as well as our cohesion. These elements progress faster when we stand side by side on operations. Besides, we strengthen our common strategic culture owing to the anticipation work conducted within the European Intervention Initiative.

Sweden and France have many co-operation areas in the military domain. We regularly operate together within multinational exercises, the latest being Northern Coast (mine warfare exercise and fight against asymmetric threats) and Golden Crown (submarine rescue exercise). The French Air and Space Force participated in 2019 in Exercise Arctic Challenge, co-organised by Sweden, Finland and Norway. The Swedish armed forces also provide us with their expertise in the deep cold operational environment. French units take part each year in Exercise Arvidsjaur (deep cold combat and survival training), in deep cold training courses organised, among others, by the Subarctic Warfare Centre and in under-ice diving courses.

Finally, we develop our links in the capability domain. Sweden has thus asked for the observer status in the MGCS project, and we are discussing about the capabilities of the medium-range anti-tank missile. Our two countries are associated in the space domain with the CSO programme (space observation capability). A reception station has indeed been built in Sweden and the country will have access to the image banks as of next year. It has also been invited to observe space Exercise AsterX 2022. France and Sweden are finally increasingly involved in the European projects (PESCO and EDF). Bilateral military co-operation just gained momentum with the signing of the Letter of Intent by the two Defence Ministers on 24th September.

France considers itself as a reliable and credible defence partner of Sweden and of the European States in general. It wants to prove it through a permanent engagement in the reassurance operations in the eastern flank of Europe and through a constant investment in the development of a collective military conscience. This last item requires us to create operational links, to have a mutual knowledge and to deepen interoperability, in order to face, together, the upcoming threats.

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