

Germany and France stage joint military build-up

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A joint meeting of the German and French cabinets on Tuesday in Berlin reached an agreement for Germany and France to jointly build a combat drone, and work together more closely on satellite reconnaissance.

In the coming months, an agreement to develop a European drone will be signed, with Italy also participating. Over the course of this year, an initial study will concretise the requirements for the new aircraft. The project will also be opened up later to other interested parties such as Spain and Poland. The new drone should be operational no earlier than 2020 and no later than 2025.

It will be a drone capable of flying for up to 24 hours at a height of 3,000 to 15,000 metres, and will be able to gather intelligence as well as fire missiles. So far, only the US and Israel have built such drones.

Airbus (Germany, France), Dassault (France) and Finmeccanica (Italy) had already made a proposal for such a craft two years ago. They will probably be responsible for the development and construction of the new drone, which will consume hundreds of millions, if not billions of euros, according to experts.

The joint cabinet meeting also decided to extend Franco-German cooperation on military reconnaissance satellites. A corresponding agreement should be signed by June. Among other things, the German Ministry of Defence will invest €210 million in the future French reconnaissance system CSO (Composante Spatiale Optique) to gain greater access to its satellite imagery.

President François Hollande and Chancellor Angela Merkel justified the joint rearming with strategic arguments. It would ensure greater independence from the industries and information of other states, Hollande said. This is a sign of technical competence and a question of political power. Those who know the

situation, can act”, he said, and “those with their own satellite imagery, are free to decide.”

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian particularly stressed the decoupling from the United States. “We Europeans can do it, we Europeans should have done it long ago”, he said. “When we finally do it, then we increase the independence from the United States in this field, technically and militarily.”

Le Drian explicitly supported the plans for a European Army brought into play by German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in recent weeks.

Chancellor Angela Merkel said she was “very happy” that the long existing plans were finally being implemented. “The project shows how closely we work together,” she said.

Plans for a European Army and close military cooperation between Germany and France had existed in the 1990s. The aim is to enable Europe to pursue its own global interests independently of the United States.

Some of these plans have already been implemented. For example, an existing Franco-German corps was converted into a European Brigade. Several European armaments projects—like the Euro Fighter, the NH90 helicopter and the A400M transport aircraft—were agreed.

However, with the Iraq war, which divided Europe into supporters and opponents in 2003, the failure of the EU constitution project in 2005 and the 2008 financial crisis, these plans ground to a halt. Fiscal policy conflicts between Germany and France were exacerbated. In foreign affairs, France has focused on its former colonial territories in Africa and the Middle East, while Germany turned towards Eastern Europe.

The conflict with Russia in Ukraine, and the deepening of the crisis in the Middle East, then brought Germany and France closer together again. In both cases, the closing of ranks was in response to the aggressive and sometimes erratic actions of the US.

In Ukraine, Paris and Berlin in particular supported the putsch in Kiev, which brought a pro-Western regime to power. However, for economic reasons, they do not want to push sanctions against Russia too far, in contrast to Washington, and reject building up the Kiev regime militarily. In the Middle East, they regard the United States as increasingly responsible for the entire region sinking into war.

In its efforts as a “power in the centre”, Germany is striving to become the hegemonic power in Europe and a world power, seeking close cooperation with France in order not to be isolated. This is why Berlin has demonstratively, albeit mostly symbolically, supported the French military intervention in Africa. And in foreign policy initiatives such as the Minsk Agreement and the Lausanne negotiations with Iran, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier always stresses solidarity with his French counterpart Laurent Fabius.

France is pleased with this support. After the joint cabinet meeting in Berlin, Merkel and Hollande cynically used the Germanwings disaster in the south of France and the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to justify their military and foreign policy cooperation.

Since the beginning of the year, Germany and France had “come closer together” as a result of several “critical tests”, Merkel told the press conference. Hollande added, the Franco-German friendship had become “more a Franco-German fraternity in the last few weeks”. In the past crises, “our two countries [were] only one country”. Germany and France were “two big states, who also play their role on the world stage”, and want to “influence Europe and the fate of the world”.

However, this evocation of liberty and fraternity also covers over deep-going conflicts and contradictions that can always break out again. Economically, France, which has long been stagnating, feels crushed by the German export offensive. And nationalist parties are growing in both countries, like the National Front, which rejects cooperation between the two

governments.

In addition to military and political aims, the drone project also pursues economic objectives. Huge profits and technological advantages are always linked with multi-billion-euro defence projects.

US manufacturers have sold their drones to Europe, but have refused to grant access to the technical documentation. Foreign technology is “mostly like a so-called black box,” reports *Die Zeit*. “European operators may not open up and inspect important components, let alone maintain and repair them. Despite transatlantic partnership—that goes too far, especially for the Germans”.

From a German perspective, the drone project is also another step in a systematic military upgrade, which is being driven forward ever faster since government representatives announced the “end of military restraint” at the beginning of last year. Only ten days ago, the cabinet agreed to increase the defence budget by €8 billion.

The German defence ministry does not want to wait until the planned euro drone is ready—which the experience of previous European armament projects suggests could be a long time. Later this year, it will decide on the purchase or leasing of American or Israeli attack drones. This involves the Israeli “Heron TP” drone and the infamous “Predator” from the United States.



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