

# Jonas Elvander – Interview with Wolfgang Streeck: The EU's war in Africa

June 16, 2021 EU politics, EU-Institutions, National Politics

Planned was an interview concerning European military intervention in the Sahel. It turned out to become a very interesting conversation about European defence policy in general, and the ongoing attempts by France to establish a (French-led) European army post Brexit

**Jonas Elvander is a Brussels-based journalist and editor for the Swedish left-wing magazine Flamman**

**Wolfgang Streeck is an economic sociologist and director emeritus of the Max Planck Institute in Cologne.**

This interview originally appeared in Flamman



**Jonas Elvander:** You have previously spoken about the role of the French army in European politics, especially about how it is deployed in conflict zones as a kind of ersatz European army in exchange for favours from other member states, especially Germany. Can you explain how this system works?

**Wolfgang Streeck:** To begin with the fundamentals, since Brexit France is the only EU member country that has nuclear arms and a permanent seat

on the United Nations Security Council. There can be no doubt that France sees this as a natural entitlement to European leadership on national or “European” security. Here French national interests tend to transform, from a French perspective, into common European interests. More precisely, there is a French national interest in turning French security interests into European ones, in other words, slip in the role of a European hegemonic power. For this France needs Germany, which is by far the strongest economic power in Europe. It also needs to escape from American supremacy over European security policies, by establishing a French-led Europe as an independent world power between the United States and China, more or less equidistant from the two. Here France as using the EU as a front would claim Northern Africa and large parts of the Middle East as an area of principal interest where it would bear responsibility for what is called „political stability“, the keeping in office of friendly governments that would listen to France when it comes to access to their raw materials or for military alliances and interventions.

**JE: How do you see this Franco-German dynamic playing out in the Sahel conflict?**

**WS:** In the Sahel France is involved in a war of attrition against local rebels — some nationalist, some Islamist, some both — who are demanding national autonomy from France, their former colonial and present postcolonial overlord. In part this is about access to very rare natural resources, some of which essential for the French nuclear industry and nuclear arms. But the idea of a French Africa still exists, one that speaks French and not English, and where governments are kept in power, if need be, by French troops located on site. The problem is that this is very expensive, and the French nuclear force, which is of no use in the Sahel desert wars, eats up a huge chunk of the very high French military expenditures. This is where Germany comes in. Under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty of the early 1960s, signature of which was a condition of Germany being released from postwar occupation, Germany cannot have nuclear arms. This means that it should have money left for big conventional forces. If France could get Germany to spend more on the kind of military it is allowed to have, the Germans could help out with ground forces in the Sahel, of course under French strategic command. There are already German troops there, in an effort to do France a favour and avoid France criticising Germany as „anti-European“; but there are by far not enough EU troops to win the various wars France is currently waging there. There is also the problem of the remnants of German postwar pacifism, which makes it difficult under the German constitution to send troops to far-away places in Africa to „stabilize“ an area where there is nobody attacking Germany. This is why in Germany, public debate on the Bundeswehr’s Sahel mission is avoided, for fear that this might end up with a backlash in public opinion. To avoid this, it is claimed that the German

troops in the Sahel wars are there solely to train and advise the local troops, not for fighting. In fact we know very little about what is really going on there, in part because the French are in command and their national public is much more willing not to ask questions about foreign military interventions than, potentially, the German public.

For Germany this is a difficult terrain for other reasons as well. There is a feeling among the German political class that Germany's *de facto* economic hegemony in the European Union must be presented to the rest of Europe as that of a French-German partnership, which it is hoped would make it more palatable for other EU nations. Open discord with France must therefore be prevented at almost any price, and a major job for the makers of German foreign policy is finding common interests with France, or inventing them, or making French interests appear to be German interests, for example in arms procurement. The French arms industry is one of the few economic sectors where France excels as a manufacturing country. But for the really big projects it is too small, so it needs cooperation with German arms producers, for economic and technological reasons. The German government, however, is obliged in law to be highly restrictive when it comes to arms exports. This can be circumvented in joint projects with French partners, by letting them handle the export side under their much more lenient regime. Agreements such as these can also be kept secret for national security reasons.

A recent example is a French-German project to design and build a next-generation fighter bomber, called Future Combat Air System (FCAS), complete with swarms of drones, satellites and ground stations, which is estimated to cost about 300 billion euros between now and 2040 (which, experience tells, will certainly be a lot more at the end). For comparison, the so-called "Next Generation EU Recovery and Resilience Fund", set up to help all 26 EU member countries overcome the after effects of the pandemic, is budgeted at 750 billion, only one-and-a-half times as much as one new fighter plane. Recently Germany seems to have formally signed on to FCAS although nobody knows, and indeed nobody in the German political establishment even seems to ask, which enemy FCAS is to fight, except perhaps French irritation with Germany.

**JE: How does this relate to NATO and France's and other European countries obligations to that alliance?**

**WS:** This is another field of conflict between Germany and France. Germany is a non-nuclear power squeezed in between four nuclear powers – Russia, the UK, France and the U.S., which has stationed unknown numbers of missiles and nuclear warheads and about 40,000 troops on German soil. France has made it clear that if push came to shove, the French nuclear force, the so-called *force de frappe*, won't be available to

defend Germany; it is a purely national force and exclusively at the command of the French President. Paris, in other words, would not be sacrificed for Berlin. This leaves the American promise of nuclear protection under NATO, which binds Germany much more to the U.S. than France. Moreover, the more pressure the United States puts on Russia, for example in Ukraine, the more Russia feels a need to upgrade its nuclear forces, given that its conventional forces are no match for NATO. (Soon Russia will spend less on its military than Germany alone, which is pressured by both the U.S. and France to spend more on “defence”.) Russian investment in improving its nuclear warfare capacities, as is currently underway, makes Germany even more dependent on the U.S., and this may be one reason why the U.S. continues to assume a hostile posture to Russia, even after the end of the Soviet Union. Moreover, while France is interested primarily in Africa and the Middle East, German interests are more in Eastern Europe, as a market for its exports and as a place for industrial investment and the recruitment of cheap immigrant labour. Eastern European countries, however, demand military protection against Russia, which the French are hesitant to provide as they seek a relaxation of tensions with political means, to have a free hand in Africa. Thus Germany has to perform a difficult balancing act between the U.S. and France, which is likely to become increasingly difficult in the future as French ambitions for European leadership grow. Note that French troops have long left Afghanistan, years before the U.S. were willing to do so, while Germany up to a few months ago urged the U.S. to remain there, offering to increase their military deployment in support.

Note also that all of this is tremendously difficult to trace. International warfare, partly conducted under the guise of a “war against terror”, is and can be kept more secret than ever. Much of the dirty work is done by drones or robots, where you don’t need traditional soldiers any more, only programmers and, as it were, gamers. It is true that desert warriors must sometimes still be killed by hand, but this is increasingly done by Special Forces, who operate in deep secrecy. Special Forces, or Special Ops, seem to be all over the place these days, with a remarkable number of countries contributing small elite units to fight under American command and aided by American logistics. Their “missions” are so secret that even their family members are not allowed to know where they are operating and what exactly they are doing.

**JE: The French spend by far the most on their military, while many other countries have scaled down theirs and switched to a slim professionalized army. Why is that? And how should this be interpreted against the background of France’s neocolonial relationship to large parts of Africa on the one hand, and the fact that France has vetoed many attempts to form a European army since the EDC debacle in 1954.**

**WS:** The French army looks large if you look just at what it costs. But since the French defence budget has to pay for all this expensive hardware, from nuclear bombs to aircraft carriers to nuclear submarines, its ground troops are far from impressive. Unfortunately, as indicated, nuclear submarines are not of help in a desert war against an insurgent guerilla. Unlike in the 1950s, France now wants a European army that includes Germany, since it believes it would in fact be a French army with German land forces and auxiliaries from other, smaller countries. This optimism is related to the French permanent seat on the UN Security Council, with a right to veto anything that France doesn't like, and the French status as the EU's sole nuclear power. There are strong French efforts, half-heartedly supported by the German government, to develop what the French call a "shared strategic culture" with Germany and the German military, countervailing Germany's inevitably close and presumed to be vital connection with the United States. American foreign and security policy under Trump for a while tried to accommodate Russia and reduce the role of NATO for the purpose. Trump even asked publicly why NATO, set up in defence against the Soviet Union, was still there, three decades after the Soviet Union had disappeared. This was much to the liking of France, while in Germany a deeply "Atlanticist" political class was scared stiff. Currently the Biden administration seems to return to the old anti-Russianism of the Democratic Party. In response, French policy tries to strengthen the connection with Germany to make it the core of a European sub entity of NATO – ready, in the next Trumpian moment, to turn itself into a power centre of its own, independent from the United States. Clearly this would be impossible without Germany.