

Remaining a Day-One Player

The French Air and Space Force and the US Air Force

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While roughly a tenth of the size of the US Air Force, the French Air and Space Force (FASF) is considered by some to be the Air Force’s most near-peer partner—a fully capable, full-spectrum air force, backed by the political willingness to act. Admittedly, France remains a junior partner to the United States in any Washington-led coalition, and asymmetry will remain a structural feature of the transatlantic tie for the foreseeable future.

In *Allies That Count: Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare*, French professor of political science Olivier Schmitt explains that the utility of a junior partner’s contribution depends on “whether the junior partner has a high degree of standing in the international system or on whether its military contribution is both integrated . . . and of a sufficient technological quality to cooperate with US forces.”¹

Although a junior partner, France is an Ally that counts, as much as for its political standing and willingness to use its forces abroad, as for the high-end, full-spectrum capability of its forces. This explains why French Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin signed a renewed joint statement in November 2022, reaffirming “the need to enhance our defense cooperation in order to enable our forces to jointly address the array of threats we face.”²

This statement is also in line with former Chief of Staff of the US Air Force General Charles Q. Brown Jr.’s “Integrated by Design” approach, where the United States works with its Allies and partners through the coordination of people, policies, and processes. As Brown notes, Allies, including the FASF and the US Air Force, need to “collaborate

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1. Olivier Schmitt, *Allies That Count: Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 12, <https://doi.org/>.

2. Joint Statement of Intent between Mr. Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense of the United States of America and Mr. Sébastien Lecornu, Minister of the Armed Forces of the French Republic, signed November 30, 2022, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/>.

and make decisions together on interoperability, resource investment, information sharing, force development, and strategy from the very beginning.”³

The French Air and Space Force has long been a day-one player in coalitions and conflicts along with the US Air Force and has started to collaborate more closely with the US Space Force. This relationship must not be taken for granted, because there is risk of an interoperability gap between the two sides as increasing numbers of European nations acquire the F-35 platform. As such, in today’s advanced coalition operations, the two air forces must keep pushing hard to operate effectively together in a consistent and mutually reinforcing manner. Although progress continues, there is still many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip to overcome the existing barriers.

Strong Partners Already

*Interoperability: The ability to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives.*⁴

As America’s oldest ally, France has a long history of cooperation with the United States that it can continue to build on. Epitomized by American ace Eddie Rickenbacker, who, during World War I, flew the French Nieuport 28 and the SPAD XIII in the “Hat-in-the-Ring” Squadron, and Eugene Bullard, who joined France’s Lafayette Flying Corps in 1916 as one of the first African American military pilots, the United States’ and France’s combined aeronautical roots run deep.

Similarly, World War II saw French airmen at the controls of US warplanes, partnering together across the breadth of air missions. More recently, operations in Iraq (1991), Bosnia (1992–95), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2002–13), Libya (2011), and the Levant (since 2014) highlight that the French Air and Space Force and the US Air Force have continued this tradition of fighting alongside each other into the twenty-first century.

Exercises and Operations

In Operation Hamilton in April 2018 the French Rafale held the overall mission commander role, with US Air Force B-1s, F-15s, F-16s, and F-22s along with Royal Air Force Typhoons engaging in combined air strikes on Syria, following the use of chemical weapons by the regime. This operation demonstrated the FASF’s day-one player prowess and serves as a model of interoperability, both in the planning and in execution of real-world present-day kinetic warfare, albeit without a credible air or ground defense from the adversary.

3. Mackenzie Eaglen and Charles Q. Brown Jr., “Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Jr. on Air Force Defense Strategy and Innovation,” American Enterprise Institute, August 29, 2022, YouTube video, 58:02, <https://youtu.be/>; and Charles Q. Brown Jr., keynote address, Global Air & Space Chiefs’ Conference, London, UK, July 2022, 2, <https://www.af.mil/>.

4. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff, 2021), 110, <https://irp.fas.org/>.

In both the US Central Command and US Africa Command areas of responsibility, the French Air and Space Force is performing combat operations and conducting combat support, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and tactical airlift missions throughout these theaters in close collaboration with the US Air Force and US Joint forces.

Additionally, since 2018 the FASF has annually sent Rafale fighters, KC-135s, A330 multi-role tanker transports (MRTTs) air-to-air refueling aircraft, and its new A400M airlift aircraft to the US Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility to perform high-intensity training in French territories as well as training, security cooperation, and strategic messaging, much like its US counterpart. In 2021, the FASF conducted the HEIFARA mission, which sent three Rafales, two A400Ms, and two A330 MRTTs to French Polynesia in less than 48 hours and immediately generated fighter sorties after a projection of more than 17,000 kilometers. After this initial phase, the FASF conducted air maneuvers with US Pacific Air Force's F-22As during WAKEA exercises to increase interoperability.

In July 2023, the FASF conducted the annual PEGASE mission, which consisted of an airpower projection of 18,000 kilometers in the Indo-Pacific region with 10 Rafale, 4 A-400M, 5 MRTTs, and 320 airmen. The crews departed France on June 25 and reached southeast Asia in 30 hours.

Notably, the FASF took part in the Mobility Guardian exercise in Guam and flew with US Pacific Air Force's F-35 during Northern Edge 23-2 to reinforce their interoperability. Three of the Rafales deployed in Guam landed in Palau on July 7 for exercises in distributed operations and agile combat employment and to strengthen cooperation.

In addition, the French Air and Space Force engaged with other French partners throughout the region, with security cooperation stops in Singapore, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Japan, and the French territories in the South Pacific, intending to strengthen France's cooperation in the Pacific region while supporting its citizens and interests, per its Ministry of Armed Forces' Indo-Pacific policy.

Further Bilateral Cooperation

Overall, the two air forces share a common strategic vision that uncontested air dominance is no longer assured. As such, they must adapt to win in highly contested environments and contribute effectively to the joint warfighting effort. Beyond exercises and operations, the current operational framework of bilateral cooperation includes operational engagement talks with proposals for a similar construct in the A5 plans and requirements lane as well as annual vice air chief talks.

Strong synergies exist between US Air Forces Europe (USAFE) and the FASF, particularly in USAFE's 603rd Air Operations Center and the FASF's command and control node in Lyon—the Commandement de la défense aérienne et des opérations aériennes—reinforced by a trilateral France-United Kingdom-United States (FRUKUS) air force partnership. In 2021, for instance, under this trilateral strategic initiative, France hosted an Atlantic Trident exercise with 12 US Air Force F-35s at a French airbase for over a month, the first time F-35s operated from a non-F-35 country. In the fall of 2023, the

UK will host the next Atlantic Trident exercise, featuring F-35s and Rafales employing advanced tactics, techniques, and procedures in a full spectrum of mission sets.

France and the United States have also long been partners in the space domain. France is considered a top priority by the US Space Command in terms of cooperative efforts. Indeed, France has capabilities and a strong industrial basis all along the space spectrum, not to mention strategic locations throughout the globe that serve as useful real estate for ground-based space situational awareness capabilities. Most importantly France and the United States “have a common assessment of threats and share the ambition to confront them accordingly,” as recalled in the November 2022 joint statement of intent.⁵ For all these reasons, France and the United States are constantly enhancing their cooperation in the space domain and have since 2009 “leveraged the Space Cooperation Forum to advance shared objectives, such as information-sharing, developing mutual education and training opportunities, and building towards combined operations.”⁶

Balancing Integration with Autonomy

If the French Air and Space Force is to continue to play its part, it must not be complacent nor rest on its laurels. By the same token, the US Air Force must strive to make Brown’s integrated by design imperative a reality rather than an aspiration that does not hold under scrutiny. These parallel efforts are paramount to overcome the existing barriers to a deeper and wider collaboration.

First, the word integration may be understood differently from the two sides of the Atlantic. As Brown explained during the September 2022 International Air Chiefs Conference in Washington, DC, “‘Integrated by Design’ is the US Air Force’s approach to developing people, policies, and processes, starting with Allies and Partners in mind.”⁷

The core idea is not new, but the approach emphasizes execution rather than discussions to “collaborate and make decisions together on interoperability, resource investment, information sharing, force development and strategy from the very beginning.”⁸ In other words, it aims to increase integration at institutional and tactical levels, to maintain the leading edge over competitors. France is of course supportive of this philosophy and is eager to see it become a reality, as evidenced by the signing of the aforementioned joint statement of intent.

But integration also entails industrial risks for France as a junior partner—albeit a very important one—to the United States when integration and interoperability consist of providing Allies and partners with more American military equipment. This is why France is careful about the concept of interchangeability, a term coined by UK Chief of the

5. Joint Statement of Intent.

6. Joint Statement of Intent.

7. Charles Q. Brown Jr., speech, International Air Chiefs Conference, Washington, DC, September 15, 2022.

8. Brown, keynote address, 2.

Defence Staff Admiral Sir Tony Radakin to refer to moving “beyond interoperability” into an area of greater sharing and synergy.⁹

Admittedly, interchangeability would be “the holy grail of tactical integration because it would dramatically ease the burden of planning coalition operations,” but it would also come with a high level of dependence vis-à-vis the United States.¹⁰ In addition, US International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) complicate cooperation between France and the United States at the industrial level, because they limit the exchange of technical data and give the United States a vote on France’s arms sales policy.

In short, these regulations and the ever-increasing US defense industrial muscle shed light on the difficulty for France in overcoming the conundrum between a better integration with the United States in all warfighting domains and the preservation of its strategic autonomy. The latter must not be understood in terms of decoupling, but rather of self-sufficiency—that is, the ability to provide more resources and the willingness to take on more responsibilities for its own defense. Indeed, a state can be part of an alliance and yet be seeking self-reliance in the face of new threats and security issues. As Florence Parly, former French minister of armed forces, stated, “Hesitating between strategic autonomy and Atlantic alliance is a bit like asking a child if he prefers his mother or his father.”¹¹

For France, interoperability with the United States in particular is essential to be able to continue to operate together seamlessly like both nations have over the last 100 years. One of the biggest challenges for the FASF will be to remain a day-one player with the US Air Force while preserving its ability to act independently, when necessary, especially in the nuclear deterrent mission.

Yet this challenge is daunting with the significant acquisition of the F-35 across Europe, which makes it more difficult for France, as the FASF will not operate Lockheed Martin’s flagship. There are currently over 150 F-35s in the European theater, with well over 500 more planned for the region. Interoperability with the French Rafale and Rafale exports is critical for coalition operations. It is a challenge for France; it is a challenge for NATO. As the retired French Vice Chief of the Air Staff General Frédéric Parisot regularly warned, with the resurgence of near-peer competitors, NATO cannot afford to have divided airpower—between the F-35 community and the others—within the current operating environment.

Added to this current challenge of interoperability between the French Rafale frontline fighter, the growing F-35-capable nations, and the Joint all-domain command and control/

9. Richard R. Burgess, “U.S., UK. Naval Leaders Cite Advances in Interchangeability,” *Seapower Magazine*, October 20, 2020, <https://seapowermagazine.org/>.

10. Stacie Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, *No 1 in Team: Integrated Deterrence with Allies and Partners* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, December 2022), 11–12, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/>; and Megan Eckstein, “U.S., U.K. Navies Working to Achieve ‘Interchangeability’ in Carrier Forces, Collaboration on Unmanned and AI,” US Naval Institute, October 20, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/>.

11. Florence Parly, minister of the armed forces of France (statement, Defence Summer Universities, Paris, France, September 2018).

advanced battle management systems command and control networks is the fact that both the United States and France are working on the next generation of fighter, command and control, and networked systems-of-systems. It is critical that these advanced systems are not developed without integrating by design from the start.

New Framework

The time has come to focus on implementation. In September 2023, the FASF and US Air Force signed a letter of intent “that elevates and intensifies cooperation across the bilateral spectrum to help achieve integration by design.”¹² More specifically, Generals Stéphane Mille and Brown decided to strengthen their cooperation along several lines of engagement to face the challenges ahead, enhance day-zero interoperability, be ready to win as a team in highly contested air and space environments, and contribute effectively to the joint warfighting effort.

The first line of engagement concerns bringing in the concept of partner interoperability at the beginning—at strategy and doctrine development, well before aircraft are fielded. Indeed, interoperability is not only about technology and datalinks.

Future operational concepts and analysis through efforts such as wargames, scenarios, table-top exercises, or combined planning can help fix the gap in mutual understanding and include discussions of theories of airpower. Far from being exhaustive, the list of concepts includes (1) human-to-autonomy teaming; (2) collaborative combat aircraft; (3) resilient basing and agile combat employment; (4) Joint all-domain command and control and advanced battle management systems; and (5) near-space operations.

Concerning the last issue, China’s spy balloon that floated across the United States in early February 2023 could introduce a new avenue of cooperation between the US Air Force and the FASF, as France is about to release its strategy of Higher Airspace Operations—operations within the unregulated near-space area—while at the same time President Joseph Biden has announced that an interagency review is underway “to study the broader policy implications for detection, analysis, and disposition of unidentified aerial objects that pose either safety or security risks.”¹³

Also, information-sharing is vital to the success of multinational and bilateral operations, as discussed earlier. Consequently, the FASF and US Air Force can work on overcoming institutional barriers to change the information-sharing paradigm to allow more routine operational exchange of information.

12. Charles Q. Brown Jr. (@GenCQBrownJr), “I was very pleased to join my French counterpart, Gen. Stéphane Mille,” X (Twitter), September 19, 2023, 8:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/>.

13. “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby,” White House (website), February 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>; and Christina Mackenzie, “France Considering Options for ‘Unexploited’ Higher Airspace Region,” Breaking Defense, January 13, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

The two services acknowledge the dual value of common exercises, both for readiness and strategic signalling. As such, they can better synchronize planning whenever it is possible and desirable. The French Air and Space Force's participation in the recent US Indo-Pacific Command-led Large Scale Global Exercise 2023 offered a threefold opportunity that was capitalized on: increase interoperability, test agile combat employment concepts with US Pacific Air Forces, and signal France's commitment to protect its interests in the region. Atlantic Trident 2023 and other future exercises offer similar opportunities in the European theater.

Education and training are also critical lines of effort—whether through professional military education, combined training, or specific courses—as well as expanding exchange and liaison officers' positions within each other's operational units and staffs.

Additionally, the US Air Force and FASF could strengthen their cooperation in terms of capability development (including innovation) in relationships between, for example, the French Procurement Agency and US Air Force/A5, and within the joint Cooperative Oversight of Programs process to consider the incorporation of each other's priorities, technology, and systems much earlier in the development process, such as with the French Future Combat Air System/Next Generation Fighter and the US Air Force's next generation fighter as well as other advanced and future systems.

In parallel, the FASF and the US Space Force and US Space Command will continue to advance partnerships in the framework of the terms of reference signed in 2022 to develop information-sharing at increased levels of security classification, establish mutual education and training opportunities, and build towards combined operation in space.

Conclusion

The French Air and Space Force and the US Air Force must continue working together to be more integrated by design. Yet integration does not mean assimilation, and FASF will have to balance the need to strengthen integration with the preservation of its autonomy, for nuclear deterrence, for its industrial policy, and in terms of strategic signaling. Admittedly, as the authors know and have witnessed, France is a demanding Ally, but it is reliable as much for its capabilities as for its will to use force when necessary.

This is particularly true in the air and space domains where France is—and must stay—a day-one player alongside the United States. In short, France and the United States must continue to foster comprehensive reflection on air and space domains, discuss threats and challenges, and above all, put forward concrete policy orientations. To hedge against a more demanding future, four key words must shape strategic thinking: readiness, preparedness, sustainability, and interoperability.

The new framework, signed this September, is an opportunity to nourish ourselves on each other's experiences and perspectives in order to facilitate future military engagement and protect common security interests. France and the United States can only be stronger

together. In the words of the famous French airman and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “There is only fertile the great collaboration of the one through the other.”¹⁴ ✈️

14. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Citadelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

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