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The Dual-Core Dynamics of France and Germany and the Resolution of Dilemmas in the Process of European Defense Autonomy Against the Background of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 has completely reshaped Europe's security landscape and exposed the EU's current shortcomings in defense, energy and other fields. Europe has long relied on NATO's security framework and has a high degree of dependence on the United States. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the strategic contraction of the United States, and the lack of internal strength in Europe have stimulated the security anxiety of European countries. As political and economic powers in the world respectively, France and Germany promote the realization of European defense autonomy in different ways. France has long adhered to the concept of European strategic autonomy, while Germany achieved a "turning point" after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, shifting from a conservative to a more radical stance. Despite their differences, the two countries, based on their respective strengths, have concluded treaties and carried out cooperative military projects. The dual-core forces of the two core powers, France and Germany, play an important role in promoting the realization of European defense autonomy.

Keywords: European Defense Autonomy, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Gaullism, Atlanticism, France-Germany Dual-Core Dynamics

1. Introduction

Since modern times, Europe has had policies and practices on the construction of defense autonomy. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has exacerbated the geopolitical tension in Europe. The United States pursues the doctrine of "America First" and reduces its defense-related expenditure in NATO, exposing Europe's over-reliance on NATO and the United States. To regain their status and influence in the world, European countries have actively promoted the construction of European defense autonomy. As political and economic powers in Europe respectively, France and Germany participate in strengthening the capacity of European defense autonomy with different strategic considerations. France adheres to Gaullism and upholds the concept of independence, while

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Germany has a tendency towards Atlanticism, listing EU integration and transatlantic partnership as its diplomatic pillars. This raises the question: Against the background of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, how do France and Germany promote the construction of European defense autonomy and alleviate the difficulties faced in the international community?

Current academic research on France-Germany policies on European defense autonomy against the background of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has the following limitations: First, some studies focus on the history of France-Germany reconciliation and European integration, and rarely put forward countermeasures combined with realistic dilemmas; second, some studies focus on EU strategic autonomy but do not centre on defense autonomy; third, some studies discuss French defense policies alone, lacking cross-national comparison with Germany; fourth, the horizontal comparative study of France-Germany policies is insufficiently related to defense autonomy; finally, although some studies discuss the dilemmas of the France-Germany axis, they ignore its promoting role in European defense autonomy.

This paper studies the promoting role of France and Germany in the process of European defense autonomy through case analysis. By sorting out the development process of European defense autonomy, it discusses the opportunities and dilemmas faced by the development of European defense autonomy after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, then respectively discusses the practices and roles of the two major countries in promoting the construction of European defense autonomy, and finally explores the cooperative scenarios and possible divergences of the France-Germany dual-core dynamics. This paper helps to clarify the construction logic of the European security order and predict the subsequent development trend of the European defense system, which has theoretical significance. At the same time, the exploration of the policy practices of France and Germany provides a referenceable demonstration path for the promotion of the regional security autonomy process around the world, which has prominent practical significance.

2. Historical origin and progress of European defense autonomy

2.1. History of European defense autonomy

After World War II, the strength of European major powers was weakened. In the Cold War pattern of hegemony between the United States and the Soviet Union, European countries practiced common defense for the first time to ensure their own security and guard against the resurgence of Germany. In 1950, French Prime Minister Pleven submitted the "Pleven Plan" to the parliament, which proposed to form a European army and build a European Defense Community, also incorporating Germany's armed forces. In 1952, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany signed an agreement in Paris, announcing the establishment of the European Defense Community. Before the establishment of the European Community, the security mechanism in Europe during the Cold War consisted of the Western European Union (WEU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with the WEU only being a subordinate part of NATO's defense system. The establishment of the European Community changed this pattern.

The development of European defense autonomy encountered some obstacles. The lack of common diplomatic tools made it difficult for European countries to express their views collectively and exert influence in international events such as international crises. In 1973, the adoption of the Copenhagen Report marked the official formation of the European Political Cooperation system; in 1987, the European Security Agenda first formed a common security strategy in the form of a "charter"; the Single European Act came into force in 1987, under which the member states of the

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European Community began to have a unified foreign policy. The Single European Act provided European countries with common diplomatic tools, laying a legal foundation for European political cooperation in common foreign policies, and was an important progress in the development of common defense and the promotion of defense autonomy capacity building in Europe.

On the basis of common diplomatic tools, the direction of European defense autonomy construction gradually diversified, resulting in a large number of organizations and policies. In 1993, the initiative put forward by France and Germany to establish the Eurocorps was formally established. In the same year, the members of the European Community signed the Maastricht Treaty, according to which the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Economic Community and Cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs constituted the three pillars of the EU. In 1998, the British and French heads of state issued the Saint-Malo Declaration on European Defense, supporting the formulation of European defense policies under the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This declaration marked the birth of the European Security and Defense Policy. Since then, European defense autonomy policies have gradually developed.

At the same time, the turbulence in the international community affected the development of European defense policies. In the spring of 1999, NATO launched a war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia over the Kosovo issue, and the EU's mediation failed. The EU gradually realized its over-reliance on the United States and NATO, and recognized the importance of consolidating its own security and defense construction. Therefore, the EU released the Global Strategy on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in 2016, themed "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe". Approved by the European Council, the EU then put forward the Implementation Plan on Security and Defense. Since then, "strategic autonomy" and the promotion of common security and defense capacity building have become the core grip of the EU. In 2017, 25 EU member states formally launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism in the field of defense, carrying out a brand-new practice of the "multi-speed Europe" concept in defense. European defense autonomy policies have gradually developed, with a more complete system, and continuously innovated and evolved with the changes in the international community.

In short, by reviewing the background of emergence and development, it can be found that the development of European defense autonomy policies is deeply influenced by the international environment of each era and Europe's own security and defense demands. In addition, the development of European defense policies has experienced a gradual process from scratch to systematization, which to a certain extent meets the survival and development demands of Europe in the international environment. However, in the process of the emergence and development of the concept of defense autonomy and a series of policies, NATO has always existed within the European framework, and the EU's dependence on NATO has been initially reflected at this stage.

2.2. The role of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the realization of European defense autonomy

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the most direct and key core factor promoting European defense autonomy. The protraction of the conflict in Europe has significantly exacerbated the geopolitical tension in Europe. Before the conflict, France, Germany and other countries actively mediated but failed to prevent the escalation of the situation, also exposing Europe's inability in security coordination. At the same time, Europe's strategic vulnerability in key fields such as defense and energy were fully revealed, and its international status and influence were impacted. The concept of strategic autonomy has increasingly appeared in the public statements of senior officials of the EU and core member states such as France and Germany, becoming a core issue in various policy documents of the EU.

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For a long time, European security has highly relied on NATO led by the United States, and defense construction has lagged behind. Many EU member states have long been "free riders" with low defense expenditure and internal imbalance, and the United States bears more than 70% of NATO's military expenditure. In the field of military industry and core technologies, the research and development of European countries are scattered, with prominent parallel research and development problems. Key components such as aero-engines and high-end chips are seriously dependent on the United States, and the industrial chain has a low degree of autonomy. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has made Europe deeply aware of the security risks of over-reliance on NATO, promoted it to reflect on the dependence on the United States, and accelerate the construction of autonomous defense.

From the perspective of the external environment, on the one hand, the strategic shift of the United States and the weakening of its commitments to Europe further stimulated Europe to move towards autonomy. The Trump administration pursued "America First", requiring Europe to substantially increase defense expenditure, cut EU security assistance, shift its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific, and promote great power competition. Europe generally worried that the United States would gradually shrink its security protection for Europe, so it was more determined to promote autonomous defense. On the other hand, the intensification of US-Russia confrontation and the expiration of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) triggered an arms race. The continuous intensification of security contradictions between NATO's eastward expansion and Russia directly threatened Europe's border security. Under multiple external pressures, Europe no longer blindly followed the United States, and its willingness to pursue an independent security stance continued to increase.

Although the Russia-Ukraine conflict has greatly promoted the process of European defense autonomy, Europe still faces many internal constraints and external challenges, and its development prospects are unclear.

First, economic and military industrial strength cannot support defense autonomy. EU member states have long been unwilling to increase defense funding, and European defense bonds are difficult to implement due to the opposition of many countries. The European defense industry is highly fragmented, the proportion of joint arms procurement is far below the established target, and countries have obvious divergent positions on the development of the defense industry. In addition, the EU has a high degree of energy dependence on Russia, and sanctions against Russia have caused high domestic inflation and rising energy prices, further restricting defense investment under economic pressure.

Second, there are deep-seated divergences in security concepts and interests within the EU. Security risks in Central and Eastern Europe, immigration issues and terrorist threats have exacerbated European security pressure. Countries represented by France advocate Eurocentrism and pursue independent defense; while Central and Eastern European and some Western European countries trust NATO and US protection more and adhere to Atlanticism. In addition, the rise of populism and extreme right-wing forces has increased the centrifugal force within the EU, seriously hindering the process of defense integration.

Finally, US external intervention has always been an important constraint. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has reactivated NATO to a certain extent. Countries such as Sweden and Finland have sought to join NATO, and Europe has instead become closer to the United States in terms of security. The United States ostensibly supports European strategic autonomy, but in fact only hopes that Europe will increase military expenditure and strengthen NATO, not allowing European defense to decouple from the United States and unwilling to lose its leading role in Europe [1]. There is a

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fundamental contradiction between the US-dominated Atlantic alliance system and the EU's goal of pursuing equal and autonomous defense integration.

Overall, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has awakened Europe's geopolitical security awareness, provided an important opportunity for European defense autonomy, and promoted the EU to shift from concept to pragmatic cooperation. EU Commission President Von der Leyen claimed to adopt "principled realism" in the EU's global strategy [1].France and Germany, as core countries, play a key leading role. However, European defense autonomy is still restricted by economic shortcomings, internal divergences and US constraints, and will face a long-term dilemma between security dependence and strategic autonomy.

3. The role of france and Germany in European defense autonomy

3.1. Gaullism and the defense autonomy proposals of the Macron government

From the perspective of the origin of concepts, France's defense autonomy is included in its strategic autonomy, and France's strategic autonomy policy originates from De Gaulle's concept of independence. The core essence of this concept is that France must have absolute sovereignty over the decision-making and action of its national defense and security [2]. In the late 1950s, de Gaulle advocated breaking away from US control, emphasizing the concept of complete national sovereignty and maintaining diplomatic independence. De Gaulle established France's nuclear deterrence system in the military field, and took the lead in recognizing New China among Western countries in the diplomatic field. His policies and proposals aimed to ensure France's absolute autonomy in defense and influenced many subsequent French presidents. Even his "pro-US" successors would emphasize that "France must retain the important capacity to act independently" [3].

In 2017, Macron, who took the "middle path", won the general election. He pointed out that the current world is characterized by a "sovereign world of nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism and isolationism" [1]. Macron changed the pro-US and pro-NATO practices of previous presidents Sarkozy and Hollande, re-hoisted the banner of "Gaullism", and adopted a more proactive and active strategy of defense autonomy in foreign affairs. In 2021, the AUKUS was established, and Australia tore up the agreement to purchase submarines from France. This reflects the exclusion of European major powers by the changes in the Asia-Pacific interest pattern led by the United States. Before the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Macron frequently mediated between Russia and Ukraine, calling on the EU to bypass NATO and the United States and dialogue directly with Russia. However, his efforts failed to prevent the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and France and the EU were greatly affected accordingly. Therefore, France has adopted a series of specific defense measures: on the one hand, promoting Europe to get rid of dependence on the United States in military affairs; on the other hand, calling on European countries to re-examine their relations with NATO to get rid of its control in international public opinion. The specific measures are as follows:

1. Actively building reliable defense cooperative partnerships. Seeking countries with common political will for strategic autonomy and certain national defense industrial strength, such as Germany and Italy, and maintaining close cooperation with them. France also goes beyond the framework of EU treaties and proposes a defense community strategy to neutral countries and other countries.

2. Promoting the construction of the European Defense Council to improve the decision-making capacity of defense issues. French think tanks propose a plan to gather the heads of state and

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government of participating countries to discuss and vote together, so as to solve the problem that the European Defense Alliance lacks a decision-making body.

3. Promoting the formation of the Eurocorps and the European Political Community to strengthen the capacity to handle defense issues. In the final version of the strategic guidelines adopted in 2022, the EU has clearly stated that it will complete the formation of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EURDC) with 5,000 soldiers covering land, sea, air, space and network fields by 2025 [4]. In addition, France tries to establish a new framework system to integrate European countries. Macron put forward the concept of the European Political Community in 2022, which can integrate the United Kingdom after Brexit and Ukraine and other countries that cannot join the EU in the short term, making up for the deficiencies in EU functions and coverage, and improving the overall execution capacity of European countries.

4. Launching the European Intervention Initiative, so that when European security is threatened, 14 European countries including the United Kingdom can immediately carry out military deployment to realize the overall defense autonomy of Europe.

5. Taking the lead in proposing the construction of the European Autonomous Action Capacity (EAAC) in 2017, namely the "troika", including a European army, a joint anti-terrorism prosecutor's office and a European civilian protection force. After taking office, Macron actively promoted the conclusion of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) defense agreement and the European Defense Fund, laying the foundation for the construction of the European Autonomous Action Capacity and building a "European pillar" within NATO.

By summarizing Macron's past diplomatic propositions, we can find the following characteristics of Macron's diplomatic policies: first, believing in multilateralism with the core of "balancing powers", maintaining multilateralist propositions in the Sino-US competition without taking sides, and improving the influence of France and the EU in the international community; second, adopting a geopolitical strategy of consolidating Europe and advancing in Asia, and pursuing a Europeanized autonomy strategy. Macron put forward the concept of "European sovereignty", advocating that the EU has more sovereignty in fields such as defense, which has been supported by Germany. In short, France's "balancing power" concept and "Europeanized" autonomy strategy determine that when dealing with relations with NATO, France will give priority to European integration and strengthen its own and the EU's influence.

3.2. The fluctuating attitude and specific measures of Germany in defense autonomy

Germany holds a relatively cautious attitude towards European defense autonomy, attaches importance to NATO, does not abandon its dependence on the United States in its overall policies, and integrates into NATO's nuclear deterrence policy through nuclear participation, with a strong tendency towards Atlanticism. During the Merkel era, Germany proposed that it should improve the credibility of Europe as a partner of the Western world and strengthen its status relative to emerging major powers. During this period, Germany had two core goals: making Europe more independent and capable of taking international action, and strengthening ties with the United States. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the coalition government agreement of the new German government in 2021 clearly stated that Germany needs to strengthen the democracy, strategic sovereignty and action capacity of the EU [5], so as to realize peace and freedom in Europe to ensure Germany's peace and prosperity. The agreement also defines Germany's responsibility as "serving European interests". In February 2022, after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a "turning point". Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy first clearly

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proposed that "European defense autonomy is the core goal of Germany's security policy" [6] and its Atlanticist tendency has converged. The specific measures are as follows:

1. Proposing the establishment of a European Security Council to improve the efficiency of European defense decision-making. To break the long-standing inefficient dilemma of EU diplomacy and other policies, Germany has repeatedly proposed the establishment of such a council, a concept once put forward by Merkel. This proposal is to be led by core member states and coordinated with NATO to accelerate defense decision-making.

2. Establishing a special fund of 100 billion euros for national defense and committing to increasing the proportion of military expenditure to 2% of GDP [7]. In 2025, the Merz government passed a constitutional amendment to relax the "debt brake" and planned to increase its military expenditure [8].

3. Actively promoting the construction of rapid reaction forces and defense cooperation mechanisms. In 2025, Germany announced that it would provide troops for the European "military core" rapid reaction force [9].Using Germany's industrial advantages to integrate the military industry, strengthen the combat capacity of the EU, and promote the construction of the entire defense mechanism. Germany's economic and industrial capacity plays an important role in the construction of European defense autonomy.

In addition, Germany actively responded to France's proposals in the construction of European defense autonomy. In 2017, Macron put forward the concept of "European sovereignty", which was supported by Germany [10]. The new German government elected in 2021 took "increasing European strategic autonomy" as its governance goal. Germany has also actively cooperated with France in establishing a national defense and security committee and promoting joint defense projects.

4. The impact of France-Germany cooperation and divergences on European defense autonomy

4.1. France-Germany cooperation

France is the only permanent member of the United Nations in the EU after Brexit, and Germany is the world's fourth largest economy. The former is a political power, and the latter is an economic power. Germany, with its strong economic strength, has become the "ATM" of the EU, while France, relying on its voice as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, enhances Europe's influence. Since Macron took office, France has continuously accelerated the process of European defense cooperation. Macron regards the "France-Germany core" based on the spirit of the Élysée Treaty as the driving force of the EU, believing that it is an important prerequisite for promoting the construction of European defense autonomy and should play a leading role in the process of European integration. In 2018, in the German Bundestag, Macron pointed out that "Europe and the France-Germany couple within it have the responsibility to prevent the world from sliding into chaos and lead it on the path of peace" [11]. Germany is also committed to deeper cooperation with France on European defense issues. In 2018, immediately after taking office, German new Foreign Minister Heiko Maas visited France, aiming to open a new era of France-Germany cooperation [12]. Germany actively responded to France's proposals, and Merkel and Macron publicly expressed the importance of France-Germany cooperation on many diplomatic occasions.

So far, France-Germany cooperation has been manifested in various ways to jointly promote the construction of European defense autonomy. First, France and Germany have continued the spirit of reconciliation through signing treaties and promoted closer cooperation in future defense autonomy

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construction. In 2019, France and Germany signed the Treaty of Aachen [13], which is a supplement to the Élysée Treaty signed in 1963 marking France-Germany reconciliation. Against the background of the United States pursuing "America First" policy, Brexit causing unstable situations within Europe, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict exposing European defense drawbacks, the two important European countries, France and Germany, coordinated with each other to promote the improvement and positive transformation of the European order. Second, France and Germany have cooperated to solve difficult political issues, helping to improve Europe's international influence. In the face of the Iran nuclear issue and the US tariffs on the European iron and steel industry, Merkel and Macron visited Washington one after another [14], working together for European interests. France-Germany cooperation has thus gradually enhanced Europe's strength and has important strategic significance. Finally, the military cooperation projects carried out by France and Germany constitute most of the European common defense policy. After Brexit, the military expenditure of France and Germany accounts for almost half of the total military expenditure of European countries, and the two countries bear more responsibilities [15]. France provides strategic deployment, while Germany provides industrial and practical support. The two together form the "engine" of Permanent Structured Cooperation, focusing first on forming a permanent and binding structure to ensure Europe's security. Macron's proposal of the "European Intervention Initiative" was approved by Germany, which focuses on improving Europe's military operation capacity and is more pragmatic and flexible. Both military projects aim to improve Europe's crisis management capacity, thereby enhancing European defense autonomy capacity. France and Germany have given play to their respective advantages in cooperation, showing their different strategic cultures.

4.2. France-Germany divergences

Although France and Germany have cooperated on the issue of European defense autonomy, there are still divergences between them.

First, France and Germany hold different strategic concepts. France took the lead in proposing strategic autonomy and practicing Europeanism. Macron put forward the concept of "sovereign Europe" in 2017, and after his re-election, he further promoted Europe to become a geopolitical force. Germany has a cautious attitude towards European defense and a tendency towards Atlanticism, and did not respond positively when Macron advocated European defense autonomy. After the Ukraine crisis, Germany changed its position and supported joining hands with France to promote strategic autonomy under the new geopolitical background. However, due to its historical reasons, Atlanticism still has an impact on Germany.

Second, France and Germany have different policy goals. Due to the differences in their own international role positioning, there are divergences in the shaping of the EU's image. As a nuclear state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France believes that its country should give full play to its capacity, take independent action for a long time, give priority to combating terrorism, and restore its status as a world power. Germany, on the other hand, believes that it should strive to make the EU a bearer and guarantor of regional order, thereby ensuring the rights and leadership foundation of the EU. If it is not for the establishment of European defense autonomy capacity, Germany has no reason to strengthen military means and expand the scope of action.

Finally, France and Germany also have divergences in the implementation of specific defense policies, such as military expenditure and military equipment procurement. Germany purchased US F-35 fighter jets and unilaterally signed a missile defense system agreement with 13 NATO countries mainly in Northern and Eastern Europe [16]. France is very dissatisfied with Germany's behavior, believing that Germany has damaged EU defense autonomy, and the purchase of US

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military equipment will lead to Europe's deepening dependence on the United States. How to resolve these specific divergences in defense policies is of great significance for deepening France-Germany cooperation in the field of defense.

The sustainable development of European defense autonomy largely depends on whether all its members can reach a consensus on various divergences, have common political will, and have the ability to translate political will into action. It must be pointed out that there are always differences in cognition and interests within the EU, especially between France and Germany. Even if the two countries reach an agreement on the issue of defense autonomy, the divergences in specific implementation methods may lead them to accuse each other. Only on the premise of firm political will for defense autonomy, can France and Germany actively resolve divergences in concepts and specific interests, and on this basis, have self-defense capacity to achieve the sustainable development of European defense autonomy in the future.

5. Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has broken the post-war security pattern of Europe and injected unprecedented impetus and pressure into the process of European defense autonomy. By sorting out the historical evolution of European defense autonomy, analyzing the opportunities and challenges brought by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and focusing on the dual-core driving role and divergences of France and Germany, this paper finally responds to the question raised at the beginning: the France-Germany axis is the core engine of European defense autonomy, but the differences in concepts and interests in their cooperation are the key bottlenecks restricting the progress.

As core major powers in Europe, France and Germany have complementary advantages and formed a joint force in building European defense autonomy. France adheres to Gaullism and leads the direction of European defense with a firm concept of strategic autonomy, strengthening Europe's autonomous action capacity by promoting projects such as the European Intervention Initiative; Germany has achieved a "turning point" after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, supported by strong economic and industrial strength, and provides material guarantee for European defense autonomy through pragmatic measures such as establishing a special national defense fund, relaxing the "debt brake", and providing troops for rapid reaction forces. The signing of the Treaty of Aachen and the collaborative promotion of military projects reflect the common determination of the two countries to promote European defense autonomy and also confirm the importance of the dual-core dynamics.

However, the current European defense autonomy still faces multiple dilemmas: externally, it is subject to US intervention; internally, there are divergences between France and Germany in strategic concepts, policy goals and specific defense practices, coupled with problems such as insufficient innovation in the EU's own military industry and industrial fragmentation, which jointly hinder the progress of European defense autonomy. In this context, the key to breaking the dilemma lies in whether France and Germany can reach a consensus to bridge their divergences and give full play to their dual-core leading role. The two countries should respect each other's strategic demands in policies, coordinate defense policies and actions in specific actions, and solve the problem of fragmentation in the military industry, so as to promote Europe to gradually get rid of excessive dependence on the United States and NATO and realize the sustainable development of defense autonomy.

In summary, European defense autonomy is a long-term and complex process, and the coordination of the France-Germany axis is still the core key. Only when France and Germany build internal consensus and break through internal and external constraints can Europe truly achieve strategic autonomy in the defense field.

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