



## France

## Tanks again

LONDON AND PARIS

## The armed forces are now planning for high-intensity war

IN THE FORESTS and plains of the Champagne-Ardenne region, where once the great powers went into battle, the French armed forces are beginning to prepare for the return of a major conflict. Planned for 2023, Exercise Orion is a full-scale divisional exercise that will last several days, based probably out of camps at Suippes, Mailly and Mourmelon. It will involve the full range of French military capacity on a scale not tested for decades. The drill will include command-post exercises, hybrid scenarios, simulation and live-fire drills. Around 10,000 soldiers could take part, as well as the air force and, in a separate maritime sequence, the navy. Belgian, British and American forces may join in.

There are other signs that the French armed forces are in the midst of a generational transformation. In January the general staff quietly established ten working groups to examine the country's readiness for high-intensity war. French generals reckon that they have a decade or so to prepare for it. The groups cover everything

from munition shortages to the resilience of society, including whether citizens are "ready to accept the level of casualties we have never seen since world war two", says one participant. The spectre of high-end war is now so widespread in French military thinking that the scenario has its own acronym: HEM, or *hypothèse d'engagement majeur* (hypothesis of major engagement). The presumed opponents are unnamed, but analysts point not only to Russia, but also Turkey or a North African country.

That represents a seismic shift for French forces. Thirty years ago they mostly did peacekeeping. Over the past decade, they have turned to counter-insurgency

and counter-terrorism, whether abroad (Opération Barkhane in the Sahel) or at home (Opération Sentinelle). But in his strategic vision for 2030 published last year, General Thierry Burkhard, the head of the French army, called for preparing for high-intensity, state-on-state conflict.

"We absolutely have to prepare for a more dangerous world," General Burkhard recently told *The Economist*. This requires what he calls a "hardening" of the land army. Currently France keeps 5,100 troops in the Sahel as part of Barkhane. Future operations "could involve brigades, or a division", meaning 8,000-25,000 soldiers. The need to change scale over the next decade, says the general, will require a mix of reforms: more demanding recruitment; investment in modern equipment; simpler organisational structures to make the army more nimble; and toughened training for a major conflict. "We will be tested more and more brutally," he says. "We need to realise this."

When Emmanuel Macron was elected president in 2017, the armed forces initially doubted his commitment to military spending. After imposing a round of short-term cuts, he rowed publicly with General Pierre de Villiers, then head of the joint chiefs of staff, prompting the general to resign. Since then, however, Mr Macron has kept a campaign promise to invest heavily in France's soldiers.

The defence budget for 2019-25 got a big ►►

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► boost, taking annual spending to €50bn (\$59bn) by the end of the period, by which time it will be 46% up on its level of 2018. Weighted towards the later years, the budget allows military planners to think ahead, buy kit and reorganise. “It’s the first time in memory that we have a reasonable fit between the planning documents and the budget allocated,” says François Heisbourg of the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris. It also means that France now meets its NATO commitment to spend at least 2% of its GDP on defence.

The core of French military modernisation is the Scorpion programme, a \$6.8bn project to replace virtually every front-line motorised and armoured vehicle in the army, upgrade the 1990s-era Leclerc tank and connect all these together over a new digital network. The idea is that a first fully-equipped Scorpion brigade should be ready by 2023. Rémy Héméz, a French officer and researcher, says that in the 15 years between 2010 and 2025 the army’s equipment will have changed more than it did in the four decades between 1970 and 2010.

### Marchons, marchons

In many respects, France’s approach to future war differs from the tech-heavy vision recently unveiled by Britain. Whereas Britain is cutting troops and armour, France is keeping 60% more soldiers than Britain plans to, and 50% more tanks. It has been relatively slow to acquire and arm drones. “There is a great risk of falling behind as automation on the battlefield accelerates,” warned a report by the Institut Montaigne, a think-tank. Indeed, French officers tend to be more sceptical than British or American ones that technology will transform the battlefield. “Technology is never 100% effective,” warns General Burkhard. “Soldiers must always be able to fight in a degraded way...when the technology does not work any more.”

That does not mean France is ignoring new domains of war; space, in particular, is a priority. In September last year France’s air force became the “Air and Space Force”,

having earlier set up a new military space command in Toulouse. The French armed forces are also expanding their information warfare and cyber capabilities. In December 2020 Facebook and Instagram removed a network of 100 fake accounts linked to the French armed forces after they sparred with Russian-backed ones over the Central African Republic and Mali, among other African battlegrounds where the two countries vie for influence.

As France starts to gear up its armed forces for all these new forms of warfare, however, there are a number of serious challenges. The Sahel experience, says General Burkhard, is “undeniably a real strength”. Over a vast area of semi-arid scrub, soldiers and special forces take part in high-risk combat operations, which are both technically and tactically challenging. The French army has reported 57 deaths since 2013. Yet Barkhane is a highly asymmetric conflict, in which the French enjoy air supremacy, with no communications interference or threat from drones, missiles or cyber-attacks.

The other problem is that French forces are being pulled in several directions at once. In mid-March a dozen French tanks, 160 armoured vehicles and 300 troops arrived in Tapa, in Estonia. They were the latest French contribution to the NATO battle-groups stationed in Poland and the Baltic states to deter Russian attack. Indeed military staff assume future engagements would be alongside allies—if not NATO, then at least America, or a coalition of the willing. These modernisation efforts are consistent both with NATO’s priorities and with Mr Macron’s desire for Europe to bolster its indigenous defences, though France and others remain reliant on American support for key enabling assets, like airlift and air defence.

In addition to eastern Europe, France is increasingly preoccupied to the south. In the eastern Mediterranean, France and Turkey have quarrelled over Libya, Syria and Cyprus, prompting Mr Macron to dispatch two warplanes and a frigate to Greek waters last August. France is also deeply involved in the Indo-Pacific, where its overseas territories contain 1.6m French citizens and 7,000 soldiers. France has sustained a steady naval presence in the area.

The catch is that the navy has just 15 major surface ships to deal with all these issues, points out Admiral Pierre Vandier, France’s chief of naval staff. “All of us Europeans are on thin ice. We may stretch our forces between doing well in the Atlantic, doing well in the Med, doing well in the Gulf and doing well in the Indo-Pacific.” Prioritising between these is no longer a job for the armed forces, he says, but “a political decision” for Mr Macron, or for his successor. “We will have choices to make, for sure.” ■

## Serbia

# Vial stuff

## An otherwise misruled country beats the EU at vaccination

SERBIA MAY not have had such glowing press coverage since the first world war. A poor country by European standards, and plagued by corruption, it nonetheless has one of the world’s fastest covid-19 vaccination campaigns—third in Europe in total doses delivered per person. Thousands of Bosnians, Macedonians and Montenegrins have crossed the border for free jabs. President Aleksandar Vucic has been having a good pandemic.

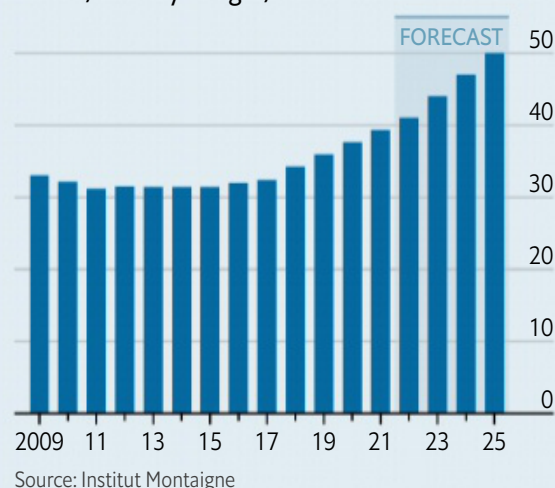
On the government’s health website Serbs can sign up to receive a Chinese vaccine, a Russian one, a Western one or whatever is available. About three-quarters of the shots given so far are Chinese. To obtain the sought-after Pfizer vaccine, you may need contacts. Foreigners get AstraZeneca, possibly because many locals do not want it. By March 27th 20% of Serbs had had at least one dose. Mr Vucic crowed that 30-year-olds in Germany would have to wait for ages to get their first jab.

Nevertheless, rates of infection and death are rising fast. Many Serbs do not bother to take precautions, says Ivan Kostic, a surgeon in the central town of Cacak, particularly those who have had their first shot. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, there have been no long lockdowns. The health-care system is run-down: Serbian hospitals have a quarter fewer staff than western European ones, estimates Dr Kostic, partly because so many have emigrated.

Worse, conspiracy theories are starting to undermine the vaccination drive. One study found 70% of Serbs believe in at least one covid-19 conspiracy theory, such as that it is a bioweapon or is spread by drug makers; in western Europe the rate is about ►

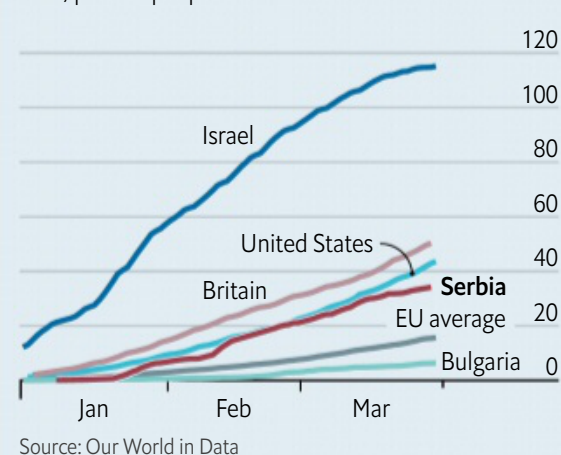
### Rumours of wars

France, military budget, €bn



### Beating Brussels

Covid-19 vaccination doses  
2021, per 100 people





► a quarter. Since the 1980s, says Vedran Džihic of Vienna University, Serbia has engaged in “hyper-production” of conspiracy theories, mostly xenophobic ones directed at Albanians, Bosnians, Croats or the Vatican. Now citizens have difficulty discerning crackpot tales from reality.

Yet Mr Vucic’s strategy of not putting his foreign-policy eggs in one basket has paid off. He has bought vaccines in Europe, Russia and China, and signed deals to produce the Russian and Chinese ones in Serbia. Both countries hope to use vaccine politics to undermine faith in the EU. Polls show it is working, though some Serbs think that China expects commercial favours in return.

The EU has promised Serbia recovery funds, but has yet to donate any vaccine. Meanwhile, Mr Vucic’s success at getting vaccine elsewhere lets him pose as a regional leader. Serbia’s neighbours have few illusions about his benevolence, says Florian Bieber of Graz University. But his prowess at “street-wise, gangster-style” politics, domestic and international, makes him a force to be reckoned with. ■

## Germany and covid-19

# Who’s in charge?

BERLIN

Germany’s management of the pandemic looks shaky

A COMMUNIST-ERA joke, in updated form, has been doing the rounds on German social media. “Are there no vaccines here?” someone asks, to be told: “No, there are no vaccines over there. There are no tests here.” The gag captures the dismay many Germans feel about their state’s inability to fend off the third wave of the pandemic, even as other countries vaccinate their way towards freedom.

Two factors explain the descent into misery. The first is that much of the lockdown armoury is already deployed. In October, politicians could close restaurants, bars and museums to battle the second wave. But most restrictions have only tightened since, leaving Germany to countenance hitherto untried options like compulsory testing and curfews. Meanwhile, an ever changing tangle of rules leaves citizens confused and businesses in despair.

The second is a fraying of Germany’s federal model. Throughout the pandemic, national and state leaders have thrashed out lockdown rules at regular summits, ensuring decisions that could be implemented consistently by local leaders. The system had its flaws, not least in sidelining parliament. But now it is creaking. Meet-

OVER THE years, Swedes, Germans and Russians have all had a go at conquering Latvia and imposing their flavours of Christianity on it. Today Lutherans worship mainly in the country’s west, and Russian Orthodox in the east. But Latvia’s deepest rituals are still inspired by its home-grown brand of paganism. They include wild summer-solstice parties and a national song-and-dance festival every five years.

The hymns of this prehistoric faith are folk poems, typically four lines long, called dainas. Thanks to Krisjanis Barons, a folklorist who encouraged Latvians to note down such quatrains in the 19th and early 20th centuries, over a million of them are on file at the national



Pagan pages

ings run late into the night, as ill-considered ideas are battled around in the hunt for compromise. (Last week Angela Merkel had to apologise for one, a short-lived plan to tighten restrictions over Easter.) Politicians are briefing against each other via leaks. Now several states, including North Rhine-Westphalia, the largest, have ignored a national agreement to pull an “emergency brake” when covid numbers exceed a certain threshold, preferring instead to expand testing capacity or limit restrictions to the hardest-hit areas.

On March 28th Mrs Merkel attacked the freelancing state leaders, hinting that their intransigence would be met with changes to federal law. She extended her rebuke to Armin Laschet, the premier of North Rhine-Westphalia who hopes to succeed her as chancellor after an election in

Latvian poetry

# Folk histories in four lines

A Baltic cultural treasure, translated

library in Riga, the capital. Some have musical notation, but since dainas follow predictable schemes the tunes tend to be repeated, as in Celtic jigs and reels.

For the past 22 years, Ieva Szentivanyi has been rendering dainas into English. Her first volume was published in 2018 and the second is ready for the press. The rhythm of Latvian is hard to translate, but more difficult is conveying the affection of the language’s diminutive suffixes. The English diminutive of “book” is “booklet”; in Latvian, she explains, it more like a “dearest, sweetest, most beloved book”. Dainas are short, but rich in metaphor and symbolism:

*Birch tree, dear, thou art so ample  
All the way to the ground;  
Dearest wife, thou art so lovely  
All the way to deep old age.*

Aficionados say this canon of folk poems is as significant as any body of classical literature. Ms Szentivanyi calls them Latvia’s wisdom to share with the world. Some scholars claim a few could date from the Bronze Age: in one a warrior duelling with his sister’s abuser breaks his sword against a gatepost, something an iron weapon would be unlikely to do.

There is one class of daina that Mrs Szentivanyi dares not touch, mythical ones that speak of melting seas and waves of sunshine, which are confusing enough in the original Latvian. She aims to finish 2,000 of them. It is a daunting challenge: as one of her favourite dainas has it, “the words go on and on”.

September. Yet he and others vowed to stick to their guns. As authority drains from Mrs Merkel a vacuum has developed at the heart of German decision-making. Add sluggish vaccinations, and pandemic policy has never known such disarray.

The fallout is visible not only in soaring caseloads and dwindling beds for intensive-care units. The polling lead enjoyed by Mrs Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian ally, the Christian Social Union (CSU), is evaporating. Soon after Easter the two parties must pick a single candidate to lead them into the election. The main rival of Mr Laschet, who was recently anointed as the CDU leader, is Markus Söder, his CSU counterpart. Straight after Mrs Merkel’s interview, Mr Söder backed her tougher line. Voters find him the more appealing candidate. ■