

French Security Policy and the War in Ukraine

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In the lead up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, France pursued dialogue with Russia and sought a mediator role under the leadership of President Emmanuel Macron. In a televised address to the nation one week following the invasion, President Macron told French citizens that the war in Ukraine marks a "a turning point for our continent and our generation".¹ The forceful rhetoric raises the question: How has the war in Ukraine affected French security policy?

This memo explores the French response to Russia's war in Ukraine and analyses its implications for French security policy. The analysis relies on a combination of sources, in the form of strategic documents, policy reports, and media articles, as well as discussions with experts on French security policy. It begins by recapping French security policy after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and briefly outlines France's response to the Russian invasion in February 2022. The memo thereafter delves into two key issues that have arisen and will shape French security policy moving forward: the relationship with Russia and the future of the European security order. It concludes by discussing how the war has affected French security policy: Is it a change in style or substance?

FRENCH SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA: SANCTIONS, DETERRENCE AND DIALOGUE

Since the 1990s, the French relationship with Russia has been driven in great part by the economic ties between the countries. The prevailing sentiment in Paris following the dissolution of the Soviet Union was that trade was the preferred instrument to change Russian behaviour.² In the decades since, a succession of French presidents have tried to establish ties to Russia. No exception, President Macron has received much attention for continuing in the footsteps of his predecessors. However, an overview of France's responses to Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 paints a more complicated picture of a policy approach with several nuances.

Post-2014: a three-pronged approach

France responded to the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 in primarily three ways. Firstly, it responded politically and economically, through EU sanctions. Secondly, it responded militarily by contributing to the NATO assurance and deterrence measures that were initiated after Russia's actions; specifically, it contributed to Baltic Air Policing and NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic States. As part of the contribution, 300 French soldiers have alternated between deployments in Estonia and Lithuania, where France also contributed tanks.³ Thirdly, France actively pursued dialogue with Russia – both bilaterally between Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin, as well as via the Normandy format, which brought together France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine and led to the Minsk agreements that were intended to end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. On the surface, France's three-pronged approach may appear to be complementary on several levels, but it has caused France problems internationally.

Part of the reason for this lies in France's diagnosis of the European strategic landscape following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and specifically its pursuit of autonomy for European security. France's Defence and National Security Strategic Review, published in 2017, describes a significant deterioration in the strategic environment, with explicit references to Russia's assertion of power and intent to rebuild a sphere of influence, as well as the "permanent risk of escalation" in Ukraine.⁴ One of the Russian aims,

1 Address to the Nation. Élysée. 2 March 2022.

2 Lecture 'Russia, France, and global disorder - A Raymond Aron Lecture featuring Thomas Gomart, with Fiona Hill', Brookings Institution, 8 June 2022.

3 Sundberg, Anna. *Frankrikes säkerhetspolitik och militära förmåga*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2018.

4 French Ministry for the Armed Forces. *Defence and National Security Strategic Review*, 2017.

according to the review, is to undermine the transatlantic relationship and divide the European Union. A more recent strategic update, published in 2021, also references strategic and military competition from Russia and China, painting a bleak picture of a security environment that involves risks of uncontrolled escalation and direct confrontation between great powers. As a result, the French Armed Forces must be prepared for high-intensity conflict.⁵

It appears that one of President Macron's takeaways from this strategic analysis was to carve out an independent role for Europe within the overarching competition between great powers. In terms of security and defence policy, President Macron has advocated for further EU defence integration and European strategic autonomy, the latter broadly defined as the ability to respond independently to crises and threats.⁶ One of the main French arguments in favour of strategic autonomy is for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own security and thereby its sovereignty, no longer relying on American assistance.⁷

Upon his election in 2017, President Macron also pursued closer relations with President Putin through personal diplomacy and initiated a "strategic dialogue" between France and Russia that involved ministerial consultations and working groups on strategic and regional crises. President Macron's approach was intended to tie Russia closer to Europe and weaken Russian relations with China, which is seen as the greatest challenge to Europe in the long term.⁸ In a now famous speech at the Ambassadors Conference, in 2019, President Macron derided French diplomats for contributing to mistrust of Russia over the years and called for a new security architecture in Europe that included Russia. The relationship with Russia, according to President Macron, had been based on a "series of misunderstandings".⁹ At the same time, President Macron has not shied away from being critical of Russian state-backed media outlets and alleged Russian interference in French elections.

Described by observers as both "realist" and "geopolitical", President Macron's actions have largely been interpreted as a continuation of a longstanding political tradition in France, dating back to Charles de Gaulle: scepticism towards reliance on the US and concerns about French autonomy and influence on the global stage.¹⁰ The idea of European strategic autonomy, as advanced by President Macron, appeared to include a relationship with Russia that is independent of the United States, whose strategic interests may differ from Europe's. This was especially the case during the presidency of Donald Trump. In line with this sentiment, France's 2021 Strategic Update is critical of the American departure from multilateralism and the transactional approach of the Trump administration.¹¹

However, many of France's European partners, and especially those in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), have diverged from the French strategic approach, instead favouring closer ties to the United States to guarantee European security. President Macron has been criticised for downplaying the Russian threat, alienating fellow European states through his unilateral efforts, and neglecting consensus-building. France's bilateral relationships with CEE states have improved since 2003, when President Jacques Chirac, in response to the support of CEE states for the American intervention in Iraq, claimed that they had "missed an opportunity to be quiet".¹² Nonetheless, there remains a deep mistrust within the CEE against the French approach and goals. Combined with President Macron's famous remarks about NATO being "brain dead", alarm bells have rung among European partners who prioritise the engagement of the United States in the security of the continent.

Nonetheless, France's policy of dialogue continued during the lead up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. President Macron's "shuttle diplomacy" – speaking to President Putin via phone on a regular basis and travelling between Moscow and Kiev – in the final days before the

5 French Ministry for the Armed Forces. *Strategic Update*, 2021.

6 Maślanka, Łukasz. *A Crash Test: EU Strategic Autonomy in the Foreign Policy of France*. The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 23 March 2021.

7 Sundberg, Anna. *Frankrikes säkerhetspolitik och militära förmåga*. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2018.

8 Gunnarsson, Carina. *Långsiktiga trender i Frankrike*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2019.

9 Ambassadors' conference – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic. French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. 27 August 2019.

10 See for example Downing, Joseph. Ukraine: why Emmanuel Macron's open line to Moscow has not delivered the international prestige he expected. *The Conversation*. 14 March 2022.

11 French Ministry for the Armed Forces. *Strategic Update*.

12 Smith, Craig S. 'Chirac Upsets East Europe by Telling It to 'Shut Up' on Iraq'. *New York Times*. 18 February 2003.

invasion was largely met with scepticism, despite significant consultations with European partners beforehand. It likely did not help that when President Macron claimed to have received assurances from President Putin that Russia would not escalate the crisis, this was denied by the Kremlin the next day.¹³

Post-February 2022: doubling down

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Macron swiftly condemned Russia's actions and pledged support for Ukraine, including shipments of defensive equipment. France thereafter intensified its three-pronged approach towards Russia through further sanctions, military positioning, and diplomacy.

As in 2014, France responded immediately through EU sanctions. Domestically, it has accordingly seized assets connected to Russian oligarchs, including luxury yachts. Indeed, it appears that President Macron's previous hesitation regarding the potential boomerang effect of EU sanctions are a thing of the past, as he has continued to speak of the possibility of further sanctions following the sixth EU package in the summer of 2022.

The French military response has once more focused on contributions to NATO's deterrence on the eastern flank. France has deployed parts of the high readiness forces committed to the NATO Response Force (NRF) to Romania through its *Mission Aigle*, which brings together 500 French and 300 Belgian troops.¹⁴ France has also extended and added 200 troops to its existing deployment to NATO's eFP in Estonia, and sent fighter jets to the enhanced Air Policing (eAP) operations along NATO's eastern flank.¹⁵ In Paris, the Russian invasion is largely seen as a vindication that emerging trends identified in the 2017 French strategic review hold, but that they have been accelerated.¹⁶ The invasion has furthermore intensified preparations within the French Armed Forces for the prospect of engaging in high intensity warfare.¹⁷

France has also responded with its own national deterrence measures. In March 2022, media reported that France had raised its alert level for nuclear deterrence and deployed three of its four nuclear submarines.¹⁸ For France, nuclear weapons are primarily weapons of deterrence and self-defence. By deploying and positioning its nuclear forces in a forward-leaning manner, France is signalling readiness for a potential escalation, even if not accompanied by official commentary. Deterrence is, according to France, a "dialogue between nations", and a language that Russia, as a fellow nuclear power, should be able to master.¹⁹ The shift in France's nuclear posture also suggests that there are genuine concerns in Paris over the potential for the conflict to escalate beyond conventional means.

French concerns over potential escalation may help to explain why, despite sustained criticism from other European leaders, particularly those of the CEE states, France has maintained a focus on dialogue with Russia. By President Macron's own account, his phone conversations with President Putin between December 2021 and June 2022 amounted to more than 100 hours.²⁰ France has claimed that the dialogue between the Russian and French presidents is at the behest of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, with whom President Putin refuses to engage directly, leaving President Macron as a go-between. President Macron continues to defend his approach of speaking directly with President Putin, labelling criticism as "false morality".²¹ Moreover, President Macron has warned of the potential for escalation arising from American statements that seem to call for regime change.

At the same time, France has attempted to maintain a delicate balance vis-à-vis Russia, by emphasising diplomacy and mediation, while simultaneously providing military aid to Ukraine. French officials initially avoided detailing the military equipment provided by France in order to avoid provoking Russia, and possibly to keep the door open to assuming a mediator role in a peace process.

13 Hardin, Luke, et. al. 'Macron claims Putin gave him personal assurances on Ukraine'. *The Guardian*. 8 February 2022.

14 French Ministry for the Armed Forces. 'Mission AIGLE - Visite de la Ministre de la Défense belge en Roumanie'. 18 March 2022.

15 French Ministry for the Armed Forces. 'Renforcement de la posture défensive et dissuasive de l'OTAN sur le flanc est de l'Europe', 16 March 2022.

16 Webinar 'How the war in Ukraine affects strategic foresight? Visions from France and Japan', Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), 14 June 2022.

17 Barotte, Nicolas. 'Guerre en Ukraine: les défis d'une reconstruction des armées pour la France'. *Le Figaro*. 23 March 2022.

18 Biegala, Eric. 'La France renforce son niveau d'alerte et déploie trois sous-marins nucléaires en mer'. *France Inter*. 23 March 2022.

19 Pannier, Alice and Olivier Schmitt. *French Defence Policy since the Cold War*, New York: Routledge, 2021; Barotte, Nicolas. 'Nucléaire : la France renforce la crédibilité de sa dissuasion'. *Le Figaro*. 24 March 2022.

20 Sabbagh, Dan. 'Russia must not be humiliated in Ukraine, says Emmanuel Macron'. *The Guardian*. 4 June 2022.

21 Speech by the President of the French Republic at the conference of ambassadors. Élysée. 2 September 2022.

Nonetheless, details regarding the military aid began emerging in spring 2022, as media reported that France had sent, among other equipment, anti-tank missiles from its army stocks. President Macron later confirmed this and added that self-propelled howitzers had also been sent, an indication that France had departed from an earlier unwillingness to deliver heavier weaponry and to publicly discuss military aid.²²

OLD DEBATES, REIGNITED

From afar, the French response to the Russian invasion appears to be following lasting trends in French security policy with respect to Russia since 2014: in simplified terms, a three-pronged focus on sanctions, military positioning, and dialogue. However, a year marked not only by the invasion but also by both presidential and legislative elections has reignited longstanding debates that may indicate an ongoing shift in France on the view of Russia and the future of the European security order. How the French position continues to unfold on these topics will give a clearer indication of the lasting impact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine will have.

An ambivalent view of Russia

President Macron has followed in the footsteps of previous French presidents in his efforts to engage with Russia, and has positioned himself as a go-to interlocutor when it comes to President Putin. However, his overtures towards President Putin, justified as promoting European stability, were not able to thwart the current strategic crisis and have widely been regarded as a failure.

Although the threat from Russian military power featured in French strategic documents after 2014, French officials and intelligence services failed to foresee that the build-up of Russian troops along Ukraine's border would escalate to an invasion. Clear differences emerged between American and French assessments of Russian intentions. The view of the French intelligence services, that an invasion would be too costly for Russia, was acknowledged as mistaken, and led to a public discussion surrounding

French intelligence failures and the dismissal of a top intelligence official.²³

According to several French observers, the invasion has caused a dramatic shift in how President Macron's administration views Russia. The extent to which President Macron consults Western partners in conjunction with his dialogue with President Putin, abandoning the unilateral approach of the past, as well as French contributions to NATO's reinforcements, are testaments thereto.²⁴ French dialogue with Russia now exclusively takes place at the highest levels since the suspension of the bilateral working groups. Additionally, President Macron has made efforts to reach out to CEE states, for example by recently hosting the Polish prime minister, with whom he has previously had a contentious relationship. President Macron's focus on consultation with European partners may also indicate an acknowledgement in France of shifting power dynamics in the EU, as the CEE states' longstanding mistrust of Russia has been vindicated.²⁵

There are further indications that other segments of the French policy establishment are re-evaluating their stance towards Russia. The re-evaluation is prompted not only by Russia's invasion in Ukraine, but also by the deployment of Russian mercenaries in the Sahel, which has led to strategic realignment in the region. According to French policy experts, the French relationship with Russia has entered a new phase, in which Russia is characterised as an open competitor acting in multiple domains.²⁶

Furthermore, the French presidential election in April 2022 revealed a major shift in rhetoric among political parties and leaders who were previously regarded as relatively friendly towards Russia. All presidential candidates denounced the invasion, including the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who had previously financed her party with a loan from a Russian bank and, on a trip to Moscow, praised President Putin. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the far-left party, La France Insoumise (LFI), had just prior to the invasion said that he understood why Russia was mobilising troops on the border with Ukraine, given the threat to Russia. He later condemned

22 Ricard, Philippe. 'France is delivering Caesar cannons and Milan anti-tank missiles to Kiev'. *Le Monde*, 24 April 2022.

23 Berthemet, Tanguy. 'Guerre en Ukraine: l'état-major limoge le patron de la direction du renseignement militaire'. *Le Figaro*, 30 March 2022.

24 Webinar 'Transatlantic Tuesdays: France and the Western Response to Russia's War on Ukraine', German Marshall Fund, 22 March 2022; Morcos, Pierre. 'Winning in Ukraine: a French perspective'. *Defense News*. 20 May 2022.

25 Kaufmann, Sylvie. 'War in Ukraine has shaken the EU's power dynamics'. *Financial Times*. 30 August 2022.

26 Lecture 'Russia, France, and global disorder - A Raymond Aron Lecture featuring Thomas Gomart, with Fiona Hill', Brookings Institution; Kaufmann, Sylvie. 'Can Macron be trusted when it comes to Russia?'. *Financial Times*. 3 February 2022.

the invasion and insisted that he had never supported President Putin.

At the same time, there remains a strong sentiment in Paris that Moscow is part of Europe, and that some kind of co-existence must be found. President Macron's calls for avoiding the "humiliation" of Russia in Ukraine, much criticised by Western observers, should be viewed through this lens. If it is true that there has been a dramatic shift in the perception of Russia, it remains to be seen whether it will translate into policy following the end of the war, or whether President Macron will continue the French tradition of approaching Moscow. A potential challenge for President Macron will be to maintain a focus on Ukraine, given the unfolding situation in West Africa and the Sahel, in addition to potential political restrictions arising from his party's minority position in the National Assembly.

Renewed emphasis on EU and NATO

Since his election, President Macron has made repeated calls for a new security architecture in Europe, one that involves Russia. While details as to how President Macron views the new security architecture have been sparse, there appears to be a shift in French views on EU and NATO that could provide early indications.

Since the Second World War, France has promoted autonomy in European security, not wishing to rely on the American nuclear umbrella.²⁷ The focus on national autonomy, in the spirit of De Gaulle, led France to withdraw from NATO's integrated command structures in the 1960s. At the end of the Cold War, some parts of the strategic community even pushed for the dissolution of NATO, to instead focus on European defence.²⁸ France did re-enter NATO's command structure in 2009, under the leadership of President Nicolas Sarkozy, but does not participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), nor share nuclear planning.²⁹ The strategic nuclear deterrent has widely been considered the ultimate guarantor of French autonomy.³⁰

Despite having reintegrated and contributed substantially to NATO's assurance and deterrence measures since

2014, France has found it difficult to shake a perception of French ambivalence towards NATO. Part of the reason for this is that President Macron has made Europe, and particularly the EU, a significant focus of his policy agenda. Echoing the positions of his predecessor, Francois Hollande, President Macron's efforts have been channelled through further EU integration in security and defence as well as the Franco-German relationship. While President Macron has insisted that his calls for stronger European defence and strategic autonomy are intended to complement NATO, French initiatives have generally met with resistance from other EU states. Among the CEE states, in particular, French efforts are seen as loosening the transatlantic ties on which their security rests. There is, moreover, a perception among some CEE analysts that the pursuit of strategic autonomy is a French tool to promote France's own policy goals.³¹

Since the invasion, however, France has placed great emphasis on NATO and its role in deterrence on the eastern flank, both politically and by deploying parts of the NRF. According to President Macron, the war in Ukraine has rejuvenated NATO and provided strategic clarification to the Alliance, likening the effect to that of an "electric shock".³² Whereas on a political level the relationship between France and Poland is not without its problems, France has contributed to air defense missions in Polish skies. Additionally, President Macron supports Sweden's and Finland's membership bids to the Alliance.

There are also signs that France is re-evaluating its stance on EU enlargement. France has previously called for a "deepening" of the EU, seeing expansion in opposition to that project. On this topic, too, France has disagreed with the CEE states that have largely been in favour of EU enlargement. According to one analyst, there is now an awareness in Paris that the EU has neglected the Western Balkan region, leaving it exposed to Russian and Chinese influence.³³ President Macron's recent proposal for a "European political community" that includes non-EU countries, and the fact that France supports Ukraine's

27 Howorth, Jolyon. *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, The European Union Series, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

28 Schmitt, Olivier. 'The Reluctant Atlanticist: France's Security and Defence Policy in a Transatlantic Context'. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2017: 463-474.

29 Rydqvist, John and Niklas Granholm. *Nuclear weapons in Europe: British and French deterrence forces*. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2018.

30 Ostermann, Falk. *Security, Defense Discourse and Identity in Nato and Europe - How France Changed Foreign Policy*. Routledge, 2020.

31 Mašlanka. *A Crash Test: EU Strategic Autonomy in the Foreign Policy of France*.

32 Reuters. 'L'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie a déclenché un électrochoc à l'Otan, dit Macron'. *Reuters*. 17 March 2022.

33 Webinar 'Transatlantic Tuesdays: France and the Western Response to Russia's War on Ukraine', German Marshall Fund. 22 March 2022.

EU-candidate status, indicate a shift in thinking surrounding the geopolitical significance of EU enlargement.

In Paris, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been seen to vindicate French calls for the EU's strategic autonomy. A likely result is that France will intensify its dual focus on the EU and NATO. Moreover, strategic autonomy will receive even greater emphasis in the French EU agenda, especially the military aspects.³⁴ In order to build consensus on these issues, France will likely need to improve its relationship with the CEE states, which have assumed a significant role in the current crisis. There are signs that President Macron is making efforts to do so. For example, France has worked to strengthen its defence relationship with fellow NATO ally Romania, where it will be leading a new eFP battle group, with several high profile visits. By several accounts, President Macron has also shifted away from his unilateral approach, instead going to great lengths to consult with European states during his dialogue with President Putin. Nonetheless, President Macron's dialogue continues to frustrate CEE partners who wish to isolate Russia, posing a challenging balancing act for France and potentially undermining a leadership role in both the EU and NATO.

A CHANGE IN STYLE OR SUBSTANCE?

Russia's war in Ukraine has upended the European security order and caused European countries to re-evaluate their security policy positions. France is no exception. For several years, French security policy has been characterised by an emphasis on European strategic autonomy, on the one hand, and a strategic dialogue with Russia, on the other. Owing in part to a lack of consensus-building, the French policy position has often perplexed outsiders, and led to a level of mistrust among European partners.

At present, it appears that the French political establishment is re-evaluating the view of Russia and the European security order. Based on publicly available information, however, it is too early to say whether we are witnessing a dramatic pivot in these areas. The view of Russia as threatening strategic stability in Europe has been well documented in French security policy reviews since 2014, but has likely intensified since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Public

discussions about French intelligence failures, and President Macron's reference to alleged war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine, suggest as much. Additionally, the three-pronged focus on sanctions, NATO reinforcements on the eastern flank, and dialogue with Russia is nothing new. Recent developments could thus indicate an acceleration of the existing trends in French policy that arose following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

A significant difference between the French responses in 2014 and 2022 seems to boil down to method, rather than substance. French dialogue with Russia now exclusively takes place at the highest levels. Furthermore, since the invasion, consultation with Western partners has been a key feature of President Macron's discussions with President Putin. Outreach to the CEE states may become an increasingly stronger feature of French security policy moving forward, given their added significance in the managing of the current crisis. Greater consensus-building by France could prove important to mitigating the risk of fractures appearing among EU states in the face of a protracted conflict.

At the same time, all signs currently indicate that France will maintain dialogue at the highest level with Russia. In part, France may hope that dialogue between the French and Russian presidents will keep the door open to possible future negotiations to end the war. France likely also sees dialogue with Russia as important to mitigating the risk of further escalation, including to a nuclear level. Underlying France's approach is the French self-image as a global actor that is willing and able to shoulder significant security responsibilities.

Certainly, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, a NATO ally, and a driver of EU security and defence policy, France has significant influence on both European and global politics. President Macron's domestic policy agenda may be hampered by his loss of a majority in the recent legislative elections. However, given that the French president enjoys considerable control over French foreign and security policy, his analysis of the strategic landscape and lessons to be drawn from the war will continue to shape French security policy moving forward. ■

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34 Webinar 'The French Election: Foreign and Security Policy Challenges For the Next President'. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). 29 April 2022.