

## Twilight of Jupiter: The Legacy of Macron's Foreign and Security Policy

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Over the course of his seven-year presidency, Emmanuel Macron has had complete freedom in shaping France's foreign and security policy. This autonomy is evident in France's fluctuating stance towards Russia, from initial hopes of building a shared European security architecture to the recent reports of dispatching French military instructors to support embattled Ukraine. The pace of decision-making was undoubtedly an advantage for France compared to many allies, but it did not always enhance Paris's credibility.

The outcome of the early parliamentary elections will not revolutionise France's foreign and security policy. In the short term, the potential influence of the left on governance and France's excessive deficit problems may raise concerns about the stability of defence funding and military aid to Ukraine. In the coming years, there remains the possibility of the far-right gaining power and deeply redefining France's foreign and security policy towards an anti-American, anti-European, and pro-Russian stance.

### 2017–2022: Moscow First

Macron's policy before 2022 was based on the belief that France and Europe were not destined to merely observe the growing antagonism among major powers such as the US, China, and Russia. The president's goal was to reach a strategic agreement with Russia that would initiate the development of a new European security architecture. A step in this direction was the initiation of the "trust and security dialogue with Russia" in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Macron sought to establish a personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, believing it would lead to a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Russia–West relations that deteriorated in 2014 after the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas.

The vision of a "shared security architecture" with Russia,<sup>2</sup> extended beyond bilateral Franco-Russian relations. Although it concerned the security of other countries, especially those bordering Russia, it was not consulted with them beforehand. For Paris, a compromise on European security issues with Moscow would allow a focus on other threats deemed more urgent by French authorities:

<sup>1</sup> M. Menkiszak, *Tell me more: Russia on Macron's détente initiatives*, OSW, Warszawa 2021, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>2</sup> 'Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs', Elysée, 27 August 2019, [elysee.fr](http://elysee.fr).



the situation in Africa, terrorism, and conflicts in the Middle East. Macron's intentions were supposed to be particularly justified in light of President Donald Trump's policies; an argument aimed especially at Germany, a NATO member attached to a transatlantic bond.

The election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president in 2019 was seen by Paris as an opportunity to accelerate the resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict within the Normandy Format and to achieve

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an agreement that would then facilitate a reset in EU-Russia relations. The failure of the Normandy Format summit in Paris in December 2019,<sup>3</sup> where Zelensky and Putin met, did not prevent Macron from pursuing deeper strategic dialogue with Russia. However, it did stall the dynamics of Franco-Ukrainian relations. France and Germany did not want to appear to be pressuring the weaker side of the conflict but also did not intend to abandon prioritising relations with Russia. Macron was delaying a visit to Kyiv up to the last days before the war started, and proposals to strengthen military cooperation between France and Ukraine remained in the project phase.

At the same time, the backdrop of Franco-Russian relations between 2017 and 2022 was the increasing activity of Russian entities in African states that were formerly French colonies. The operations of the Wagner Group, involving the direct presence of mercenaries and the promotion of anti-French and anti-Western propaganda, have caused significant concern within the French armed forces, administration, expert community, and media. Until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, publicly linking Wagner's activities to Moscow was a taboo for French diplomacy, due to concerns about deteriorating bilateral relations. French authorities likely assumed that Russia's hostile actions in Africa would cease following an EU-Russia agreement on European security.<sup>4</sup>

The inauguration of Joe Biden as US president in January 2021 led to a rapid improvement in relations between Washington, Brussels, and Berlin. The slogans promoted by France of building European strategic autonomy, including in its relations with Russia, became less resonant. In the spring of 2021, Russia conducted its first military buildup on the Ukrainian border, and in June, Biden and Putin met at a summit in Geneva. The response from France and Germany was the initiative of an EU-Russia summit in Brussels in the summer of 2021, which most EU countries did not agree to. However, Macron continued bilateral dialogue with Putin, primarily through phone conversations.

## 2022: Limited changes in Paris policy

France reacted with embarrassment to the Russian Foreign Ministry's presentation of two draft security guarantee agreements (with the US and NATO) in December 2021.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, reaching a comprehensive agreement with Russia was the goal of Macron's dialogue with Putin. On the other hand, however, the French president's main goal was to avoid a situation in which European security is decided by Moscow and Washington over the heads of Europeans. Paris supported the concept, advocated by Russia, of neutrality for countries located between the EU and Russia, but did not see the possibility of revising the status of countries already part of the EU and NATO.

<sup>3</sup> S. Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés. Comment Berlin et Paris ont laissé la voie libre à la Russie*, Stock, Paris 2023, p. 383–387.

<sup>4</sup> Ł. Maślanka, 'Strategic Patience: French Interests and the Dialogue with Russia', *PISM Bulletin*, 3 December 2021, [pism.pl](https://pism.pl).

<sup>5</sup> P. Ricard, J.-P. Stroobants, 'Les Européens redoutent d'être marginalisés face aux menaces russes sur l'Ukraine', *Le Monde*, 16 December 2021, [lemonde.fr](https://lemonde.fr).

Macron's last attempt to salvage the Franco-Russian dialogue and ease tensions between Russia and Ukraine was his visit to Moscow and Kyiv from February 7–8, 2022. It took place amid another concentration of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine. The French president did not believe in the possibility of a full-scale invasion by Russia. He thought that Putin was trying to intimidate Zelensky, or would take limited military action in the Donbas.<sup>6</sup> The French president's goal was to get Russia and Ukraine to return to the Normandy Format negotiations and at the same time initiate a dialogue between Moscow, European capitals, and Washington on a new "security architecture" in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Putin's ultimatum, which was unacceptable to the West, could become the starting point for new negotiations, in which the subject would not only be the US and Russia, but also Europe, represented by France and Germany.

It seemed that the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022 would completely invalidate these intentions. Paris supported the imposition of far-reaching sanctions on the Russian Federation. Unlike the leaders of Germany and Italy, Macron hinted that he would be willing to support restrictions on Russian commodities. Supplies of French weapons to Ukraine were no more a taboo. France also increased its commitment to NATO's eastern flank – including sending a battalion of rapid reaction troops to Romania.<sup>8</sup> In June 2022, the president announced state support for strengthening arms production, saying it was necessary to switch to a "war economy." The Élysée also supported Finland and Sweden's applications to join NATO. A radical change was the approval of Ukraine's aspirations for EU membership.

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At the same time, Macron made it clear that he was determined to maintain a dialogue with Putin not only on ending the conflict but also, on the future of European security. An expression of the French president's intentions at the time was a May 2022 call to "not humiliate Russia".<sup>9</sup> Macron feared that a complete break in communication with Moscow would benefit countries that France sees as rivals of the EU (such as Turkey). It would also make Europeans even more dependent on the US, as in the event of a change in the political situation at home, the Americans could promptly return to the bargaining table with Russia over the heads of Paris, Berlin, and Brussels.<sup>10</sup>

Doctrinally, Macron still viewed his country as a "balancing power." According to this approach, France was to remain a reliable NATO ally but not bound by the current US policy line towards China or Russia, instead striving to maintain dialogue with all parties.<sup>11</sup> The successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in the autumn of 2022 prompted the Russian authorities to announce a "partial mobilisation".<sup>12</sup> Paris interpreted this as an indication of preparations for a prolonged confrontation, involving both Russia's open war with Ukraine and potential threats to NATO's eastern allies. Macron also began to

<sup>6</sup> 'Invasion russe en Ukraine insuffisamment anticipée: le chef du renseignement militaire français viré', *Libération*, 31 March 2022, [liberation.fr](https://www.liberation.fr).

<sup>7</sup> 'Defiant Putin mauls Macron in Moscow', *Politico*, 7 February 2022, [politico.eu](https://www.politico.eu).

<sup>8</sup> 'Renforcement du flanc Est de l'OTAN', *Ministère des Armées*, [defense.gouv.fr](https://www.defense.gouv.fr).

<sup>9</sup> 'Clôture de la Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe', *Élysée*, 9 May 2022, [elysee.fr](https://www.elysee.fr).

<sup>10</sup> A. Chemin, P. Ricard, 'Guerre en Ukraine: le cavalier seul diplomatique d'Emmanuel Macron', *Le Monde*, 12 December 2022, [lemonde.fr](https://www.lemonde.fr).

<sup>11</sup> The notion of a "balancing power" appeared both in Macron's speech at the September 2022 Ambassadors' Conference, as well as in the National Strategic Review (RNS) published in November, 'Revue nationale stratégique 2022', *SGDSN*, 28 November 2022, [sgdsn.gouv.fr](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr).

<sup>12</sup> A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, 'Partial mobilisation in Russia. War after 209 days', *OSW*, 21 September 2021, [osw.waw.pl](https://www.osw.waw.pl).

realise that his belief in establishing a personal relationship with Putin was merely an illusion, skillfully exploited by the Russian dictator to delay the West's response to Russia's actions.<sup>13</sup>

## 2023: The Beginning of Evolution

Spring 2023 was a period of intense discussions among Ukraine's Western partners about the limits and scale of providing military aid. The successes achieved by Kyiv in the autumn of 2022 sparked optimism and hopes that in the following year Ukraine would be able to regain control over the territory as of 24 February 2022.

At the same time, frustration was growing in Paris due to the increasing misunderstandings in relations with Berlin.<sup>14</sup> Decisions by Germany, such as the purchase of F-35 aircraft, underscored Europe's attachment to the American nuclear umbrella.<sup>15</sup> For the French, this was frustrating, as Macron's suggestions since 2020 about the "European dimension of French nuclear deterrence" aimed to outline a long-term political alternative (regardless of its feasibility) to dependence on the US. France's tougher stance towards Russia could allow Macron to retaliate against Chancellor Scholz, who was reluctant to cooperate with Paris. The preparations for the Ukrainian counteroffensive presented an opportunity. In the early 2023 discussions regarding the advisability of supplying Western tanks to Kyiv, France, unexpectedly, took a positive stance, surprising Germany.<sup>16</sup>

In the following months, France's rhetoric evolved towards increasingly explicit support for Kyiv. In a speech in Bratislava in May, 2023,<sup>17</sup> Macron admitted that

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Western allies had underestimated the position of Central European countries regarding Russia. Before the NATO summit in Vilnius in July, 2023, France also expressed support for Ukraine's membership in NATO. Alongside London, Paris announced the delivery of long-range missiles to Ukraine, which raised concerns not only in Berlin, but also in Washington.

However, Macron did not abandon the goal of pursuing a more strategically autonomous Europe. Unlike the pre-war period, he reconciled with the necessity of NATO as a collective defence alliance and began to emphasise that European ambitions were focussed on building a strong pillar within NATO. The EU's efforts were mainly to support the European defence industry and encourage member states to more willingly procure weapons produced in Europe.

In 2023, the French president also managed to pass through parliament the Military Programming Law (LPM) for 2024–2030.<sup>18</sup> It involved a 40% increase in funds for this purpose (up to €413 billion) compared to the previous period, along with significant investments in the modernisation of the armed forces. This particularly concerned areas that defined the exclusivity of French military power relative to European allies (nuclear deterrence, the construction of a new aircraft carrier, nuclear-powered submarines) and those that were particularly innovative (e.g., seabed security, space security).

<sup>13</sup> On this topic: I. Lasserre, *Macron-Poutine, Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Hors collection, Paris 2023.

<sup>14</sup> L. Gibadło, S. Plóciennik, "Europe's engine" seizing up. French-German relations during the polycrisis', *OSW Commentary*, no. 484, 19 January 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>15</sup> M. Cabirol, 'Comment les Etats-Unis ont imposé le choix du F-35 à l'Allemagne', *La Tribune*, 10 March 2022, [latribune.fr](https://latribune.fr).

<sup>16</sup> H. von der Burchard, C. Caulcutt, G. Rinaldi, 'France and Poland push Germany to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine', *Politico*, 9 January 2023, [politico.eu](https://politico.eu).

<sup>17</sup> 'Sommet Globsec à Bratislava', *Elysée*, 1 June 2023, [elysee.fr](https://elysee.fr).

<sup>18</sup> 'La loi de programmation militaire 2024–2030: les grandes orientations', *Ministère des Armées*, [defense.gouv.fr](https://defense.gouv.fr).

However, France is neither returning to the Cold War-era model of its army nor increasing the number of ground troops, (aside from plans to double the number of reservists).<sup>19</sup> This is partly due to budget constraints. A more significant factor is the lack of a direct threat to France, given its geographical location and nuclear deterrence. In the event of a potential conflict with Russia, France would participate as part of a broad coalition, with a commitment to deploy a contingent of up to 20,000 soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

## 2024: “Strategic Ambiguity”

The failure of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the summer of 2023 and the blockage of the next tranche of US military aid in Congress raised questions in major European capitals about the direction of further policy towards Ukraine and Russia. From Paris’s perspective, many advocated returning to the cautious approach Macron had shown until mid-2022 and urging the authorities in Kyiv to negotiate with Russia. However, the deteriorating situation for Ukraine prompted him to adopt the opposite stance. On 26 February 2024, at a press conference following the Paris conference of European states on military aid to Kyiv, the French president confirmed discussions with allies about the possible deployment of NATO forces on Ukrainian territory and refused to rule out such a possibility.<sup>21</sup>

Macron assessed the situation on the front lines, the potential for further advances by Russian troops, and the risk of a collapse in Ukrainian defences. He was particularly concerned about Ukraine losing Odesa, a port crucial for global grain trade.<sup>22</sup> Its capture by Russia would mean that 30% of the world’s key grain exports would come under Russian control, giving it a tool to leverage against African states, and indirectly, the EU countries of Southern Europe.<sup>23</sup> However, political factors seemed key in shaping Macron’s stance.

First, it seemed reasonable to deprive Putin of the monopoly on unpredictability. Since the beginning of the war, Western allies, particularly Germany, the United States, and France, had set “red lines” in aid to Ukraine for fear of Moscow’s response. Introducing uncertainty into the Kremlin’s calculations was deemed necessary, which Macron himself called “strategic ambiguity”.

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A tough stance towards Russia and going beyond the current allied consensus would help rally previously sceptical states, including NATO’s eastern flank, to the idea of greater European strategic autonomy. The discussions about sending troops to Ukraine also effectively overshadowed accusations against France that its military aid was still significantly less than that of Germany, Poland, or the UK.<sup>24</sup> To counter figures provided by German sources (IfW Kiel), France revealed for the first time the value of its support (€3.8 billion) in a bilateral security cooperation agreement with Ukraine signed in February 2024.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> T. Gomart, ‘La fin de l’optimisme stratégique’, *Etudes*, January 2024, revue-etudes.com.

<sup>20</sup> On this topic: J-D. Merchet, ‘Sommes-nous prêts pour la guerre? – L’illusion de la puissance française’, Robert Laffont, Paris 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Ł. Maślanka, ‘France’s rhetorical offensive on the war in Ukraine’, *OSW*, 8 March 2024, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>22</sup> C. Gatinois *et al.*, ‘Guerre en Ukraine: la métamorphose d’Emmanuel Macron, colombe devenue faucon’, *Le Monde*, 14 March 2024, lemonde.fr.

<sup>23</sup> A. Coutansais-Pervinquier, ‘Cinq scénarios d’un déploiement français en Ukraine’, *Le Figaro*, 23 March 2024, lefigaro.fr.

<sup>24</sup> L. Kayali, C. Caulcutt, J. Posaner, ‘Under fire: France insists it’s no slacker on military aid to Ukraine’, *Politico*, 4 March 2024, politico.fr.

<sup>25</sup> The document stipulates that France will provide support worth “up to €3 billion” this year. In May 2024, during Zelensky’s visit to Paris, Macron declared the delivery of an unspecified number of Mirage 2000 aircraft to Ukraine. The French press also reported preparations for a multinational military instructor mission led by France. ‘Accord de coopération en matière de sécurité entre la France et l’Ukraine’, *Elysée*, 16 February 2024, elysee.fr.

While Macron viewed dialogue with Russia from 2017 to 2022 as an opportunity for greater European strategic autonomy from the US under French leadership, by 2024 he acknowledged that building a credible European defence was essential for stabilising relations with the Kremlin and thus gaining greater independence from Washington.<sup>26</sup> Macron presented this revised French stance in a speech at the Sorbonne on 25 April.<sup>27</sup> He called for the consolidation of various projects to strengthen European security (e.g., missile defence, long-range missile capabilities, and nuclear deterrence), which together would form a European defence initiative.

## The Future: Status Quo Inertia and the Risk of an Anti-Western Shift

The victory of Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (RN) in the June European Parliament elections and the significant defeat of the presidential coalition prompted Macron to dissolve the National Assembly. He took this step despite knowing it would worsen the political situation for his camp. The National Assembly elected on 30 June and 7 July, consisting of 577 seats with an absolute majority 289, is divided between three comparably strong blocs: the left-wing New Popular Front (NFP), which received 25% of the votes and holds 182 seats; the centrist presidential coalition 'Ensemble', which garnered 24% of the votes and has 168 seats; and the far-right National Rally (RN), which secured 37% of the votes and 143 seats. The Gaullist right (LR), with 9% of the votes and 66 seats, is also a significant faction. Serious disagreements within both the presidential and left-wing camps regarding the preferred government configuration are directly threatening their cohesion.

The possibilities of forming a stable support base for any government are limited. The reduction of the presidential camp in parliament by over 80 seats will undermine Macron's credibility both domestically and internationally. The 2024 elections likely mark the end of the president's self-made foreign policy, although its direction may persist due to the absence of an alternative majority. The constitution vaguely divides responsibility for international and security affairs between the president and the government. The practice of conducting foreign and security policy has been shaped by previous periods of cohabitation, most recently from 1997 to 2002. The president's exclusive authority to appoint the prime minister, along with the unofficial influence over ministerial appointments—including those to the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs—remains an asset for Macron. However, a government not supported by parliament can be overthrown at any time.

In a letter to the French public on 10 July, Macron advocated for a broad agreement among all parties, except the far-right National Rally and the far-left Unbowed

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France (LFI), led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who are sceptical of NATO, the USA, and were pro-Russian and pro-Chinese before the war. He also stated that no political camp won the elections. Extending Prime Minister Gabriel Attal's mandate, in a caretaker capacity, serves as a form of pressure on moderate parties and an attempt to stabilise the situation before the Olympic Games. During the NATO summit in Washington, the president was expected to confirm that France's security commitments and aid to Ukraine remain in force.

A broad agreement variant reduces the likelihood of an NFP minority government (as the left demands the premiership, considering itself the election winner) and cohabitation. However, it does not rule them out entirely if maintaining a government acceptable to the president proves impossible in parliament. Macron will only be able to dissolve the Assembly again in the summer of 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Ł. Maślanka, 'President Macron proposes a European defence initiative', OSW, 29 April 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>27</sup> 'Discours sur l'Europe', Elysée, 24 April 2024, [elysee.fr](https://elysee.fr).

The left's influence on governance would mean the continuation of the current foreign policy course regarding Russia and Ukraine (LFI has a minority share in NFP). France would thus remain a loyal ally in NATO and a proponent of developing EU defence initiatives. In the pre-election manifesto, NFP also committed to "reliably defending the sovereignty and freedom of the Ukrainian nation and the integrity of Ukraine's borders, including through the supply of necessary weapons".<sup>28</sup> However, the possibility suggested by Macron of sending troops to Ukraine or other actions within the framework of "strategic ambiguity" would likely not materialise. The return of Donald Trump in the US would further incite French authorities to promote the agenda of "strategic autonomy" and move away from emphasising its complementary role to NATO. A left-wing government would likely not seek to reset relations with Russia unless there were a radical change in the political situation in this country and the war came to an end.

The risk associated with NFP's participation in governance is the possibility of reducing defence spending or difficulties in finding funds for military aid to Ukraine. The worst-case scenario involves state insolvency due to increased social spending, a deteriorating reputation in financial markets, and conflict with the European Commission over the budget deficit. These risks mean that Macron could agree to form an NFP minority government only as a last resort, prompted by a severe social crisis.

The president's preferred variant of a broad parliamentary pact, including Macron's camp and excluding LFI, would mitigate the risk of significantly reducing defence spending, military aid to Ukraine, or a debt crisis. It would mean the continuation of Macron's foreign policy with his participation in the role of arbitrator but also a more substantial role for parliament and the government than before. However, due to voter sentiments, such an agreement would be politically challenging to accept for all parties except the president's camp. Such a government—in an optimistic scenario—would likely only be tolerated by moderate parties outside Macron's camp.

The scenario of a minority presidential "Ensemble" cabinet with only the right (LR) or only the centre-left (socialists and some Greens) is supported by politicians from the respective right and left wings of Macron's camp. An alliance with LR would be more feasible due to shared positions on economic issues. However, Gaullists are likely to be less supportive than socialists of Macron's European policy, as they emphasise national sovereignty, especially on defence issues. Some Gaullists also favour dialogue with Russia.

The specifics of the electoral system have rendered the far-right bloc relatively weaker in the new parliament, despite winning the most votes (37%) in the second round of elections. The National Rally's support has been growing steadily in each successive election, making it possible that Marine Le Pen could win the presidency in 2027 or that the National Rally could gain power through early parliamentary elections next year. If the far-right influences governance during Macron's term, it would likely mean a reduction in military aid to Ukraine while maintaining political support (similar to the Italian model).

The National Rally winning the presidency would herald much deeper changes, including the prospect of limiting France's NATO membership by boycotting the Alliance's military structures and seeking bilateral agreements with Russia (the Hungarian model). In European politics, a government led by the National Rally would likely result in a significant cooling of relations with Germany and strong opposition to further development of the EU's common security and defence policy.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Nouveau Front Populaire. Contrat de législature', *Nouveau Front Populaire*, June 2024, [www.nouveaufrontpopulaire.fr](http://www.nouveaufrontpopulaire.fr), p. 6.