

France and Shifting European Geopolitics: An Opportunity for Leadership

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Abstract: This article analyses how France's role in European and global geopolitics is evolving in response to recent challenges, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine, shifting US policies, and China's rise to power. As the EU's only nuclear power and a major diplomatic and military force, France is well positioned to strengthen European strategic autonomy, a concept that has long been a part of French foreign policy and is now gaining relevance. While French foreign policy remains rooted in Gaullist principles emphasising national sovereignty and independent decision-making, it has been tempered by increasing interdependence and the need for cooperation with European allies. France has played a leading role in providing political, diplomatic, and military support to Ukraine, and has intensified its efforts towards European defence coordination by expanding partnerships and investing in its defence industry. France's stance has hardened in relation to Russia, although pragmatism may remain important if future European security necessitates re-engagement with Russia and adaptation to China's global influence. France's leadership is paramount in advancing European strategic autonomy, security, and multilateralism, though success hinges on internal consensus and coordinated European action within a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Introduction

In recent years, changing geopolitical configurations within the Euro-Atlantic area, starting with Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, followed by the economic strains caused by the pandemic and the United States' increasing disengagement from European defence, as well as China's growing global influence, have increased France's centrality in contemporary dynamics. As the European Union's sole remaining nuclear power and the continent's most influential

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political and military force, not to mention a historical initiator and active promoter of European integration, France is well placed to take on a leadership role. The return of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency in 2025, coupled with his unpredictable foreign policy choices, has made it clear that European states must invest more in their own security, enhance their economic power, and strengthen their political influence. The French concept of European strategic autonomy, which had previously mostly evoked scepticism, if not rejection, suddenly started to look like a serious vision. The current situation seems like a perfect opportunity for France to affirm its relevance and enhance its power, provided it is willing to take on the leadership role that Europe requires.

French foreign policy is often characterised by a policy of “grandeur” (Boniface, 1998; Gauchon, 2016; Rieker 2017). This is usually traced back to the Gaullist tradition, which has shaped some of the most distinctive and enduring features of French strategic culture. In this tradition, particular importance is placed on the sovereignty of France, namely its ability to make decisions on issues it deems to be of vital interest and its capacity to implement those decisions. This requires a degree of independence from any outside power, competitor or ally, as well as the freedom to choose partners. At the same time, French leaders since de Gaulle have sought to exert political influence in global politics, occasionally exceeding their actual economic and political weight. In seeking to play in the same league as other great powers, such as the United States and, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, France has rather ably compensated for its lack of strategic weight through active diplomatic involvement in global affairs, such as promoting international institutions, cultivating diplomatic networks and generating visionary ideas.

France’s articulation of its sovereign national interests and initiatives in relation to the regional and global order has been historically characterised by constant ambivalence. David Cadier has explained the dynamics of French foreign policy through the milieu goals approach, demonstrating how France seeks ‘to shape the environment and external conditions in which it and other states operate’ (Cadier, 2018, p. 1352). French policymakers react to geopolitical shifts in the international environment, trying to influence their dynamics so as to avoid negative constraints on France’s national interests. For instance, France has frequently acted as a regional balancing force and a competitor to US hegemony in Europe, implicitly or explicitly

seeking to distance the latter from the former (L'Orient-Le Jour, 1998; Faure, 2020).

Similarly, France has promoted a European security architecture that extends beyond democratic European states and involves Russia closely, thus affirming its independence in choosing partnerships. Nevertheless, France remains integrated into the so-called Euro-Atlantic community, which encompasses the EU and NATO (especially since 2009, when France rejoined the NATO military command structures), and this involves a considerable dispensation of sovereignty. Despite regional balancing in Europe, France has aligned its positions with those of the United States on the most important strategic issues and has always been viewed with distrust in Moscow as being part of the Western camp (Gomart, 2003).

Since its creation and throughout its evolution, the European Union has been guided by distinctive French leadership, with prominent figures such as Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, François Mitterrand and Jacques Delors championing the common market and promoting European political union. Following this vision, especially since the 1980s, French national interests became concurrent within European ones, with the latter serving as an extension of the former. As Ole Waever aptly noted, French European policy is a strategy to make Europe 'what France should have been and should somehow remain' (Waever, 1990). Maintaining this consonance requires active leadership in European affairs and monitoring developments for any constraints that could affect French sovereignty, which is still highly valued by many French opinion leaders and decision-makers.

Dialogue between these opinion leaders and decision-makers, politicians, public intellectuals, and various interest and advocacy groups is an important factor to be taken into account when analysing foreign policymaking in France. For example, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is said to contain two major opinion groups, the "Gaullists" and the "Atlanticists", who influence French diplomacy on matters of independent positioning or alignment with the United States (Lequesne 2020). Florent Pouponneau and Frédéric Mérand (2017) have demonstrated the influence of groups of experts in nuclear research and production, as well as in Middle Eastern affairs, on shifts in French nuclear non-proliferation policy throughout the second half of the 20th century. Ringailė Kuokštytė (2023) argues that France's commitment to European common defence depends more on the interests of national defence industries than on the government's political will to lead the process of European integration in this field. In addition to

these dynamics, France's position in the international arena can never be decoupled from democratic deliberative processes within the country.

Analysing the past of French foreign policymaking helps us to understand the country's most recent positions within the changing geopolitical environment. Several elements stand out here. Firstly, the concept of European strategic autonomy has taken on a new significance and become a key item on the European diplomatic agenda since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and following the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Secondly, France has actively supported Ukraine in its war efforts, and its role has grown recently. Thirdly, France has re-evaluated its relationship with Russia and is reviewing its engagement with China. These three dimensions reveal the contours of French foreign policy within the new European security architecture.

Promoting European Strategic Autonomy

The notion of strategic autonomy first appeared in the French National White Book on Defence in 1994, but later found its way into European documents, most notably in the 2016 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy'. The 2022 European "Strategic Compass" also referred to strategic autonomy, although there was little agreement among the member states on what this idea entailed in practical terms. Should it include an autonomous foreign policy, an integrated defence policy, a European procurement policy, or industrial capacity (Česnakas, 2023)? To some Atlanticist European partners, especially those in Eastern Europe, this idea seemed like a continuation of France's perceived ambition to decouple Europe from the United States. Given Europe's limited deterrence and defence capabilities, as well as its unclear political will to defend countries such as the Baltic States, this idea was considered dangerous, as it risked diminishing American involvement in Europe.

Recently, however, the idea of a more autonomous Europe, capable of acting independently of the United States, has gained traction. Since President Donald Trump's re-election in the United States, this has become more urgent. When the US administration cut military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine in March 2025, it became clear that Europe, whose interests are served by defending Ukraine, was unable to replace a number of American capabilities. The pressure from the United States on European

NATO members to increase their national defence budgets has also intensified. The risk of the United States not taking up its Article 5 responsibilities – a threat brandished by Donald Trump (Kube, Lee, and Tsirkin, 2025) – has made European investment in its own security one of the major conditions for the survival of not only Europe, but also the transatlantic alliance.

The White Paper for European Defence, released in March 2025, contains provisions that could help Europeans strengthen their defence capabilities. In the meantime, France has demonstrated its willingness to lead these efforts. In introducing the 2025 National Strategic Review, Emmanuel Macron stated that ‘Europeans must provide themselves with the means to control their own destiny and develop their sovereignty’ (SGDSN, 2025, p. 2). The document designates France as ‘a driving force behind European strategic autonomy’ (SGDSN, 2025, p. 55). France is increasing investment in its defence industries and plans to be prepared ‘for the possibility of major high-intensity engagement near Europe by 2027–2030’ and ‘to remain fully in control of its national and European destiny by 2040–2050’ (SGDSN, 2025, p. 27). France’s defence budget is set to reach 64 billion euros by 2027, doubling the spending level of 2017 (Greene, 2025).

France’s ambition to lead the European effort is anchored in partnerships with several European allies in various formats: Germany (through the Treaty of Aachen), the United Kingdom (through the Treaty of Lancaster House), Poland (through the Treaty of Nancy and the Weimar Format), and others in the Mediterranean, Scandinavian, and Baltic regions. Consultations with partners have been intensive. France has also offered to extend its nuclear deterrent to its European allies (in March 2025, Emmanuel Macron invited partners to undertake a strategic dialogue in this respect). Although several countries have indicated their openness to such talks, it remains unclear how this sharing would function. French leaders claim that their nuclear deterrent has always had a European dimension in that their vital interests are now inseparably connected to those of other European nations. ‘Now that the European construction ... is so advanced, it’s very difficult to think about the situation where the vital interests of let’s say Sweden or Poland or Romania would be affected ... without French vital interests being affected too...’ says H elo ise Fayet, specialist of the French nuclear strategy (IFRI, 2024). Nevertheless, this remains contingent on the President of France, since he or she is ultimately responsible for the use of French nuclear weapons and establishes the principles of nuclear doctrine for each term of office (Maitre, 2025).

Although defence spending commitments have increased throughout Europe, the results of this surge are yet to be seen. The biggest problem with European defence capabilities is not so much limited spending levels, but duplication, a lack of coordination, and gaps in the development of certain strategic capabilities – the so-called “strategic enablers” – for which Europe is still heavily dependent on the United States. The development of new capabilities in Europe faces a dilemma: on the one hand, armaments are needed at very short notice to assist Ukraine; on the other hand, investment in defence industries requires long-term strategic planning and visibility, neither of which is ensured by the situation in Ukraine. Furthermore, the situation on the contemporary battlefield is changing rapidly, and requirements are evolving, particularly in the field of drone warfare. While many European industries produce high-end military technologies, today’s war in Ukraine is partly, though not entirely, fought with cheaper, expendable weapons. Coordinating planning is not an easy task in Europe, which is composed of 27 states that possess a variety of technologies produced in a wide range of countries and have different understandings of threats and strategic objectives of European defence. Since 2022, European strategic cultures have moved towards convergence, but the “strategic cacophony”, referred to by Hugo Meijer and Stephen Brooks (2021), has not yet been overcome.

France is facing another dilemma on the domestic front. While giving preference to European military production for military aid in Ukraine or for a more autonomous European defence, it is struggling to set the French military industry in motion. The budget deficit and public debt, coupled with the difficulties of adopting budget laws in a divided parliament and chronic government instability, do not allow for the necessary visibility that defence industries need to properly plan the expansion of their activities. Each time the government falls, as it has several times in the past year, there are delays to orders and payments (Kayali, 2025). Notably, France has not contributed to the PURL initiative, which was established by the United States in agreement with NATO in July 2025. Seeing this initiative as a way for American military industries to profit, the French leadership would prefer to support European (including French) companies. However, uncertainty over production capacity in France itself problematises this intention. In terms of industrial and defence spending, Germany is rapidly overtaking France (Rahman, 2025). Although German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has expressed a positive attitude towards European industrial

production, Germany's preference for transatlantic cooperation, as well as the difficulties of implementing common European defence industrial projects (such as FCAS, Future Combat Air System, developed by French, German and Spanish companies), may jeopardise the French project of European preference and complicate its leadership role, at least in the short term.

Leading the European Support to Ukraine

Perhaps the greatest recognition should go to the French leadership for their efforts in organising political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, where Emmanuel Macron has demonstrated his presidential diplomacy skills. In February 2024, he was the first European leader to suggest sending European troops to Ukraine. France also distinguished itself in the summer of 2023 when it declared its support for Ukraine's NATO membership. Although these ideas were put on hold for some time, they may bear fruit in the future. At least the idea of a military presence in Ukraine has paved the way for the European countries to mobilise more quickly when the need arose to propose concrete security guarantees for Ukraine in March 2025.

The resolute leadership of France and the United Kingdom has established a coalition of countries willing to work on security guarantees for Ukraine. Concrete military planning is underway, with around 200 planners from 30 international partners, and the establishment of headquarters in Paris in July 2025 (UK Government, 2025). The so-called reassurance force has focused on the future regeneration of Ukrainian forces and the protection of Ukrainian airspace once hostilities cease, as well as safety in the Black Sea. However, other possibilities are being considered, particularly before a ceasefire or wider peace agreement is reached. In September 2025, Macron announced that 26 countries had pledged to deploy troops to Ukraine (Tidey, 2025). This military instrument, developed specifically for the situation in Ukraine, could potentially serve as a foundation for strengthening European defence capabilities in the future. It is also important to note that this effort has been coordinated with the EU, NATO, and the United States.

The question remains as to whether Europeans aspire to support Ukraine's security independently or in cooperation with the United States. Preliminary analysis of how Europe could defend itself from Russia without

the United States has shown that it is possible, but would require considerable effort (Burlikov and Wolff, 2025). For now, however, this scenario is not fully on the table. Many European states cherish their partnership with the United States – for the Baltic States, for example, it is clear that the United States remains the only force capable of deterring Russia – while others, such as the United Kingdom, have highly integrated defence systems with the United States. Therefore, there is little willingness to decouple European security from that of the United States in the long term. In the short term, Europe lacks the essential capabilities for this decoupling. Plans for European autonomous action are therefore being made with the understanding that the United States will remain a major ally. Its representatives are involved in continuous close consultation with the Europeans. The successful launch of concrete military planning for Ukraine on the European side provides more visibility on transatlantic burden-sharing and is therefore seen as beneficial to both sides of the Atlantic. France also seems to accept this idea of keeping the Americans involved, as, under current circumstances, Gaullist tradition gives way to pragmatic Atlanticism.

Balancing the European Security Architecture

The final element that should be noted in the changing French position within the European security architecture is its attitude towards Russia. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent imposition of European sanctions, which were supported by France and Germany, bilateral relations between France and Russia have been rather lacklustre. Vladimir Putin's popularity among the French public also declined, not least due to Russia's intervention in Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad. According to the French Institute of Public Opinion, 84% of the French population held a negative view of Vladimir Putin in March 2025, compared to 72% in 2015 (IFOP, 2025; IFOP, 2015). In 2019, Emmanuel Macron initiated a renewed dialogue with Russia, forcefully imposing this presidential decision on somewhat sceptical French diplomats and security officials (Elysée, 2019b). Bilateral talks were initiated on a number of issues and at different levels, including between various ministries. However, they did not lead to a breakthrough and quickly stalled.

The stance of the French leadership began to change significantly in spring 2022, when it became evident that diplomatic efforts were ineffective

in countering Putin's destructive intentions in Ukraine and Europe. Next to the military action in Ukraine, Russia increased its disruptive influence and sabotage operations in Europe itself, putting European resilience under extreme pressure. Since 2022, Russian hybrid warfare activities in Europe have more than doubled and have increased tenfold compared to 2020 (Edwards and Seidenstein, 2025). The unpredictability and relative ease with which Russian actors can damage European societies, democratic politics, infrastructure, cybersecurity and air safety makes defence efforts especially challenging. By summer 2025, France had clearly identified Russia as a major threat not only to Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but also to itself and to Europe as a whole. A significant event was the rare press conference given by the French Chief of the Armed Forces, Thierry Burkhard, in July 2025, in which he stated that: 'The Kremlin has chosen France as one of its preferred targets' and 'defeat in Ukraine would increasingly be a European defeat' (Armée Française, 2025).

That being said, further consideration must be given to the outlook of the French position on Russia and the possibility of future cooperation with it in establishing a post-war European security architecture. A notable aspect of Emmanuel Macron's 2019 discourse was his assertion that Russia is a European power (Elysée, 2019a). While the war in Ukraine has altered France's stance on Vladimir Putin's intentions and objectives, there is no evidence that the prevailing perception of Russia as part of the European family has shifted. Prominent observers have highlighted the Russophile tendencies of certain French political and societal forces (Schmitt, 2017) and the infiltration of Russian agents of influence within French opinion-making circles (Vaissié, 2016). Despite Putin's assertions that Russia constitutes a distinct civilisation, French political and intellectual circles, referring to the ages-long Russian involvement in the affairs of the European continent, may reconsider the concept of "European Russia" and attempt to incorporate it into the future European security architecture. This fixation on a "European Russia" may also be supported by geopolitical considerations based on Russia's geographical proximity to the European Union and its many historical and cultural affinities with the continent.

The prospect of France adopting a softer stance towards the Kremlin may in fact be closer than we think: the 2027 presidential or early parliamentary elections could see right-wing political forces come into power, and these are known to be more lenient towards Russia. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally, is an admirer of Vladimir Putin and has met him

several times. Public opinion polls show that Le Pen's supporters are less concerned about the war in Ukraine (27% are not concerned, compared to 17% of the global population), and have a lower opinion of Volodymyr Zelensky (only 56% have a positive view of him, compared to 64% of the global population and 86% of Emmanuel Macron's supporters) (IFOP, 2025). While all French political forces initially condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and expressed solidarity with Ukraine, opinions today diverge when it comes to the deployment of French armed forces in Ukraine or the maintenance of sanctions on Russia beyond a hypothetical ceasefire. These views remain subdued while Ukraine struggles for survival and Putin continues to portray France and the West as major Russian enemies. However, they remain a factor if conditions change.

The French position within the future European security architecture (hypothetically, once the war in Ukraine is over) will also depend on China's position within the global economic and security order. The recent manifestations of an 'unlimited partnership' between Russia and China, and their pretensions to forge an alternative world order that rejects liberal values allegedly imposed by the West, highlight the need to reinvigorate multilateralism and reaffirm the role of the West. France is leading efforts of de-risking European economic relations with China without decoupling, i.e., engaging in pragmatic dialogue, maintaining trade relations, and cooperating on investments, while monitoring for potential hostile Chinese activities in Europe (Esteban et al., 2025). France remains active in the Indo-Pacific region, strengthening partnerships with countries such as Japan, India and Australia, where its national interests are engaged. French leaders have expended diplomatic efforts (thus far unsuccessful) to dissuade China from supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. In the long term, the international balance will have to be reforged to take emerging powers into consideration. Russia will most probably remain a significant player in this balance, with European countries potentially willing to bring it closer to Europe and further away from China. France, with its long tradition of promoting multilateralism in global governance, will likely seek to play a leading role in these efforts by engaging with all significant players, including Russia.

Conclusion

New geopolitical developments in the Euro-Atlantic area have created a tenuous opportunity for France to exercise leadership on the European continent and implement some of its long-standing ideas, such as European strategic autonomy. In line with historical patterns, France seeks to encapsulate European interests within its own national interests in its leadership role: enhancing national and regional security, promoting national defence industries, and strengthening its influence. France is increasingly engaging with its European partners in various bilateral and multilateral formats, which is a positive development. However, the highly complex nature of security and defence cooperation in Europe, coupled with the diversity of European partners, poses a significant challenge to this endeavour. Furthermore, domestic political instability and economic slowdown increasingly complicate French ambitions. France's leadership has been especially notable in providing political and diplomatic support to Ukraine, particularly in organising a coalition of the willing with the United Kingdom to provide security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire or peace agreement with Russia. Another development within French decision-making circles is the willingness to exert diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia, as well as a significantly more cautious evaluation of Putin's intentions and Russia's threat to Europe. Nevertheless, the future necessity of maintaining multilateral dialogue and navigating the shifting global power balance, affected by China's rise and rapprochement between Russia and China, may prompt French decision-makers to re-engage with Russia once the war in Ukraine is over.

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