

France's Eastern Zeitenwende?

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Theme

The shift in France's policies towards the eastern flank of Europe is real. It entails a profound reassessment of security threats and geopolitical challenges, and of the answers they require.

Summary

This paper traces [the evolution of French](#) policy towards eastern Europe following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It explores the main drivers of the remarkable shift in France's posture, priorities and narrative, and asks whether it amounts to a tactical adjustment or a strategic turning point. The paper finds that France's policy shift is real and informed by a new assessment of the [transformed European strategic context](#). At the same time, French commitment to resisting Russia and strengthening ties with partners in central and eastern Europe is part of its long-standing endeavour to reinforce European sovereignty and defence policy. If the requirements to achieve it have changed, the ultimate goal has not.

Analysis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has transformed Europe's strategic landscape. In response to the return of large-scale war on the continent, Europeans have broken long-standing taboos, including the provision of advanced weaponry to help Ukraine push Russia back and the decision to launch a new phase of the enlargement process of the European Union. While all EU Member States have adjusted their stance and priorities to cope with the war in Ukraine, not many have embraced such a radical change as France.

Today, France stands as one of Ukraine's firmest allies in Europe, determined to obstruct Russia's war effort, provide humanitarian, financial and military support to Ukraine and contribute to its reconstruction. France endorsed Ukraine's prospective EU membership and, to the surprise of many, threw its weight behind Ukraine's NATO accession. This stance stands in striking contrast to the French position not only before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but also in the immediate aftermath of the attack. These changes have sparked considerable debate among diplomats and pundits as to whether they should be seen as a gradual transition or a drastic shift, a tactical adjustment or a strategic choice, a consistent pattern or an ambivalent position.

This paper does not confine itself to contrasting France's current posture with its traditional policy towards eastern Europe but aims to explore the main drivers of its policy shift. It looks in particular at five major dimensions of change: responding to Russia's

predatory behaviour, endorsing the prospect of EU enlargement to encompass Ukraine, establishing a new level of dialogue with countries in central and eastern Europe, backing Ukraine's bid to join NATO and asserting a 'whatever it takes' stance to defeat Russia in Ukraine. The paper addresses two main questions, namely whether the evolution of French rhetoric has been matched by subsequent action, and whether policy change corresponds to an incremental evolution in France's posture or amounts to a turning point, a *Zeitenwende*. To answer these principal questions, this policy paper builds on numerous interviews conducted with French officials and experts.¹

1. Shaping France's new approach to Russia and eastern Europe

France has come a long way from its traditional Russia-centric approach to eastern Europe, by taking the lead in countering Russia to defend Europe. Efforts to engage with Russia have been one of the fixed features of French foreign policy for decades. At the core of France's Russia policy was a 'mythologised perception' of Russia's European destiny and the West's 'failure' to embrace and accommodate it. France's search for autonomy and leadership in Europe, coupled with the ambition to conduct an independent, 'neither aligned nor vassalised', foreign policy and to balance American influence led elites in Paris to favour a cooperative approach towards Moscow. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, Russia was viewed as a great power in a multipolar world and, more recently, as a potentially instrumental means of containing the rise of China.

By conferring a special place and status to Russia however, Paris marginalised the independent states bordering Russia in its strategic thinking. It is through the Russian prism that France viewed and approached young democracies in eastern Europe in ways that would not undermine its relations with Moscow. This approach included both self-delusion concerning Russia's intentions towards its neighbours and a degree of tacit understanding of the Kremlin's determination to maintain a 'sphere of influence' in its 'near abroad'.

Against this background, President Macron's foreign policy towards Moscow, rooted in the inherited formula of 'dialogue and firmness', appeared to lean more towards dialogue than firmness. The French President sought to position France at the forefront of efforts to 'reinvent an architecture of security and confidence' in Europe, which would include Russia. Overall, President Macron's foreign policy and approach to Russia reflected France's self-perception as a 'balancing power' ('puissance d'équilibres'), claiming 'freedom to act' and flexibility beyond the constraints of East-West competition.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Macron was quick to stress that the attack marked 'a turning point in the history of Europe and of our country'. France unequivocally condemned the aggression and readily contributed to shaping the EU's response to it. The far-reaching implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the European and the international order progressively surfaced in the

¹ The author is grateful to the officials and experts who have generously shared their views and experience through anonymised interviews conducted between October and December 2023. This paper builds on their insights.

French strategic debate, leading to successive policy shifts, each further distancing France's stance from its earlier position.

The first major shift came in late spring of 2022, when Paris formally decided to support Ukraine's EU accession bid – a startling decision considering France's earlier reluctance to envisage any step conducive to further EU enlargement towards associated countries in eastern Europe (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). More broadly, France's change of heart and tone towards central and eastern Europe translated into a new attitude of listening and dialogue with partners in the region, epitomised by Emmanuel Macron's [speech at the GLOBSEC meeting in Bratislava in May 2023](#). In his discourse, the French President acknowledged that the painful historical memories and warnings of these countries had not been sufficiently recognised and heard.

A few weeks later, the NATO Vilnius Summit held in July 2023 marked two further important shifts in France's overarching approach to the region. Emmanuel Macron announced the decision [to supply long range \(SCALP-EG\) cruise missiles](#) to Ukraine, and further intensified the delivery of ammunitions, weapons and armed vehicles. Where France broke most strikingly from its long-standing position however was on the issue of NATO enlargement. In the run-up to the NATO Vilnius Summit, the French president declared himself open to the idea, until then deemed unthinkable in Paris, of supporting [Ukraine's \(post-war\) accession to NATO](#).²

Macron's solidarity with Ukraine attained a new high in early 2024, with the situation on the ground deteriorating, America's support for Ukraine stalled in the US Congress, and Europe's geopolitical [self-confidence began turning into angst](#). The French President made it clear that the ['defeat of Russia is indispensable to the security and stability of Europe'](#). He pledged to stand alongside Ukraine resolutely, with partners, ['for as long as necessary and whatever it takes'](#). As a concrete manifestation of the 'strategic leap' he was advocating, he went so far as to not rule out the deployment of allied troops to Ukraine and refusing to set [limits](#) when determining how to respond to Russia's aggression.

2. Principal drivers of change

The concise overview of the main developments in France's policy response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates the extent of the shift compared to pre-war positions. Assessing the wider implications of this evolution requires a closer scrutiny of its principal drivers. Officials maintain that these changes are not merely tactical adjustments but reflect the development of France's strategic thinking on European security against a dramatic new security backdrop that carries unprecedented threats.

² In 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy together with German Chancellor Angela Merkel led the opposition to the American initiative to grant Georgia and Ukraine the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). On this topic, see Sylvie Kauffmann (2023), *Les Aveuglées Comment Berlin et Paris ont laissé la voie libre à la Russie*, Stock, pp.63-95.

2.1. Reacting to Russia's predatory behaviour

Russia's predatory behaviour is an important factor in explaining the reversal of France's stance following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Russia upset the 'delicate equilibrium' that France strove to sustain in its 'strategic relationship' with Moscow. As Russia crossed all imaginable political, moral and security boundaries with its full-scale aggression towards Ukraine, it triggered a reassessment in Paris of the nature of Putin's regime and the need to avert Russian victory. Whereas France used to advocate a European security architecture embracing Russia, today there is a clear understanding that such a European security system should be built without, if not against, Russia.

This change did not immediately follow Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After the attack in February 2022, France sought to leave a door open for dialogue with Putin. Officials maintain that the rationale behind President Macron's continued diplomatic overtures to Russia was to exhaust all the possibilities for a diplomatic solution. Such efforts would also be essential to demonstrate to the Global South and the international community at large that the West was not rejecting the use of diplomacy to bring the conflict to an end, thereby invalidating Russia's claims about Western hostility. They would help domestically too, showing to the French public that Emmanuel Macron was striving for peace, while standing up to aggression. As France sought to keep dialogue open however, evidence of Russia's widespread war crimes began to emerge, and civilian targets were bombed on a significantly larger scale. Paris came to realise the futility of dialogue with Moscow and the need to take a tougher stance. Officials have remarked that as attempts at diplomatic engagement failed, France adjusted its approach but not its underlying objectives, namely preserving the security of the European continent, supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and defending the fundamental principles of international law.

The French authorities addressed the implications of Russia's aggressive stance not only in Ukraine but also at home. Russia has been carrying out [hybrid campaigns](#) to interfere in France's domestic politics and harm the integrity of its democratic institutions and processes for many years. Since February 2022, Russia has significantly increased its subversive operations, propaganda and [disinformation activities](#), in an attempt to undermine societal cohesion, overturn France's support for Ukraine and influence the results of the elections to the European Parliament in June. Russia has become a domestic threat to France.

As well as meddling in French politics, Russian propaganda and information warfare have targeted France in the Sahel region too. The Wagner mercenary group was instrumental in [exploiting historic resentments](#) and exacerbating anti-French sentiments in this region. Encroachments in a number of countries (the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger) have enabled Russia to increase its influence in the region, in addition to gaining access to lucrative mining assets in exchange for protecting the local regimes.

2.2. At the forefront of EU enlargement and reform

Enlargement has been the most successful tool for inducing political, economic and social advances in the countries aiming to join the EU. However, since Russia's invasion

of Ukraine and Kyiv's application for EU membership, it has acquired broader strategic significance. Opening the prospect of accession to Ukraine revived the process for countries in the western Balkans too, likewise Moldova and Georgia. Strategic, political and institutional considerations led Paris to embrace the prospect of EU enlargement – something experts have described as [France's Copernican revolution](#).

France, together with other EU Member States, came to view enlargement as a response to the geopolitical challenges facing the continent. For one thing, Paris perceived it as a contribution to the long-term resilience of Ukraine and other neighbouring states and therefore to European stability. For another, it framed enlargement as one of the main vectors for the EU to assert itself as a strategic actor in its immediate neighbourhood. Then foreign minister Catherine Colonna underscored the geopolitical imperative of enlargement: '[Ukraine will be stronger and Europe will be strengthened by Ukraine](#)'. In addition to geopolitical considerations, Paris was always clear that the prospect of enlargement to incorporate several new Member States would raise the question of the EU's own reform. Reforming Europe's institutions and policies has been central to President Macron's vision of Europe since his landmark [Sorbonne speech in 2017](#). Seven years on, in his [second Sorbonne speech](#) on Europe, he reaffirmed the need to ensure the 'anchoring' of Ukraine, Moldova and the western Balkans in Europe while simultaneously reforming the EU.

From a French perspective, the process of enlargement will in all likelihood [extend over many years](#). Given this assumption, the urgency of meeting Ukraine's expectations for stronger political engagement and to aligning all European countries against Russia's aggression prompted Emmanuel Macron to propose the launch of the European Political Community (EPC). In contrast to François Mitterrand's precursory idea of a 'European confederation', [the political aim of the EPC](#) was to isolate Moscow and to re-think Europe's political and security architecture without Russia.

2.3. France in central and eastern Europe: in search of lost time

A year after the beginning of the war, President Macron's Bratislava speech marked a milestone in France's recalibration of its relationship with the countries of central and eastern Europe. It was a self-reflective and, in some respects, repentant moment, but also an attempt to renew France's leadership in Europe.

The foremost driver behind this change in tone and approach was France's intention of restoring its strategic credentials in the region. Seen from Paris, the disagreement with central and eastern European countries was not about a divergent perception of the threats stemming from Russia, but about the ways to manage them. For the countries in central and eastern Europe however, lack of confidence in France's commitment to the region is rooted in both distant and recent historical memories, and the feeling that their warnings against the threat posed by Russia had been ignored. Some controversial statements by President Macron since February 2022, when he called for '[not humiliating Russia](#)' or contemplated '[offering security guarantees to Russia](#)' compounded France's credibility deficit in the eyes of many in eastern Europe. In Bratislava, Emmanuel Macron took it upon himself to reverse such scepticism and define a new political basis to build confidence and partnerships with eastern Europe.

The second driver behind President Macron's outreach to this region was his determination to foster France's role in a changing Europe. Paris did not share the view that the continent's political centre of gravity was moving eastwards following the validation of eastern Europe's assessment of the danger posed by Russia. France's move was rather informed by the recognition that enhancing Europe's unity and sovereignty – the overarching ambition of Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy – could not be achieved without eastern European partners on board. Paris realised that more intense dialogue with them was necessary to shape EU consensus, albeit ultimately a consensus around French ideas.

In addition to these primary drivers, France's complicated relationship with Germany and, following Brexit, with the UK, also played a role in France's recalibration of its leadership in Europe. Stalemate in the Franco-German tandem encouraged Paris to seek new partners among central and eastern European allies to amplify its voice. France might have also felt outperformed by the UK, an actor whose strategic outlook has traditionally been close to that of eastern Europeans, and which played an important role in supporting Ukraine at the outset of the war.

2.4. A step change on NATO

Emmanuel Macron's decision to reconsider France's long-standing opposition to NATO's 'open door policy' and to offer support for Ukraine's bid to join the Atlantic Alliance surprised many, both in allied countries and within the French administration. No one expected that the president, who only four years earlier had proclaimed NATO 'brain dead', would favour expanding NATO to the East at such a precarious time for Europe. The French pivot distanced Paris from Berlin, but also from Washington and London and aligned it with Ukraine's staunch supporters in eastern Europe, Poland and the Baltic states.

Sceptics felt that an opportunistic logic drove the French U-turn, as a move to curry favour with Ukraine and eastern European partners while knowing that, in the current circumstances, the US and Germany would oppose NATO's enlargement to Ukraine. Others, equally unconvinced, found Emmanuel Macron's support for Ukraine's NATO accession of little consequence in practice, given that the enlargement of NATO (and the EU) is a long drawn-out process, advancement in which depends on a combination of multiple factors, each capable of putting the process on hold. However, French diplomats deny that opportunistic or transactional motivations influenced France's stance on Ukraine's NATO accession. They maintain that the French shift on NATO enlargement is evidence of the determination in Paris to ensure that Russia fails and to guarantee Ukraine's security.

As the war grinds on, [tactical, strategic and political considerations](#) made Ukraine's NATO accession the best of available options for Paris. France was one of the first countries to join the [G7 pledge](#) to support Ukraine, including through bilateral, long-term security assurances. However, the prospect of Kyiv's membership of NATO would ensure American commitment to Ukraine's defence, together with the European allies. The security guarantees provided by Article 5 would be the most politically viable, economically tenable and the safest way of sustaining Ukraine's defence, compared to

other existing arrangements for military assistance, such as the Israeli or the South Korean models. In short, Paris views this option as the only credible way to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine. Another consideration that might have motivated the French initiative is strengthening Kyiv's position in negotiations with Moscow when, depending on the situation in the field, the time comes to enter talks.

The strategic imperative of defending Ukraine also derives from the recognition of Ukraine's EU membership prospects. Given that France chose to support Kyiv's EU accession, it was coherent to envisage Ukraine's NATO accession as the optimal way of defending the country and the entire continent. While the processes of EU and NATO enlargement are at the core of the European security architecture, opinions diverge about France's priorities regarding the sequence and interconnection between them. Some believe that it is difficult for France to imagine Ukraine joining the EU unless it becomes a NATO member first. For others, France aims to advance both processes simultaneously. Yet others believe that eventually France would be ready to consider Ukraine's EU accession even if it does not join NATO. Conversely, if the EU enlargement process ran into difficulties, accession to NATO could be instrumental in avoiding a situation where Ukraine would be left in a precarious balance, excluded from both organisations and exposed to enduring threats from Russia.

2.5. A leap forward on Ukraine

Over the course of February and March 2024, Emmanuel Macron picked up the mantle of [Ukraine's firmest ally](#) in Europe, affirming that nothing should be ruled out to defeat Russia, short of entering into war against it. His tough rhetoric has been backed up by the long-term security commitments to Ukraine that France entered into with the [Agreement on security cooperation](#), signed on 16 February 2024. The ink was barely dry on this deal when the French defence minister, Sébastien Lecornu, [announced](#) that three French companies planned to manufacture drones and terrestrial equipment on Ukrainian soil.³ Many capitals, including Berlin and Washington, quickly rejected Emmanuel Macron's reference to the option of potentially sending allied troops to Ukraine. Yet, by raising this option, the French president positioned his country in the vanguard of the resistance to revisionist Russia.

Awareness of the gravity of the context accounted for Emmanuel Macron's attempt to introduce 'strategic ambiguity' vis-a-vis Russia, a choice he strongly reaffirmed in his Sorbonne speech in April 2024. By the end of 2023, the degree of complacency that had followed the mobilisation of US and EU support for Kyiv, and Ukraine's successes against Russian forces, had begun to fade away. For one thing, Western support proved to be 'too little, too late' to empower Ukraine to carry out a successful counteroffensive. For another, Donald Trump's scathing attacks on NATO's allies across the Atlantic made it clear that for Europe the '[peace dividend](#)' of the post-Cold War era had ended. The recognition of the magnitude of the threats that a defeat of Ukraine would pose to Europe

³ Furthermore, Sébastien Lecornu announced that France would deliver hundreds of old armoured vehicles and 30 Aster missiles to Ukraine in 2024 and early 2025, as part of a new aid package. See M. Cabirol, R. Jules and L. Vigogne, "Sébastien Lecornu: J'exige la constitution de stocks pour produire des munitions", *La Tribune Dimanche*, 31 March 2024.

was at the heart of Emmanuel Macron's strategic pivot. The French president concluded that what is at stake in Ukraine is Europe itself: its security, the resilience of its democratic systems, [its credibility](#) and its future as a political project. Therefore, ensuring that Russia does not win the war of aggression against Ukraine is not solely a moral commitment, but the '*sine qua non condition*' for preserving European security.

From the French perspective, the response to the Russian threat to Europe, aggravated by the risk of American disengagement from the continent, is to strengthen European sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Emmanuel Macron's strategic leap forward on Ukraine is part and parcel of his determination to enhance the convergence of European partners around this goal. By the same token, his recent initiatives over Ukraine go hand-in-hand with his efforts to reinforce European defence policy. Russia's war against Ukraine conferred a new sense of urgency to France's long-standing calls for the development of a common European defence strategy and stronger defence industry capabilities. Steps have been made to enhance [France's defence industry capacity](#), in areas such as to ammunition production, but more investment will be needed to match President Macron's reiterated calls [to move to a 'war economy'](#) footing. At a time of growing fiscal constraints, this will be a difficult political balancing act for Paris.

Conclusion: new patterns, and obstacles, to leadership

A different Europe is emerging following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the war having repercussions for the regional security order, national security strategies and Europe's political landscape. Old alignments have been upset and new ones are emerging. The war is diluting the (ill-conceived) distinction between Old and New Europe and respective strategic cultures. The Franco-German tandem has been the cornerstone of European integration, but it is not a given that it will continue to play this role in future. Mutual frustration over strategic divergences, accentuated by the pressure imposed by the war, is exposing tensions between Paris and Berlin. While under strain, the partnership remains of critical importance to both sides, not least because it provides a basis for wider cooperation formats, as [the revival of the Weimar triangle](#) in 2023 demonstrates. However, Paris has clearly pursued a pattern of strategic bilateralism to diversify its partnerships in Europe, both before and after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, such as through the comprehensive treaties signed with [Italy](#) in November 2021 and with [Spain](#) in January 2023.

Alignments are changing in other parts of Europe too. Central and eastern European countries are far from being on the same page concerning their assessment of the risks posed by Russia and of the requirements to support Ukraine. Budapest espouses an openly Russia-friendly position, the new government in Bratislava is highly sceptical of supporting Ukraine in the war effort, while Warsaw and the Baltics are among Kyiv's staunchest allies. President Macron's overtures to the countries of central and eastern Europe have strengthened political ties with the region. The French President appears to have concluded that pursuing a strong and sovereign Europe requires deepening mutual understanding with partners on the continent's eastern flank.

In this fluid context, the French stance on Russia and Ukraine has shifted progressively, with an acceleration in early 2024. The step change took place when the shifting balance

of power on the battleground, together with stalemate in the US Congress regarding assistance to Kyiv, heightened concerns about the capacity of the West to sustain Ukraine. If caution had long framed France's approach to Russia, since late February, President Macron distinguished himself by 'thinking out of the box' and refusing to draw red lines delimiting Western support for Ukraine. If Emmanuel Macron used to speak about a European security order directed at managing Russia, with a view to eventually involving it in the regional architecture, today France's priority is to build Europe's collective defence to deter Russia from further aggression.

Ambitious rhetoric has helped Emmanuel Macron score geopolitical points in eastern Europe and raise France's geopolitical profile in the struggle with Russia, but has not sufficed to avert criticism of France over its military aid to Ukraine. Data from the [Kiel Institute](#) show a sharp discrepancy between France's stated determination to defend Ukraine and its actual contribution in terms of weapons deliveries to Kyiv. Paris has contested these reports, [pointing to the fact](#) that it delivered on its commitments in a timely way, through weapons that made a significant difference on the ground, as confirmed by [the Ukrainian side](#). French initiatives in support of Kyiv's defence go beyond deliveries and maintenance of military equipment and extend to [intelligence exchange, training and industrial cooperation](#). After providing more than €3.8 billion in military aid between February 2022 and December 2023, Paris has pledged to provide up to €3 billion in 2024 and to continue supporting Ukraine for the next ten years, as stipulated in the agreement on security cooperation. Even so, France still lags behind Germany, by far the largest military aid donor to Ukraine in Europe. Alongside military support to Ukraine, France is contributing to the security of eastern Europe in various other ways. For one thing, the consolidation of France's military presence in Romania, Estonia and Lithuania reflects the willingness to assert France's role as a security provider in eastern Europe. For another, [the defence cooperation pact](#) that Paris signed with Chisinau in early March 2024 demonstrates France's determination not only to advance an autonomous policy in relation to Moldova, but to protect the country from Russia's destabilising force.

Overall, the shift in France's policies towards the eastern flank of Europe is real. It entails a profound reassessment of security threats and geopolitical challenges, and of the answers they require. However, the underlying motivation of this far-reaching change is less novel than grand speeches may suggest. It embodies continuity in France's long-standing geopolitical thinking about the place of Europe in a volatile world, and the role of France in Europe. Striving for a united and sovereign Europe continues to be at the heart of France's grand strategy. According to President Macron, only [a united Europe](#) can guarantee France's genuine sovereignty and its ability to defend its values and interests. Europe continues to be seen as a multiplier of France's power and leading role. In pursuing the aspiration to build European sovereignty while full-scale warfare rages in Europe, Paris faces three major challenges however. The first is to make this case in a way that not only reflects France's priorities but also meets the interests of the other member states. Second, if Paris is determined to assert its leadership role, military assistance to Ukraine should match the level of Emmanuel Macron's ambition. The third challenge lies at home. While differences of nuance persist, the diplomatic and military elite, and most French commentators with expertise in such matters, broadly share the position of the French president. In contrast to the strategic elite however, members of

the political sphere find Emmanuel Macron's posture extremely controversial. As the political campaign ahead of the European elections in June intensifies, opposition parties and rivals from the far right to the far left **have vehemently criticised** his recent declarations and initiatives. It remains to be seen whether President Macron can position himself at the helm of a united Europe confronting a revisionist Russia if he fails to mobilise domestic support for his European agenda.