

# France's Security Policy in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean

Report



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In the final address of his book “Marseille the gate of the South”, written in 1927, French journalist Albert Londres called on French elites to embrace the seas and open up to the world. Beyond the ugly reality of colonial mindset depicted in the book, these final remarks are reminiscent of a thought that seems to have transcended ages, and that finds its best expression in a quote attributed to the Cardinal de Richelieu: “the tears of our sovereigns taste like the salt of the sea they ignored”.



Fig. 1. Quai de la Joliette, Marseille, 1890. Source: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Marseille\\_-\\_Quai\\_de\\_la\\_Joliette.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Marseille_-_Quai_de_la_Joliette.jpg)

The French self-perception appears to have focused its attention on the power and importance of its land forces - with the mythical nation in arm - rather than on its navy. If the French naval forces are a source of pride, it is also associated with a series of disasters, such as Trafalgar or the scuttling of the fleet in Toulon in 1942. Nonetheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Amélie Ferey. “Par-delà le Moskva: la persistance du fait naval dans l’environnement stratégique”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, Ifri, 2022.

and due to the country's geography, the seas have always been key to France's interests. The Mediterranean basin for instance, acts as the civilizational reference in a country that has been eager to capitalize on its Roman - and pre-Roman - heritage. For the French state, the importance of the Mediterranean goes way beyond memorial concerns, as, from its start in the 15th century, up until today the French state has affirmed itself as a Mediterranean power. By the 1920s, it ruled over Corsica, Algeria, had established protectorates in Morocco and Tunisia, and held mandates on Syria and Lebanon. Following the Second World War, a bloody process of decolonization started. The Mandates and Protectorates were the first to go, but in the case of Algeria, a settler colony, the French state fought fiercely against independence, in a vain attempt to preserve what was then called "French Algeria". This fight against Arab Nationalism - starting with the crushing of Syria's Arab Kingdom in 1920 - was for some decades a determining factor of France's Mediterranean policy, leading to the diplomatic disaster of the Suez Canal crisis, and to a close partnership with Israel. The independence of Algeria, in 1962, brought an end to this close partnership, materialized by a weapons embargo on the eve of the seven-day war in 1967. France temporarily shifted its focus away from Israel to try and build new relationships with Arab leaders. By the 1970s of all the aforementioned territories across the Mediterranean space, France only withheld Corsica. Likewise, French presence worldwide strongly diminished. Yet, amid the disintegration of its colonial empire, the country managed to retain a series of territories enabling parts of France's network of military forces spread throughout the globe - second only to that of the United States (US)<sup>2</sup>. As a member of both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), France has long integrated its action in the region into the broader framework of these multilateral organizations, while also maintaining its independence. An independence dear to the French elite and public, which allowed the country to oppose the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

If the Mediterranean was always central to the interests of the French State, the Black Sea has always been more distant and complicated in access. With the Crimean War of 1853-1856, coalesced troops from Great Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, entered war with the Russian Empire. In this case, the French and British were able to attack the Russian Empire on its Black Sea coast thanks to their alliance with the Ottomans, the gatekeepers of the Black Sea. In 1918-1919, in the aftermath of the first World War, France intervened militarily in Ukraine in support of anti-Bolshevik groups. This Southern Russia Campaign, as it came to be known, was meant to create a French sphere of influence in Ukraine, the Crimean Peninsula and the Donetsk river basin and was closely linked to the military mission

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<sup>2</sup> Élie Tenenbaum, Morgan Paglia & Nathalie Ruffié. "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *Focus Stratégique*, No. 94, Ifri, 2020.

sent to Romania<sup>3</sup>. The intervention turned into a fiasco and allied troops had to retreat, French authorities abandoned any hope of military actions and opted for a policy of isolation of the Bolsheviks<sup>4</sup>. More than half a century later, at the end of the Cold War, the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU created new opportunities for France to develop a multilateral approach to security in the Black Sea region. Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine came as a reminder of the strategic importance of the area.

The current French perception of the Mediterranean and of the Black Sea is marked by the return of what president Macron referred to as "imperial powers", motivated by "the fantasy of their own history"<sup>5</sup>. In this context, the concentration of French security policy in the region for the last decades, which included the preservation of law-abiding international order, the fight against illicit trafficking - of drugs, weapons, and people -, containing the rise of Islamic Jihadism, and general stability and cooperation between all shores, is now being jostled by the growing assertiveness of Russia and Türkiye. Yet, the priorities of France remain rather unchanged, and the country's commitment to a liberal order based on international law remains relevant in this new area of strategic competition. If both seas present their own challenges and opportunities, they are also deeply intertwined, and for Paris to retain its status of a balancing power, the country will have to and is increasingly opting for a collective European approach, while respecting the format of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

## I. The Challenges of a Medium Power with Global Reach

According to an expression consecrated by Hubert Vedrine, a former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, France is a medium power with global reach<sup>6</sup>. The country has more than 10.500 soldiers engaged around the world. Among them 3.750 are allocated to the *Forces of Presence* - shared between Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates - the other 7.150 constituting the *Forces of Sovereignty*, tasked with the defence of France's ultramarine territories (the inhabited ones being: Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Polynesia, French Guiana, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Saint Barthélemy, Saint Martin, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, and Wallis and Futuna). The country has also been involved in various military

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<sup>3</sup> John Kim Munholland. "The French Army Intervention in Southern Russia, 1918-1919, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1981. pp.43-66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Dorothée Schmid & Elisa Domingues Dos Santos. "Le partenariat franco-hellénique : Au-delà de la Méditerranée orientale", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Bernard Miyet. "La France et le soft power", *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 9, No. 844, 2021, pp.100-107.

operations throughout the last decades, from operation *Chamal* in Syria and Iraq, to the recently ended operation *Barkhane* in the Sahel region. With *Barkhane*, launched in 2014, France entered the global war against terror by taking on Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or AQIM. Yet, the end of this operation in recent months, marked by the extension of the terrorist threat toward the Gulf of Guinea and the retreat of democracy in the region, in a context of increasing anti-French sentiment<sup>7</sup>, has shown the limits of such interventions. Indeed, as Pierre-Jean Luizard warned, military interventions that are not followed by sustainable political projects are, more often than not, doomed to fail<sup>8</sup>. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Paris has also bolstered its presence in Eastern Europe: with additional troops and equipment sent to Estonia, Lithuania and Romania, the country has participated in the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank and re-affirmed its commitment to the security of its Eastern European allies.

France's geographical diversity<sup>9</sup> - a legacy of its imperial history - has also provided the country with the second largest economic exclusive zone (EEZ) in the world, 90% of which is located in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>10</sup>. Despite the AUKUS deal, France remains committed to the strengthening of its position in the region, defending a multilateral and holistic approach to create a countermodel of development and regional security and contain China's expansion<sup>11</sup>. In this case, like in others, French authorities' stated objectives are to push for the development of its overseas territories, their regional integration and the preservation of French sovereignty over the EEZ attached to them. By doing so, Paris is reaffirming the country's status as a power with global reach.

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<sup>7</sup> Laurent Bansept & Élie Tenenbaum. "Après Barkhane : Repenser la posture stratégique en Afrique de l'Ouest", *Focus Stratégique*, No.109, 2022, Ifri.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre-Jean Luizard. *Le piège Daech : L'État Islamique ou le retour de l'histoire*, (Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Although European, the country shares its longest land border with Brazil for instance.

<sup>10</sup> Christophe Penot. "Le renforcement de l'engagement de la France en Indo-Pacifique se poursuit", Vol. 9, No. 844, 2021, pp.15-20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

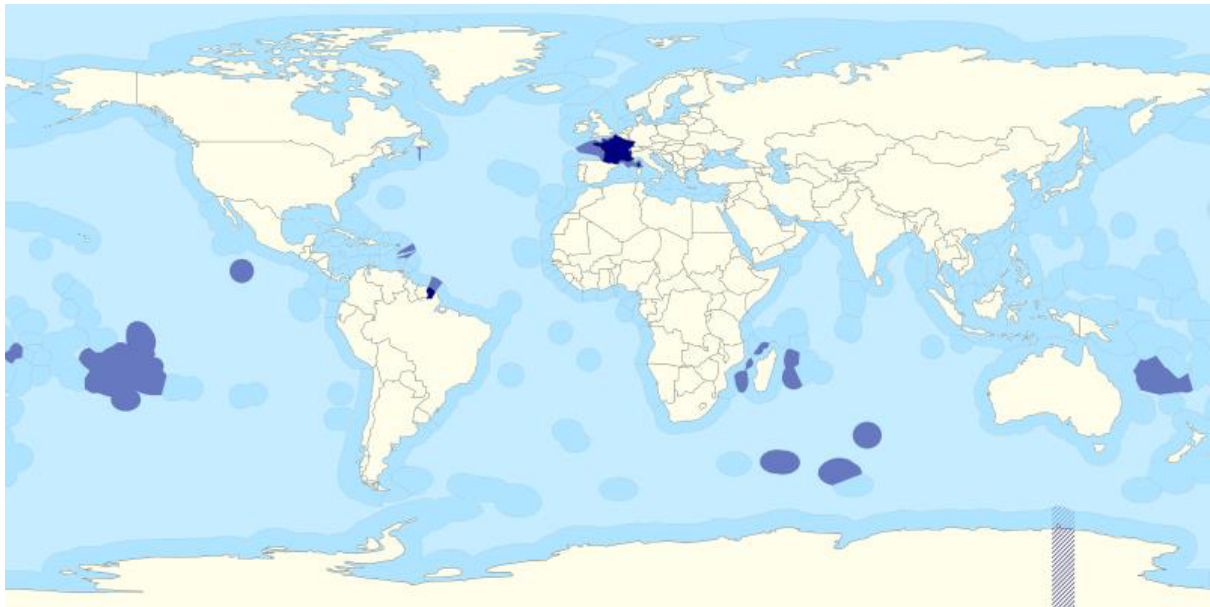


Fig. 2. Territory of France and its territorial waters. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial\\_waters\\_-\\_France.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial_waters_-_France.svg)

French sovereignty over these wide spaces is guaranteed by the country's Forces of Sovereignty, which have been for many years, if not decades, underfunded. These forces are facing a wide array of challenges: from global warming, to organized crime, regional instability and geopolitical tensions<sup>12</sup>. In the post-Cold War era, the French Armed Forces experienced the global trend of the downsizing of military institutions, the consequences of which are becoming increasingly visible. In a context of renewed great power competition, French authorities have cultivated strategic partnerships with countries like Japan and India, and through their involvement in various regional platforms, forums and organizations, are determined to cement the country's position as a global player. Furthermore, and in spite of it being a member of NATO and a close ally of the US, the country has long sought to be seen as offering a third path, out of the usual polarized international set-ups, with varying degrees of success. A third path that necessarily goes through the strengthening of European strategic autonomy, and through a broader awakening of the Union on geopolitical matters.

As global as its interests might be, France remains a medium power, which no longer wields sufficient power to preside over the fate of the world or of a specific region on its own. The consciousness of these limitations, for a country in which some still haven't really parted with the fantasy of the imperial past, is quintessential to the elaboration of a sane and sustainable foreign policy. In a globalized world, collective defence, and a multilateral international order are France's best shot at remaining audible. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also challenged the idea that France's security

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<sup>12</sup> Élie Tenenbaum, Morgan Paglia & Nathalie Ruffié. "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *Focus Stratégique*, No. 94, 2020. Ifri.

could rely on a small professional army, thought along the line of power projection. With high intensity warfare now being at the gates of the EU, the French Armed Forces are forced to accelerate their transformation initially planned for 2030. Due to the war in Ukraine, some of the supply chains of the French defence industry has been disrupted,<sup>13</sup> complicating the acceleration of France's preparedness to high intensity warfare and adding up to the existing stress weighing on the country's ammunition industry<sup>14</sup>. The war in Ukraine, and the need to supply our ally with weapons to allow it to drive the invading Russian forces off of its lands, has only strengthened Paris' commitment to more joint European defence programs. In this regard, the Versailles EU summit also served as a platform to promote this agenda, which was key to the French presidency of the Council of the EU<sup>15</sup>.

France maintains the only European naval forces with the full range of naval capacities<sup>16</sup>. As such, the State Action at Seabecame an important actor in the rescue of endangered people at sea, in the mitigation of climate change related natural disasters, and in the fight against piracy and illegal trafficking. This "dual vocation" of the French Navy is an important vector of soft power<sup>17</sup>. Working in close cooperation with its allies, in and out of the EU and NATO, France has found a way to address some of the limitations inherent to its medium power status. Thanks to it being the only state within the EU having nuclear weapons of its own, France occupies a specific place in the European security architecture. The country's Nuclear Forces, which include Sub-Surface Ballistic Nuclear or SSBN, allow it to maintain an effective and credible deterrence factor, essential to its security and independence. With 163 embassies and 16 permanent representations to multilateral organizations, France has the third biggest diplomatic network in the world. The country also holds one of the five permanent seats to the United Nations' Security Council, along with the right to veto the council's decisions. This diplomatic presence is a formidable asset and an integral part of the country's soft power.

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<sup>13</sup> This is especially visible in the French naval industry, with some components originating from Polish and Ukrainian subcontractors, that have been impacted directly or indirectly by the war – due to occupation as is the case for the Kherson based firm Pallada, or due to shortage in manpower resulting from the war in some Polish firms.

Centre d'études stratégiques de la Marine, (2022). "L'industrie navale française à l'épreuve du conflit russo-ukrainien", *Brèves Marines*, No. 260.

<sup>14</sup> Raphaël Briant. "La filière munitions française face à la haute intensité: Des équilibres à redéfinir", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, 2022, Ifri.

<sup>15</sup> European Defence Agency. "Interview : French Chief of Defence Gen. Thierry Burkhard 'Ukraine war confirms need to define long-term strategy to ensure the defence of Europe'", 2022, <https://eda.europa.eu/webzine/issue23/interview/ukraine-war-confirms-need-define-long-term-strategy>

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Rogel. "Enjeux et défis stratégiques de la marine nationale", *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 4, No. 789, 2016, pp.11-16.

<sup>17</sup> Stanislas Gourlez de La Motte. "Convaincre par la mer': quel apport de la Marine au service du soft power", *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 9, No. 844, 2021, pp.108-114.



If it is true that French authorities and Armed Forces have but too many theatres of operation to watch over, it appears that the maritime spaces where they face the starkest and most visible challenges are the ones closer to home. There seems to be a general understanding among French security experts that the situation in the Mediterranean has deteriorated in recent years, but while the Mediterranean was always central to French interests, the Russo-Ukrainian war came as a blatant reminder of the strategic importance of the Black Sea.

## II. The Mediterranean and the “Rumbles” the “Liquid Continent”

In a 2020 speech, president Macron declared that the Mediterranean was rumbling, drawing the portrait of a maritime space that could, but should not become a new theatre of great power competition<sup>18</sup>. In the last few decades, the “liquid continent”<sup>19</sup> has undergone some dramatic changes. From the era of westernization with the American-led push to build a “New Middle East”<sup>20</sup> to the relative reflux of American influence in the region<sup>21</sup>. But while the US reviewed their priorities and disengaged some of the tremendous amount of forces they had in the region, other powers became increasingly assertive, anticipating a retreat of American influence that has yet to fully materialize.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, thanks to a dense network of proxies - from the *al-Hashd ash-Sha’bi* militias in Iraq, to Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the Lebanese Hezbollah - has managed to increase its military presence and influence in two Mediterranean states. Türkiye, a NATO ally, is perceived as being increasingly assertive in its foreign policy in the region: from its involvement in the Syrian civil war - through direct military interventions and support to various factions - to various stand-off with its neighbour and fellow NATO ally, Greece. The country’s sometimes unorthodox methods, as exemplified by its documented use of Syrian mercenaries<sup>22</sup>, has proven to be a source of concern for French authorities. Russia, finally, which sided from the very start of the Syrian civil war with the Assad regime - providing it with a diplomatic shield

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Dorothée Schmid & Elisa Domingues Dos Santos. “Le partenariat franco-hellénique : Au-delà de la Méditerranée orientale”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, 2022, Ifri.

<sup>19</sup> Expression of the French geographer Elisée Reclus, quoted in Matthieu Brun & Elen Lemaître-Curri. “Mare Nostrum”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 1, No. 120, 2022, pp.9-12.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Daguzan. “Rapports de force en Méditerranée : le retour de la question maritime”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 1, No. 120, 2022, pp.13-28.

<sup>21</sup> Pascal Ausseur. “Les enjeux de sécurité en Méditerranée : l’orage approche”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 9, No. 844, 2021, pp.115-118.

<sup>22</sup> Matt Powers. “Making Sense of Sadat, Turkey’s Private Military Company”, *War on the Rocks*, October 8, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/making-sense-of-sadat-turkeys-private-military-company/>

at first and intervening militarily in 2015 - has strengthened its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the naval base of Tartus as the main symbol of this renewed influence. The country also got involved in the Libyan civil war, siding with Khalifa Haftar, a general who took up arms against the UN recognized government of Tripoli, backed among others by Türkiye. The issues of newly found natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, of the delimitation of EEZ in the region, the recurring tensions between French and Algerian authorities, and the struggle to contain migration in order to please conservative electorates, combined together with the challenges posed by the emergence of strong regional actors all influencing the French perception of an incoming “storm”<sup>23</sup>. A storm that will also likely be environmental, as the Mediterranean is heating up 20% faster than the world’s average.<sup>24</sup>

As it appears that the US priorities in the region have narrowed to the containment of Iran and the defence of Israel<sup>25</sup>, France has sought to give its Mediterranean policy a new European impulse. Confronted with the lack of consensus among EU members and diverging priorities, France has bolstered bilateral relations with other Mediterranean members of the Union, strengthening ties around areas of shared interests. The common concern of Paris and Athens regarding Ankara’s *Mavi Vatan* doctrine, what is understood as a strong revisionist undertone of Turkish authorities and repeated encroachments on Greece and Cyprus’ sovereignty, led to an agreement ceiling the strategic partnership between the two countries in 2021<sup>26</sup>. This agreement follows a spike in tensions observed during the summer of 2020 with Türkiye, best embodied by the *Courbet* incident<sup>27</sup>. In 2020, the French frigate *Courbet* was off Libya’s coast as part of a NATO operation called Sea Guardian, when it received the order to inspect a Turkish cargo ship suspected of smuggling weapons to Libya in violation of the UNSC resolution 2292<sup>28</sup>. A Turkish frigate then intervened and, according to French authorities, proceeded to direct intimidating manoeuvres at the *Courbet*, a version of the incidents which has been rejected by Ankara. But even in the midst of these tensions, it appeared that the French military’s perception of its Turkish

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<sup>23</sup> Pascal Ausseur. “Les enjeux de sécurité en Méditerranée : l’orage approche”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 9, No. 844, 2021, pp.115-118.

<sup>24</sup> Deutsche Welle. „ Med heating 20% faster than world’s oceans: WWF”. June 23, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/wwf-says-mediterranean-heating-20-faster-than-worlds-oceans/a-58008071>

<sup>25</sup> Jean-François Daguzan. “Rapports de force en Méditerranée : le retour de la question maritime”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 1, No. 120, 2022, pp.13-28.

<sup>26</sup> Dorothee Schmid & Elisa Domingues Dos Santos,. “Le partenariat franco-hellénique : Au-delà de la Méditerranée orientale”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, 2022, Ifri.

<sup>27</sup> Aris Marghelis. “The French Military’s Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey’s Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean”, *Études de l’Ifri*, 2021, Ifri.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

counterpart remained - in spite of an appreciation of growing aggressiveness - that of a professional and a rather reliable partner<sup>29</sup>.

Despite the tensions, French approach to the Eastern Mediterranean remains centred on three pillars, namely the “respect of international law and treaties; [the] respect of freedom of navigation; [and] solidarity with EU member states”<sup>30</sup>. Paris is indeed looking to avoid escalation while reaffirming support to its Allies. As Türkiye is a fellow NATO ally, French authorities are well aware that relations need to be improved in order to be able to focus on other pressing matters, such as the possible destabilizing effect of Russia’s presence in the region. French authorities have thus been eager to involve their NATO allies in the different that opposed it to Türkiye, hoping progress could be made through broader implication of third-party members of the alliance<sup>31</sup>. Yet French authorities have so far been met with limited support from countries like Germany, or even the US, whose overall concern is the unity of the Alliance. In Paris, the Eastern Mediterranean is increasingly perceived as the testing ground of aggressive neo-Ottoman policies<sup>32</sup>. The situation in Lebanon constitutes an additional source of concern: as the country dives deeper in a multifaceted crisis, French authorities adopted the role of mediator to try and pause elite and faction infighting, with limited results. As the crisis deepens, and as the Lebanese states weakens, the country risks going down the path of heterarchical governance described by Raymond Hinnebusch in Syria<sup>33</sup>, and in the absence of a breakthrough that would unlock the political situation, the Lebanese crisis will likely add up to the region's instability.

In this context, France’s strategic partnership with Greece must be understood as part of a broader network of alliance and partnerships in the region, both formal and informal<sup>34</sup>. Paris’ relationships with Cairo and Abu Dhabi are at the heart of this network, and the French-Greek partnership reaches beyond the mere bilateral rapprochement, with Athens increasingly opening to Arab countries<sup>35</sup>. The 2021 Quirinal Treaty signed with Italy - the equivalent of the French-German Treaty - and the fact that president Macron was the first leader to visit the newly elected Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, are also to be read in connection with Paris’ interest in maintaining a united front in the Mediterranean. President Macron’s August 2022 trip

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<sup>29</sup> Aris Marghelis. “The French Military’s Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey’s Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean”, *Études de l’Ifri*, 2021, Ifri.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Dorothee Schmid & Elisa Domingues Dos Santos. “Le partenariat franco-hellénique : Au-delà de la Méditerranée orientale”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, 2022, Ifri.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. “From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29:3, 2018, pp.391-413.

<sup>34</sup> Dorothee Schmid & Elisa Domingues Dos Santos. “Le partenariat franco-hellénique : Au-delà de la Méditerranée orientale”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, 2022, Ifri

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

to Alger also sought to soothe relations with an essential partner in the Western Mediterranean. If memorial reconciliation was on the menu, the fear of the formation of a Moscow-Alger-Bamako axis was most likely on many minds. As the war in Ukraine rages, Algeria and Russia have recently renewed their strategic partnership. For European leaders, faced with an energy crisis, the diversification of natural gas suppliers is essential. Three pipelines already connect Algeria to the EU markets - one through Morocco and Spain, one directly to Spain and a last one to Italy. The country could also eventually become a hub for the export of Nigerian oil directed at Europe via Niger, relying on existing Mediterranean infrastructures<sup>36</sup>. Macron's visit to Alger happened in a rather tensed climate, after the French newspaper *Le Monde* reported the president saying that the politico-military establishment of Algeria was living off a memorial rent<sup>37</sup>. While the visit led to the signature of a common declaration of cooperation by presidents Macron and Tebboune, many obstacles remain in the way of improving bilateral relations<sup>38</sup>. Yet, considering the importance of economic, cultural and human ties between the two countries, and the role of Algeria at the crossroad of two regions of prime importance to French interest - the Mediterranean and the Sahel, this declaration and the widening of cooperation are encouraging signals sent by both parties. The relationship between France and Morocco is also marked by difficulties: as Rabat is getting closer to Washington and Tel-Aviv, Paris cannot afford the luxury to see bilateral relations deteriorate<sup>39</sup>. With Morocco, France, like other European partners, faces the issue of Western Sahara, a territory claimed by Morocco against the Polisario Front, a national liberation movement backed by Algeria. Paris would most probably benefit from deeper cooperations with both Morocco and Algeria, but essential divergences and sometimes conflicting interests will probably prevent any true breakthrough in bilateral relations in the near future.

### III. France's Black Sea Policy: A Difficult Balancing Act?

For years, Western and French officials have tended to dismiss the warnings of their Eastern European counterparts regarding the threat posed by Russia in the Black Sea region. The idea that Russia had been humiliated by the disintegration of the Soviet Union is until this day a recurring theme in public debates - and even permeates some official communications - despite the work made by French scholars to debunk this

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<sup>36</sup> Brahim Oumansour, (2022. "Visite d'Emmanuel Macron en Algérie : entre enjeux mémoriel, énergétique et stratégique", Tribune, *IRIS*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.iris-france.org/169401-visite-demmanuel-macron-en-algerie-entre-enjeux-memoriel-energetique-et-strategique/>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

myth. A Russian filter<sup>40</sup> has long influenced the French vision of the region, in spite of the country's attempt to act as a balancing power. The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed this, as the imperial driver of Russia's foreign policy became too obvious to be ignored. Yet, even before February 24<sup>th</sup>, growing concerns arose from the militarization of occupied Crimea, which effectively turned the peninsula into a power projection platform for the Russian Armed Forces<sup>41</sup>.

The Black Sea region is a strategic space for the world economy, and one where Paris has long sought to be an active player while being limited by elements of political geography. A 2020 document of the Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy emphasized the idea of France as having historically played a balancing act in the region, recalling the Crimean War, the rebuilding and training of the Romanian Armed Forces during and after World War One, and the fact that Paris became the seat of the exiled Georgian government in 1921<sup>42</sup>. The region was until the start of the Russia's war in Ukraine - and continues to be - a hub for the export agricultural exports, with many countries, as Egypt for instance, heavily dependent on Ukrainian wheat<sup>43</sup>. The Black Sea region is also an important hub for the export of oil and gas, from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries. Large reserves of natural gas have also been discovered in the exclusive economic zones of Ukraine and Romania, close to Snake Island<sup>44</sup> which Russian forces occupied at the beginning of the full scale invasion, before being forced to retreat under the pressure of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in June 2022.

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<sup>40</sup> Anna Colin Lebedev, (2022). "Le filtre russe", *Le Grand Continent*, August 29, 2022, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2022/08/29/le-filtre-russe/>

<sup>41</sup> Gustav Gressel. "Waves of Ambition : Russia's Military Built Up in Crimea and the Black Sea Region", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 21, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/waves-of-ambition-russias-military-build-up-in-crimea-and-the-black-sea/>

<sup>42</sup> Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy. "France and the Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region", *Ministère des Armées*, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Horia Ciurtin. "Russian Roulette in the Pontic Granary : Deploying the 'Silent Weapon'", *New Strategy Center*, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Alain Oudot de Dainville. "La Mer Noire : espace stratégique", *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 5, No. 850, 2022, pp.33-36.

Türkiye also has significant reserves of natural gas in its Black Sea EEZ, which it aims to start exploiting in the near future, possibly as soon as 2023.<sup>45</sup>



*Fig. 3. Renault tanks with French soldiers mixed with civilians and White Army soldiers during the military intervention in the Black Sea in 1919. Source:*

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Char\\_Renault\\_et\\_soldats\\_fran%C3%A7ais\\_a\\_Odessa\\_1918\\_1919.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Char_Renault_et_soldats_fran%C3%A7ais_a_Odessa_1918_1919.jpg)

The geopolitical order inherited from the dissolution of the Soviet Union is marked by various protracted conflicts, from the Nagorno-Karabakh to Transnistria, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and before February 24<sup>th</sup>, Donbass. The common denominator in all these frozen conflicts is the presence of Russian troops in the so-called separatist territories - with the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh, until the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force following Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war. The Russian military presence in these regions facilitates power projection and is an essential driver of these low intensity conflicts, that the Kremlin can decide to escalate to serve its interests. The Russian Federation has been very active in trying to cement a form of control - be it an informal one - over ex-Soviet republics, using all means available to achieve this end. From energy blackmail, in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, to intense propaganda, up until direct military intervention - as in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine, starting in 2014. The country has also systematically opposed colour revolutions and any government that tried to reach out of Moscow's orbit. In this

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<sup>45</sup> Daily Sabah. "Türkiye says ready to start using its Black Sea gas by next March". 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkiye-says-ready-to-start-using-its-black-sea-gas-by-next-march>

context, Paris often sought to act as mediator, as in the Russo-Georgian War or in the Donbass region alongside Germany, leading to the failed Minsk Agreements.

French vessels frequently visited the ports of Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Romania, where French troops are also stationed as part of NATO's battle groups. These visits not only served to increase cooperation with key partners, but also stood in line with France's stance in favour of freedom of navigation. With five active defence missions in the region, and strategic dialogue engaged with Ukraine (since 2006) and Georgia (since 2019), France maintains an active defence diplomacy in the region. The country is also committed to the strengthening of its fellow NATO allies in the region, with the deepening of the strategic dialogue with fellow EU and NATO members Romania and Bulgaria. In Romania, French troops are also stationed as part of a NATO battle group, and France deployed Leclerc tanks at Cincu base and a MAMBA anti-missile system on the Romanian shore of the Black Sea<sup>46</sup>. France's involvement in the Black Sea region following Ukraine's invasion has opened a new chapter in bilateral cooperation with Romania, that is met with great interest and sympathy by the Romanian political and military leadership, which tended to rely solely on the US as the prime source of support for security issues. As the region's only Latin country, Romania shares with France not only deep historical ties but also cultural and linguistic ones. The development of the strategic partnership between Paris and Bucharest would be beneficial to the region's stability beyond Ukraine, as Romania is also an important player in the Balkans, a region faced with numerous security challenges.

From Paris' standpoint, the security of the Black Sea is deeply connected to that of the Eastern part of the Mediterranean. The idea of the region as a springboard for Russia's expansion in the Mediterranean was strengthened after Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria<sup>47</sup>. The September 2022 French-Romanian agreement to improve Romanian port and river infrastructures to facilitate increased exports of Ukrainian wheat - and, coincidentally, Romanian wheat, as the country is the second-largest EU exporter of wheat after France - made particular sense given that many of the countries most affected by the disruptions in the export of Ukrainian wheat are located in the region.

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<sup>46</sup> Laurent Lagneau. "OTAN : l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace va déployer un système de défense aérienne MAMBA en Roumanie", *Zone Militaire*, May 19, 2022, <http://www.opex360.com/2022/05/19/otan-larmee-de-lair-et-de-lespace-va-deployer-un-systeme-de-defense-aerienne-mamba-en-roumanie/>

<sup>47</sup> Philippe Migault. "La Mer Noire, tremplin stratégique russe en Méditerranée", *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 1, No. 120, 2022, pp.69-80.



Fig. 4. French President Emmanuel Macron and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis visit the Mihail Kogălniceanu Airbase in Romania, June 15th, 2022. Source: <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/album-foto/vizita-la-baza-57-aeriana-mihail-kogalniceanu-impreama-cu-presedintele-republicii-franceze-emmanuel-macron>

Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and the closure of the straits to warships, the situation in the region seems to be rapidly evolving. With Russia's influence in the South Caucasus waning, the EU has attempted to serve as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan, against the backdrop of Europe's energy crisis and as hostilities resumed, with Azerbaijan firing bombs on internationally recognized Armenian territory. French supply of weapons to Ukraine is also a sign of the changing times, and the idea that Russia must be militarily defeated to enable a peace process is slowly making its way into public discourse. If Macron's communications have sometimes sparked controversy due to poor wording - which has legitimately raised questions about Paris' understanding of the conflict and the underlying responsibilities - French actions are far less ambiguous. While the CAESAR self-propelled howitzer has made its proofs on the ground, and as Paris recently supplied Ukraine with two CROTALE NG surface-to-air missile battery, France's supply of weapon to Ukraine is becoming increasingly visible. Standing with Ukraine, more than a moral imperative, is also a strategic one. If Russia were to achieve its goals, the most extreme being the destruction of Ukrainian statehood, the Black Sea would effectively be turned into a Turko-Russian dominated space, thanks to the special relationship between the two countries which have been known to cooperate on many theatres in spite of diverging interests.

The Black Sea differs greatly from the Mediterranean to which France is a riparian state, and the solidarity displays in the form of the aeronaval group deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean are hardly applicable to the region. Yet, the challenges



met in the Mediterranean are closely connected to those affecting the Black Sea region. Türkiye's role as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine was instrumental in the UN brokered grain deal, and this ability of Turkish authorities to interact with both parties is a valuable one. In other circumstances, this cooperation-competition dichotomy that marks Türkiye's relationship with Russia, although important to the region's stability, has had the reversed effect. In the southern Caucasus, where Covid and the Russian refugee crisis have exacerbated internal tensions in many countries, Turkish support to Azerbaijan, as the country increasingly threatens Armenia's territorial integrity, risks aggravating regional tensions<sup>48</sup>. The Black Sea, like the Mediterranean, cannot be envisioned without the wider regions they encompass, and in both cases, due to the complexity of the issues at stake, France will have and often has opted for a European approach.

#### IV. Untying the Euro-Atlantic Gordian Knot

On November 9, 2022 President Macron outlined a new *revue nationale stratégique* (National Strategic Review) in the city of Toulon, located on France's Mediterranean shore. Among the top priorities of this review is the emphasis of France's role as an "exemplar" member of NATO all the while urging for the further development of European Strategic Autonomy<sup>49</sup>. Far from contradictory, these two goals are essential to Paris' strategic vision. If the limits of a complete reliance on the American ally became especially visible under the Trump Administration, the Russo-Ukrainian war and other geopolitical events serve as reminders of the importance and worth of the transatlantic ties. While Europe depends on the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, greater autonomy and coordination in the field of defence would not just benefit the countries of the EU but increase the overall resilience of the alliance. France has long been a driver of this defensive dimension of the European project, and while it was sometimes met with mild reactions from partners who feared the reaction of the US<sup>50</sup>, the current situation not only proved that the EU was able to address the matters of its own security, but that it would not affect the overall effectiveness of the NATO security architecture.

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, 44 European heads of states gathered in Prague for the launch of the European Political Community - the result of a project whose premises were laid out by president Macron on the day of Europe that same year. The reference to François Mitterand's 1989 European Federation was explicit, but contrary to the

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<sup>48</sup> Iranian authorities are expressing growing concern over the situation, and frequent tension have marred the country's relation with Azerbaijan, accused by Teheran of having sided with the US and Israel.

<sup>49</sup> *Revue Nationale Stratégique*, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Furthering their disengagement in the region.

federation which ambitioned to include the USSR, Macron's community did not involve the leaders of Russia and Belarus<sup>51</sup>. Also, contrary to the Federation, the European Community contained mechanism allowing direct interaction with EU institutions<sup>52</sup>. The Prague summit was also the occasion to bring together Armenia's Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's Aliyev for talks. Coupled with US diplomatic efforts<sup>53</sup>, this initiative led the two leaders to agree to the elaboration of a peace treaty. While the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh won't be solved in a day, this constitutes an example of how European diplomacy can act in tandem with the US on areas of shared interest. If the European Political Community did not address the issue of Ukraine's fast track accession to the EU, it allowed to go beyond the format of the European Eastern Neighbourhood in terms of integration and cooperation. This initiative is reminiscent of an interview given by president Macron in 2020, in which he stated that the two main axis of France's foreign policy should focus on finding a way back to effective international cooperation - of the kind that enables defusing conflicts and preventing wars - and to build a stronger Europe, able to defend its values and whose voice would be heard<sup>54</sup>.

France has been a driver of the European Strategic Autonomy, both in words and actions. The crisis of the Covid-19 and now Russia's war against Ukraine have only further stressed the necessity for Europe to come together on the geopolitical ground. When it comes to defence, the country has long sought to engage its European allies, as was the case during the operation *Barkhane*, with the European Task Force *Takuba*.<sup>55</sup> In its attempts, Paris was sometimes confronted with difficulties and had to face the

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<sup>51</sup> Thierry Chopin, Lukáš Macek & Sébastien Maillard. "The European Political community : A New Anchoring the European Union", *Policy Brief*, Institut Jacques Delors, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Courrier international. "Accord. Sous influence Américaine l'Arménie tournera-t-elle le dos à la Russie", October 27, 2022, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/accord-sous-influence-americaine-l-armenie-tournera-t-elle-le-dos-a-la-russie#:~:text=%E2%80%99CLes%20%C3%89tats%20DUNis%20opoussent%20le%20quotidien%20proche%20du%20Kremlin.>

<sup>54</sup> Le Grand Continent. "La doctrine Macron: conversation avec le Président français", November 16, 2020, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/11/16/macron/>

<sup>55</sup> The French-led *Operation Barkhane* was spread across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. It was France's largest overseas operation, and engaged everything from combat patrols alongside Malian forces and partner militias to intelligence gathering and training, as well as local development activities to fill the void left by an absent government. The *Takuba Task Force* was a European military task force established under French command to advise, assist, and accompany Malian Armed Forces, in coordination with G5-Sahel partners and other international actors on the ground. The task force's mission in Mali ended on June 30, 2022, with the withdrawal of French forces involved in *Operation Barkhane*, which formally ended on November 9th, 2022. See more: European Council on Foreign Affairs. „Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel. Operation Barkhane.” [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/operation\\_barkhane](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane); France24. "EU's Takuba force quits junta-controlled Mali". July 1, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220701-eu-s-takuba-force-quits-junta-controlled-mali>; Hugh Shofield. "France calls time on anti-jihadist Operation Barkhane in Sahel". BBC. November 9, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63555611>

reluctance of some of its partners to stray away from the NATO-based security arrangements. Yet, since February 24<sup>th</sup>, it became clearer that while European Strategic Autonomy was necessary, it could not come at the expense of existing security agreements. The war in Ukraine also revealed the depth of Russian penetration and meddling in EU countries. Quoting Olivier Schmitt, Josep Borrell declared that “we Europeans are facing a situation in which we suffer the consequences of a process that has been lasting for years in which we have decoupled the sources of our prosperity from the sources of our security”<sup>56</sup>.

More than any French initiative, the war in Ukraine probably was the most determining promoter of Europe’s Strategic Autonomy. While Germany decided to invest heavily to build the best equipped armed forces of the continent, Poland has also positioned itself to build the continent’s “most powerful military”<sup>57</sup>. The country seemingly set to become one of the old continent’s most significant military player in the short to medium run, and as Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated: “the Polish armed forces must be so powerful that it does not have to fight due to its strength alone”, an ambitious goal backed by a sharp increase of the country’s defence budget<sup>58</sup>. As defence expenditures are increasing throughout Europe, one might wonder whether this dynamic will lead to more strategic autonomy or will be limited to the Euro-Atlantic framework. The EU training operation for the Ukrainian military - led by the Polish General Piotr Trytek – might signal a strategic awakening of the Union. Yet, in many capitals NATO remains the privileged format when dealing with security matters. The enlargement of the Alliance to Sweden and Finland being but one of the many indicators of NATO’s prolonged relevance and attractiveness. The strengthening of NATO is by no means meant to bury aspirations for greater strategic autonomy in the EU. Conscious of the risk posed by the American electoral calendar, in the context of a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment, Paris should open to its European partners’ security concerns and build bridges to allow for the strengthening of the EU’s geopolitical vocation. All parties must engage in a comprehensive dialogue and set the ground for future, deeper cooperation. If observers in France are often frustrated by the reluctance of some of our European allies to get more involved in a Europe of defence, as a complement to the EU, they would be ill advised not to open to these countries and their security concerns. NATO holds different meanings for French and Estonian elites: the weight of history, differences in strategic cultures and environment can be as much

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<sup>56</sup> EEAS. “EU Ambassadors Annual Conference 2022: Opening speech by High Representative Josep Borrell”. October 10, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en)

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Tilles. “Poland’s land forces will be most powerful in Europe, says defence minister”, *Notes from Poland*, July 29, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/07/29/polands-land-forces-will-be-most-powerful-in-europe-says-defence-minister/>

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig & Wojciech Kosc. “Meet Europe’s coming military superpower: Poland”, *Politico*, November 21, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-military-superpower-poland-army/>

of an opportunity as they can be a weakness. A number of European countries are set to heavily invest in their defence, and with the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO the European gravitational centre of the alliance seems set to shift eastward. The efforts of the countries that have decided to invest more in their security are welcomed in Paris, but France should do more. The coming phase of European rearming will also be a test for the future of the European project. It offers a window of opportunity to push forward the agenda of strategic autonomy, with the main objective being to work on strengthening the Euro-Atlantic security architecture while refusing to depend solely on it.

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