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The Future of NATO

France's Pivot to Europe



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Introduction

In France, as in other countries across the continent, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is viewed as a key moment in European history. President Emmanuel Macron called it the "start of a new era" in his speech to the nation in early March 2022, "a turning point for our continent and our generation" (Macron 2022). The war against Ukraine thus plays a significant role in shaping the French debate on security and defense – a debate which is both broad and well-informed. In this debate, NATO is arguably less central than in other countries. By and large, France considers itself less dependent on the United States and its identity is not as tied to being a member of the Alliance. That said, NATO's importance in dealing with the threat posed by Russia is widely recognized, as is the idea that the Alliance is the main forum for discussing European security – at least as long as the United States is willing to maintain its engagement.

The centrality of Russia and Ukraine notwithstanding, it is important to keep in mind that there is another major defense-related event that falls into the time period covered in this chapter. November 2022 marks the official end of the Barkhane military operation and more broadly, the failure of France's anti-terrorism strategy in the Sahel region. These developments inevitably led to new discussions in Paris, but also opened up opportunities to shift France's military focus in order to adapt to the new geopolitical context, primarily characterized by a need for collective defense, and to redirect resources accordingly.

The French debate on NATO and France's role in the Alliance largely involves two communities of experts and researchers. Firstly, among think tanks in a narrower sense (Ifri, IRIS, IRSEM, FRS, and others), discussions tend to be rather pragmatic and uncontroversial. The Alliance is seen as a useful military instrument and the US as a valued partner, although many have been pointing to the likelihood of (considerably) reduced American engagement in European security for quite some time. Strategic autonomy, both at the national and European level, is an objective both for the French government France and for think tankers. In their discourses, the transatlantic link is yet rarely approached from an ideological vantage point, be it positive or negative. We are neither observing the kind of "Atlanticism" frequently seen in countries such as Germany

or Poland, nor are calls for greater European autonomy emanating from anti-Americanism. Instead, Europe's ability to act without the US if necessary, based inter alia on a viable European defense industrial base, is simply seen as being in the European interest and not directed against the United States. This first community of think-tankers is thus largely in agreement with French official positions when it comes to the fundamentals (yes to nuclear deterrence, yes to being a NATO member, yes to pursuing strategic autonomy on both the national and European levels), meaning that the debate in these circles is usually more about fine-tuning policies than trying to convince the government to change course.

Things are somewhat different in the second of our two communities interested in debating French and European security. Among those in the wider circles of experts, which include university academics, former diplomats, and retired generals, for instance, the debate is quite distinct from that of the first community mentioned above. This second strand of the debate is often much more "old school French", much closer to how the other allies saw France act within NATO in the past. Many of these discourses were indeed mainstream until France's "return" to NATO in 2009. They are characterized by a much greater emphasis on national sovereignty, more principled skepticism toward the US, and sometimes greater willingness to find explanations for President Putin's decision to attack Ukraine.¹

Several factors might explain the differences between these two communities. The first is purely generational. Many of the protagonists in the second circle of experts are retired. Second, the think tanks in a narrower sense are much more integrated into the broader European and transatlantic debate, and thus likely to be more aware of and influenced by the thinking elsewhere. Third, funding structures are an oft-overlooked aspect when analyzing think tanks and their activities – yet, they very much determine what that think tank can do in terms of research, especially in an era when project funding rather than core funding is the norm. In France, the bulk of the funding for think tank research on security and defense comes from the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the defense industry. While research institutes are of course independent, it still seems unlikely that anybody holding dramatically different views

¹ For one illustration, see, e.g., a panel debate/book presentation on France in NATO since 1989, held on 10 June 2024 and available at <https://ihedn.fr/evenement/ihedn/debats-strategiques/olivier-forcade-benoit-daboville-serge-sur-la-france-et-lotan-depuis-1989/>.

from more “mainstream” positions would be able to build a flourishing think tank career.

Of course, establishing how influential think tanks are is a difficult task. Something that undoubtedly does characterize French think tanks – especially according to the narrower definition – is their proximity to the French government and, to some extent, the defense industry. In the current context, the influence of the second circle mentioned above is rather limited. Consequently, the remainder of this chapter focuses on think tanks in the narrower sense. That said, following the debate in these wider circles is still a worthwhile undertaking, not least in the event of the *Rassemblement national* accessing power and a possible subsequent return of more sovereignist ideas.

Threats and Responses:

Russia is the main, but not the only threat

Russia as the main threat

Although Emmanuel Macron immediately acknowledged the profound change the war would bring about, it still took a few years for France's official Russia and Ukraine policies to become what they are now. After years of opposition, Paris now supports Ukraine's membership in both the European Union and NATO, and the "boots-on-the-ground" in Ukraine proposal was initially made by the French president who thereby went much further than many of the historically more staunch supporters of Ukraine. President Macron's speech in Bratislava in May 2023 is widely perceived as a key indication of France's new approach (Macron 2023). The evolution of France's policies in this area can also be seen in statements Macron made over time: from sparking irritation when he argued, in June 2022, that Russia must not be "humiliated" to declaring it "vital" for European security for Russia to be defeated in Ukraine (BBC 2024).

These evolving policies and positions go hand in hand with a more comprehensive threat perception when it comes to Russia. Indeed, rather than seeing this evolution as a substantial change, it is best explained as the incorporation of more factors into the (official) French analysis after 2022. France has traditionally tended to view Russia primarily through a rather abstract geopolitical lens, based on the assumption that the country's actions are primarily driven – like any country's – by security concerns. This logic, while not entirely wrong, has in recent years come to be considered insufficient in the French debate. In this sense, the French analysis is more multifaceted today than it used to be. Russia scholars such as Céline Marangé (2023) offer a perspective that more strongly emphasizes the broader Russian worldview, shaped by grievances vis-à-vis the West, NATO, and the United States, and the Russian regime's desire to overcome the collapse of the Soviet Union and the humiliation it is seen as representing. This broader analysis of Russia, and the realization that abstract geopolitical notions such as strategic stability are not enough to understand the Russian regime's reasoning, also bring French positions closer to the views held elsewhere in Europe, in particular on what has been dubbed the Eastern flank.

In mainstream think tank circles, the debate on the nature of the war is long settled: it is an act of aggression by Russia. That said, the direct military threat posed to French territory is not generally viewed as significant. Nuclear deterrence is believed to be effective, protecting France in the

event that the Russian regime were to have the ambition to attack. However, the risk of hybrid threats to both France and its allies is widely considered high. What is more, the war is generally not seen as being "just about Ukraine", but rather about the European security order more broadly. Like in any war, the risk of escalation can never be excluded.

The French debate on Russia as a threat involves think-tankers from various areas, including Russia experts but also scholars with expertise in security or nuclear affairs and no background in studying Russia (or knowledge of Russian). Disagreements occasionally arise between these groups, for instance on matters such as whether the Russian regime is likely to use nuclear weapons. Bruno Tertrais, for example, who is not a Russia expert but a specialist in nuclear affairs, considers Russia a "responsible" nuclear actor (Tertrais 2024). Others, in particular Russia experts, tend to be more cautious when it comes to nuclear risks, arguing that they can never be excluded (background interviews, January 2025).

Countering the threat posed by Russia is thus the key security challenge in Europe. This view is widely shared in French think tank circles. Yet, finding ways of addressing this challenge remains a work in progress across the continent as well as within NATO, where the bulk of the related military planning takes place. What is clear, however, also to French think-tankers, is that France has an important role to play in designing the Alliance's deterrence posture and making sure allies live up to their commitments.

Paris has already taken considerable steps in that direction. As Élie Tenenbaum and Amélie Zima from the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) summarize, "[s]ince 2022, the Russian offensive in Ukraine has led France to fundamentally rethink its approach to collective security on the eastern flank" (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024). These measures, however, can only be the beginning and for France to prepare itself to take on more responsibility, greater effort is required at the national level, in particular when it comes to investing in the armed forces (ibid.). Given the way NATO operates, implementing the military plans depends first and foremost on whether member states are willing and able to provide the Alliance with the means they agreed on. In the past, this has rarely been the case. This discussion is thus linked to the debate on national military planning, which in France builds on what are known as Military Programming Laws (*Lois de programmation militaire*, LPM). In the summer of 2023, France adopted its Military Programming Law for

the years 2024 to 2030. The law envisages increasing military spending by 40 percent (or 100 billion euros), bringing the defense budget up to 2 percent of GDP by 2025. The end of France's operations in the Sahel is also reflected. While the focus in earlier programming laws used to be on expeditionary operations and counterterrorism, the law now stresses the importance of protecting national sovereignty. Consequently, nuclear deterrence, missile defense, drones, and special forces play a major role, as do investments in new technologies, innovation, and cyber and space-related capabilities. Strengthening the defense industry and enabling it to produce more and faster is another key priority.

Director of Ifri's Security Studies Center Élie Tenenbaum is still rather skeptical about the plans set out in the law. As he argues: "In view of the rising costs of equipment, reasonable budget growth will at best only enable us to maintain our format. So there won't be a single additional armored vehicle, aircraft, or frigate for the armed forces" (Tenenbaum 2023, author's translation). How French politicians can be convinced to allocate a higher share of GDP to defense spending in times of a quasi-perpetual government crisis and massive budget constraints of course remains an open question.

China as a geopolitical and geoeconomic competitor

China is perceived as a revisionist power with the ambition to change the international order, both in cooperation with Russia and by itself. In addition, China is widely viewed as a geoeconomic and geopolitical threat, as well as an actor that poses hybrid threats. That said, the immediate military threat is considered low at this point. At the same time, France has an interest in continuing cooperation with China in areas (such as trade and technology) that are beneficial to both sides and that will not lead to an increase in associated risks.

Based on its territories in the Pacific, France considers itself an Indo-Pacific power. From a French perspective, the country's Indo-Pacific policies are thus not primarily about the US or Sino-American rivalry (as may be the case in other NATO member states), but about its own security concerns.

In general, France does not want to be dragged into the rivalry between the United States and China. It wants to pursue its own strategy and is also keen for the European Union to implement its own policies vis-à-vis China and the Indo-Pacific more broadly. Given the nature of the aforementioned threats, the EU is widely seen as being a much better forum for dealing with China than NATO would be.

The key question, as defined by two experts from the Institut Montaigne think tank, is how Europe can best balance the degree of openness that is beneficial to both sides with not allowing China to take advantage of and undermine European security and economic interests (Duchâtel and Gode-

ment 2023). Approaches to dealing with China in the economic field are primarily to be developed at EU level, in particular within the context of the Union's "de-risking" agenda. Yet, as Ifri's John Seaman notes, France is particularly interested in ensuring that, while pursuing such policies, it still avoids directly antagonizing China (Seaman 2024, 56).

The consensus in France is that NATO should not play any direct role in countering China. This would be detrimental to European and French security. A "globalized" NATO is clearly not on Paris' "wish list", neither according to the official position nor that of think tank experts. To make this point, France blocked the opening of a NATO Liaison Office in Tokyo in 2023, arguing that "the Indo-Pacific is not the North Atlantic" (RFI 2023).

Yet, there is also a consensus that the rise of China and the intensification of the US-China rivalry will have considerable indirect implications for NATO and European security. It has indeed long been a core idea in the French discourse that the US pivot to Asia will result in less American engagement in European security. While Paris does not necessarily see this as a major problem – France has its own nuclear deterrent to protect it from such consequences – it is also clear that the ramifications for other European countries are far greater and that France has a role to play in that context.

The southern dimension: Still on the agenda

The southern dimension remains high on French security agendas. The jihadist threat is still considerable, and 2025 marks the ten-year anniversary of some of the worst attacks committed on French territory (Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and the attacks of November 13 later that year). The French armed forces may have had to withdraw from the Sahel region, but it is widely believed that the threat persists and may even increase in the not-so-distant future.

What is more, French observers do not perceive "the South" as being distinct from Russia. Indeed, Moscow's destructive role in the Sahel and elsewhere has had direct (security) implications for France. Many think-tankers in Paris also believe that Europe would struggle to handle another "migration crisis" – especially one intentionally triggered by Russia using one of the tools in its hybrid toolbox.

When it comes to its role in the South, France is currently rethinking its approach. However, it seems unlikely that this will result in calls for greater NATO engagement. A more "European" approach is advocated, including by the French president, and French diplomacy is "working on rounding up more international support" (Institut Montaigne 2023).

2

Securing Ukraine and bringing it into the EU and NATO

Much of the current debate is focused on the immediate question of how a ceasefire can be achieved in Ukraine to put an end to the loss of life. Current discussions in France feature two main, interlinked aspects of this question: How can security guarantees be provided for Ukraine and what specifically should these contain? How can a peace plan, or at least ceasefire, best be secured? These discussions also include the question of whether there should be European “boots on the ground”, as proposed by French president Macron. Consequently, the thinking is focused more on the “day after”, and in particular on the question of security guarantees. Against the backdrop of statements made by members of the Trump administration, whether these guarantees can be provided by NATO remains to be seen. Other possible scenarios may involve a coalition of countries having to shoulder the responsibility, with or without US backing. In either case, France – as illustrated, for instance, by the numerous summits and meetings convened by President Macron in Paris in the spring of 2025 – intends to play an important role given its military strength, but also its status as a military power with an independent nuclear deterrent.

Élie Tenenbaum thus notes in an op-ed in *Le Monde* that “commitment of resources on land, at sea, and in the air to guarantee compliance with any new agreement will be necessary to ensure that it does not suffer the same fate as the Minsk agreements or the Budapest Memorandum. Only a few countries in Europe have the capacity to contribute to this: France is one of them” (Tenenbaum 2024, author’s translation). And as Louise Souverbie of the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS) argues, “Ukrainian concessions cannot be envisaged without firm, credible security guarantees from Western allies to prevent renewed aggression once Russia has rebuilt its military capabilities. Beyond the purely security-related aspects, these guarantees are also essential to ensure the relative stability of the country, the return of Ukrainians who are currently refugees abroad, and the economic recovery needed to rebuild the country. It is already clear that Europeans will have a major responsibility in any arrangements put in place to ensure Ukraine’s – and their own – security” (Souverbie 2024).

As regards the longer-term perspectives for Ukraine, France’s official position is that it supports Ukraine’s accession to NATO – an evolution that is relatively recent (June 2023) and came as a surprise to observers. As David Cadier and Martin Quencez note, “Macron’s new stance caught NATO partners, as well as French analysts and maybe even some

French diplomats and military officials, off guard” (Cadier and Quencez 2023). Among the reasons for the change in position cited by the authors is a much wider “recalibration” of French thinking on European security and the Atlantic alliance: “This new attitude toward Ukraine also reflects a more profound recalibration of the traditional French push for European strategic autonomy, which now goes through rapprochement with and support for NATO’s eastern flank, as well as a new geopolitical offer to the countries situated between the EU and Russia” (ibid). The same recalibration has also been noted by other scholars (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024).

3

Systematic challenges and the future of NATO

The nuclear dimension remains important and the “French offer” will increasingly be debated

For obvious reasons, nuclear deterrence is always high on French agendas. Beyond purely national concerns, this includes the “European dimension” of France’s nuclear deterrent. This issue is not new, however, and it did not emerge with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Rather, while the rhetoric on a European dimension goes back decades, President Macron made his offer of dialog with European partners in a speech in February 2020 (Macron 2020). Much of the current iteration of European debates on French nuclear weapons is a consequence of this offer, which was repeated by Macron in January 2024 (Macron 2024).

Related to France’s nuclear deterrent, the combination of the threat posed by Russia and the uncertainties about American security guarantees for Europe under President Trump raise questions about France’s role in European security. Yet, voices openly calling for France to provide some form of nuclear sharing are rare. One exception is Bruno Tertrais, who argues: “Depending on the scenario, the need for a European deterrent will differ because [Europeans] will perceive this need differently. In my view, it is only in an extreme scenario – i.e., the withdrawal of the USA from NATO, accompanied by the withdrawal of its nuclear weapons – that we will have to come up with an alternative system. And why should this not take the form of nuclear sharing?” (Tertrais 2024, author’s translation). Others remain closer to the official discourse, which focuses on exploring the meaning of the “European dimension” and indeed on entering into a European dialog (Chevreuil 2024). As this debate is likely to gain more traction in the context of recent developments in transatlantic relations, the think tank debate is also likely to intensify.

Growing hybrid and asymmetric threats

As is the case elsewhere in Europe, in France, too, hybrid threats are a growing concern for both officials and experts. This pertains to threats against Europe and France, but also hybrid strategies used by malign actors elsewhere, with negative implications for French and European security (Vigilant 2025). Unsurprisingly, there is a strong focus on Russia’s actions in Africa (Audinet 2021; Audinet and Dreyfus 2023; Audinet 2024).

One subtheme that is currently attracting attention across Europe is “preparedness”, in particular since the Niinistö report (“Strengthening Europe’s civil and military preparedness and readiness”) was published by the European Union in 2024. It is worth noting, however, that the topic receives comparably little attention in France. One reason may be that it can be seen as controversial in ways that might not be expected outside of a French context: admitting that society’s preparedness for crisis and war is a necessity would mean admitting that nuclear deterrence can fail.

A window of opportunity for European strategic autonomy?

France has long championed the idea of European strategic autonomy, and the French think tank community widely shares this aim. Against this backdrop, the idea has been the foundation of the Macron presidency from day one. It is not driven by anti-Americanism, but rather by the conviction that there is a “progressive and unavoidable disengagement of the United States”, as Macron outlined in his first Sorbonne speech in 2017 (Macron 2017). The assumption had long been that Europe needs to prepare for less US engagement, in light of both domestic developments in the United States (“America first” and isolationist tendencies) and of the increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific. Given this long-standing objective of European strategic autonomy, France is one of the better prepared European countries in the context of the serious transatlantic crisis. That said, nobody believes that this objective would be easily attainable, even if France’s European allies were to embrace it.

While the European strategic autonomy debate never resulted in any European consensus, many of the underlying ideas are now shared across the continent under the headline of “strengthening the European pillar of NATO”. When it comes to strengthening European defense capabilities, a key aspect for France – both according to its official position and that of its think tank community – is the industrial dimension. Ensuring a viable defense industrial base in Europe is in fact another long-standing objective that is in keeping with the context of the strategic autonomy agenda. Its salience is only underlined by the threat posed by Russia and the uncertainties surrounding the US. It is thus no surprise that early in the war, there were, for example, calls for Europe to use increased defense spending wisely: “Counter-intuitively, however, this sudden increase in defence budgets may not reinforce Europe’s collective ability to respond

to military aggression. This is because Europeans in both the EU and NATO cannot be content with spending more on their militaries – they must also learn to spend much better” (Members of the Scientific Committee of the ARES Group 2022).

Needless to say, whether NATO will survive the second Trump presidency and whether there will even be any pillars left to be strengthened remains to be seen. Jean-Pierre Maulny asserted in February 2025 that the debate on strengthening the European pillar of NATO was, in fact, already obsolete. Against the backdrop of the Trump II administration’s rhetoric on Europe, he argues in a piece entitled “United States – Europe: Our Paths Are Splitting” that “in light of this situation, some advocate for the establishment of a European pillar within NATO. This solution, however, seems outdated given the new context. If one considers that the United States is negotiating peace in Europe without and against the Europeans, and that they no longer wish to defend Europe with conventional military means (will they respect the NATO Defence Planning Process?), it is better for Europeans to fully take on Europe’s security. This would mean taking control of NATO: Europeans must quickly discuss this option and communicate their decision to Secretary General Mark Rutte. It will also be easier to make NATO and the European Union work together with a more Europeanised organisation” (Maulny 2025).

In France, NATO is not usually discussed as a community of values. Instead, it is seen as a military alliance with undeniable military added value. Against this backdrop, but also given that French analysis has long predicted less US engagement in European security, the emotional blow caused by the Trump II administration’s rhetoric on NATO and Europe is arguably less intense in France than in other European countries. The “values” dimension and the idea that NATO would be a “family of nations” has always tended to be of lesser importance in the French context. Likewise, the political community dimension is not at the heart of French thinking about the Alliance either. Moreover, it is widely believed in Paris that the statements President Macron made on NATO’s “brain death” continue to have some truth in them. Back in 2019, these comments were to a large extent a reaction to conflicts with Turkey and the latter’s unconstructive behavior within the alliance. After witnessing, for instance, Sweden’s NATO accession process, which was actively hampered by Turkey and Hungary, French think-tankers argue that it is still worth underlining the more dysfunctional aspects of the Alliance. But given the Trump administration’s approach to alliances and long-standing allies, many now wonder whether NATO has a future at all.

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About the author

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The Future of NATO – Country Report France

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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