



JUNE
2024



Return to the East: the Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank

Élie TENENBAUM

With the collaboration of Amélie ZIMA

The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit foundation according to the decree of November 16, 2022. As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.



The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the authors alone.

ISBN: 979-10-373-0933-4

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2024

Cover: © January 29, 2023, in Rutia (Estonia). French, British and Estonian military personnel of the eFP BattleGroup have participated in the Baltic Hawk mission.
© Thomas Collange/Armée de Terre/Defence. Date of the photography : 29/01/2023.

How to quote this publication:

Élie Tenenbaum with the collaboration of Amélie Zima, “Return to the East: the Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe’s Eastern Flank”,
Focus stratégique, No. 119, Ifri, June 2024.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: Ifri.org

Authors

Élie Tenenbaum is the Director of the Ifri's Security Studies Center. A PhD graduate in History (2015) and a Sciences Po graduate (2010), he was a Visiting Fellow at Columbia University. He has taught international security at Sciences Po and the history of international relations at the University of Lorraine. He works in particular on issues of irregular warfare, the fight against terrorism and hybrid threats, and on French defense policy and military operations. He is the author of numerous articles and books on history and strategy, including his latest book, co-authored with Marc Hecker, *La Guerre de vingt ans : djihadisme et contre-terrorisme au XXI^e siècle* [The Twenty Years' War: Jihadism and Counterterrorism in the Twenty-First Century], published by Robert Laffont in 2021.

Amélie Zima is a research fellow at Ifri's Security Studies Center and is responsible for the European and Transatlantic Security program. She holds a PhD in political science from Paris-Nanterre University. Her thesis dealt with the first post-Cold War enlargement of NATO, and was awarded first place in the thesis prize of the Institut des hautes études de défense nationale (IHEDN). Her research focuses principally on NATO and the Polish political system. Before joining Ifri she was a research associate at the French Center for Social Sciences Research (Cefres) in Prague, the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISP-PAN), the Center for French Culture and Francophone Studies at the University of Warsaw (OKF-UW), and the Institute for Strategic Research at the École militaire (IRSEM) in Paris. She has taught at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, University Paris Nanterre, and Sciences Po.

Executive summary

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has flung Europe's eastern flank into a new phase of strategic confrontation. It has had a major effect on France's position, which was previously somewhat timid, leading it to significantly reinforce its deterrence and defense posture in support of the collective defense of Europe, in the name of strategic solidarity and the protection of its security interests.

This U-turn is not taking place in a historical vacuum, but must be understood in the light of a long history that still influences perceptions of French policy in the region. After having been a key security player in Central and Eastern Europe between the wars, France gradually turned away from this region, first in the context of the Cold War, and then from 1990 onwards, due to differing perceptions of the strategic environment.

Throughout the latter period, France's concerns about antagonizing Russia, and its complex relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), inevitably led to growing mutual distrust with its eastern flank allies. Although the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas prompted the French government to gradually shift its position by participating in NATO's enhanced air policing and forward land presence, it was not until 2022 that France fully assumed the responsibilities its eastern allies expected it to take on.

Since 2022, the Russian offensive in Ukraine has led France to fundamentally rethink its approach to collective security on the eastern flank. There have been three main changes. The first is a hardening in tone, reflected in both increased tensions with Russia, and destabilizing actions by Russia against France. The second is the implementation of an active policy of aid to Ukraine, reflected at the military level in legacy equipment transfers, on-demand production supplies, and training of Ukrainian armed forces. The third change concerns France's approach to the defense of Europe in the broadest sense, through the launch of a new European Political Community, but also its political reinvestment in NATO and the emphasis on its fundamental role in collective defense.

This reinforcement has taken the form of an increased French contribution to the NATO Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) strategy, adopted in 2020. This consists of two levels. The first is the operational implementation of enhanced vigilance activities (eVA): on land, through the forward presence; at sea, through Standing Naval Forces; in the air, through Air Shielding activities; and in the cyber and information domains. The second level is based on developing the

new NATO Force Model and ensuring its consistency with operational and capability planning in order to reinforce the Alliance's military credibility and its ability to deter aggression leading to a new high-intensity conflict on Europe's eastern flank.

France contributes to the DDA strategy in the three main domains of the land, air and sea. Its contribution to the land component is currently the most visible. First, it contributes to two multinational battlegroups, one under British leadership in Estonia, and the other as a framework nation in Romania. The forces deployed in this context take part in training activities to increase operational readiness and strengthen strategic signaling. The main challenges they face are interoperability, service support (in particular military mobility) and the potential expansion to the brigade level, an objective set by the allies at the Madrid summit.

In the air domain, vigilance activities are carried out as part of the Air Shielding mission and fall into two categories. The first consists of air policing missions, notably as part of Enhanced Air Policing (eAP) in the Baltic States and Poland, which is operated for the French Air and Space Force from Lithuania. This also includes training flights for complex air superiority missions. The second component consists of reinforcing the ground posture through the deployment of a medium-range surface-to-air system (MAMBA) in Romania. It also aims to implement the US-initiated Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept and associated Extended Air Base project, with a view to reinforcing survivability to offensive counter-air tactics through dispersion of air forces.

Finally, in the naval domain, France has strongly re-established its presence through its contribution to the Standing NATO Maritime and Mine Counter-Measures groups. The associated missions vary from one maritime basin to another. In the North Atlantic, anti-submarine warfare plays an essential role in response to Russian activities, while in the Baltic, mine countermeasures, air defense and seabed protection are key. The Black Sea, meanwhile, faces the challenges of drifting mines and threats of naval interdiction, and is now inaccessible to warships. However, the French Navy continues to operate by air from the Mediterranean Sea, where in 2024, its carrier strike group was put under NATO operational control for the first time in its history.

While this overall French military posture on the eastern flank is currently fulfilling its DDA function, its sustainability depends on future developments in the geostrategic environment of the Euro-Atlantic area. Two major factors need to be considered in this respect. The first is the evolution of Russian military power: despite the mounting cost of its war of aggression against Ukraine, Russian armed forces are set to remain a significant strategic threat to Europe in the years to come, and all the more so should they secure victory (even a limited one) in the Ukrainian theater. The second factor is the evolution of the US military posture in Europe. While the current

US commitment makes it an essential and irreplaceable actor in the defense of the eastern flank, its political and strategic trajectory raises the prospect of a significant rebalancing toward the Indo-Pacific in the medium term.

These considerations should prompt France to question its level of ambition and the resources it intends to devote to Europe's collective defense in the east. If Paris wants to influence strategic orientations and fully play its role as a major military power in Europe, it will have to demonstrate its credibility on two key issues: aid to Ukraine, and contributing to the DDA concept within NATO. To achieve this, France needs to consider adapting its posture, both regional and general, at the politico-strategic level. In terms of capabilities, bringing its level of ambition into line with planned resources would require a financial commitment, along with a realistic approach to military programming.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	8
FRANCE ON THE EASTERN FLANK: A MIXED LEGACY	10
The forgotten alliance	10
<i>The cordon sanitaire strategy</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Security guarantees and the breakdown of alliances</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The Cold War: missed opportunities</i>	<i>13</i>
A growing estrangement	14
<i>Mitterrand's proposed Confederation</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Accommodating Russia: enlargement and the Founding Act</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>The 2000s: misunderstandings and tension</i>	<i>17</i>
Between discreet return and strategic ambiguity	19
<i>The annexation of Crimea: back-up support for Central and Eastern Europe</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Franco-Russian dialogue at all costs?</i>	<i>21</i>
THE FOUNDATIONS OF A NEW APPROACH: RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND EUROPE	23
France-Russia: from understanding to confrontation	23
<i>A major political shift</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>The growing Russian threat</i>	<i>25</i>
"Until victory"? France's support for Ukraine	27
<i>Material aid: from stocks to flows</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Training initiatives</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>The future of aid to Ukraine</i>	<i>34</i>
Prospects in the east	35
<i>"Troops" in Ukraine?</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Broader European ambitions</i>	<i>37</i>
REINFORCING DETERRENCE AND DEFENSE IN THE EAST	39
Europe's collective defense after 2022	39
<i>The forward presence and the eVA</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>A new deterrence and defense architecture</i>	<i>43</i>

More French boots on the ground	46
<i>Estonia: the Lynx goes on hunt</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Romania: The Eagle's takeoff</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Future challenges for the land component</i>	<i>58</i>
Air Shielding, French style	64
<i>From Air Policing to Combat Air Patrols</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Protection and dispersion: two challenges of high-intensity combat ...</i>	<i>69</i>
A multi-faceted naval posture	73
<i>The North Atlantic and the Arctic: underwater confrontation</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>The Baltic: the specifics of a narrow sea</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>The Mediterranean and the Black Sea: between a rock and a hard place</i>	<i>79</i>
PROSPECTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	83
Russia and the US: two geostrategic unknowns.....	83
<i>The evolution of the Russian threat</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>The US commitment in question</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>Various scenarios for 2030.....</i>	<i>97</i>
France: what ambitions, by what means?.....	100
<i>Aid to Ukraine: a financial challenge</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Reinforcing France's strategic presence on the eastern flank</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Regional approach: dispersion or concentration?</i>	<i>106</i>
Operational and capability recommendations	112
<i>Implications for the French Army.....</i>	<i>112</i>
<i>Implications for the Air and Space Force</i>	<i>115</i>
<i>Implications for the French Navy</i>	<i>119</i>
<i>Joint forces implications</i>	<i>121</i>
CONCLUSION	123

Introduction

As of 2024, for the first time in twenty years, Europe has been main theater of deployment for the French armed forces. This marks a major return to an area that had been low down the French political and military agenda for some time, despite the threat posed to the member states of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by Russia, and to a lesser extent Belarus.

The French deployment forms part of the deterrent force put after NATO at the Warsaw Summit in 2016. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the outbreak of war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, NATO Allies decided to station multinational battalions in Poland and the Baltic states to form an enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), and in Romania and Bulgaria as a tailored Forward Presence (tFP). Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted NATO to revise its policy of deterrence and to extend this presence along the entire eastern flank.

Although France participated to eFP from its inception, contributing to the battalion stationed in the Baltics, it did not see it as a priority compared to its engagements on the southern flank, mostly for counter-terrorism purposes. Its return to the region since early 2022, particularly in southeast Europe, is a testament to the French government's growing awareness of the security challenges on the eastern flank.

This new awareness has led to a change in its policy vis-à-vis Russia. Paris had long pursued an accommodating policy toward Russia, to the neglect of the political and strategic concerns of its Central European allies. This stance was a dead end that contributed nothing to the security or stability of the Euro-Atlantic area, as has been demonstrated by the dramatic turn of Russian aggression in 2022, and as, in fact, had already been demonstrated, although without sending such shockwaves through Western Europe, by the Russo-Georgian War in 2008.

France's return to the eastern flank may echo at the same time it deeply differs from its attempts to create a network of eastern alliances following the First World War. Although France at that time pursued a policy of influence, helping to develop and modernize the armies of the Central European nations in order to create a "cordon sanitaire" against Bolshevism, its inability to understand the strategic peculiarities of Central Europe was already clear. From the Locarno Treaties in 1925 to François Mitterrand's proposed European Confederation, this inability resulted in estrangement and tension.

How, then, must France modify its position on the eastern flank in order to maintain its credibility and politico-strategic influence in Europe? Is the current stance suited to France's European ambitions? This study answers these questions by looking at the long-term history of France's presence on the eastern flank, from the end of the First World War through to the most recent developments connected with the war in Ukraine.

This study defines the eastern flank as a geographic frontier running from the North Cape in Norway through to the Black Sea. The eastern flank encompasses Central and Eastern Europe but does not include the Balkans, the Caucasus, or the Eastern Mediterranean. Although these three adjacent theaters have an impact on the eastern flank, they are not directly covered by NATO's reinforcement policy, in which France plays a role. For the same reasons, the North Atlantic is considered but not central to this analysis.

The study first analyzes the mixed legacy of France's presence in Central Europe since the end of the First World War. Perceptions of French policy during the interwar period and through the end of the Cold War continue to permeate the political and strategic thinking of the country's Central European partners, constituting obstacles and assets in equal measure. Going against the grain of popular belief, this historical overview also shows that there is no enduring tradition of alignment between France and Russia.

Second, our analysis examines the foundations of the new French approach to the eastern flank. The large-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a rupture in French foreign policy, with France distancing itself from Russia, rethinking its military presence in the eastern flank area, and launching initiatives that aim to reconfigure Europe's political and security architecture, from the European Political Community to Emmanuel Macron's 2023 speech at the GLOBSEC security conference.

The third section looks in detail at how France has contributed to reinforcing the deterrence posture. While France was in a back-seat position after the Warsaw Summit, having only sent troops to one multinational battalion in the Baltics, it now deploys forces along the entire eastern flank and makes up a significant portion of NATO forces in Romania.

The final section looks forward to possible future developments on the eastern flank. It explores the strategic unknowns represented by the evolution of the Russian threat and the presence of the United States (US) as an ally, which is up in the air pending the outcome of the 2024 presidential election. This section also suggests ways to increase France's political and strategic influence in the Central European zone. Finally, it offers recommendations for the different branches of the armed forces.

France on the eastern flank: a mixed legacy

France's strategic activities on Europe's eastern flank are not taking place in a historical vacuum. France has a complex, often overlooked, track record in the region that continues to impact its reputation and its interactions with its allies. This legacy must be properly acknowledged so that France can respond accordingly. Analyzing France's strategic position on the eastern flank thus requires us to take a long-term perspective in order to shed light on the historic dynamics influencing today's political and military decisions.

Although France had had dealings with the region for centuries, they picked up pace with the Napoleonic Wars in the nineteenth century, which brought major disruption to regional balances. But contemporary relations have been especially marked by the legacy of the 20th century. Three broad periods are relevant here. First, the memory, often forgotten in France, of an "alliance de revers" formed in the wake of the First World War against the twofold threat of a vengeful Germany and a destabilizing Soviet Union. This period ended with "withdrawal" at the end of the 1930s, and forgetting of the past during the Cold War. A second period, beginning in 1989, was characterized by an increasing lack of understanding between France, which was keen to emphasize the strategic equilibrium and respect Russia, and the nations newly freed from the Soviet yoke, which primarily wanted security assurances in relation to their former oppressor. The final period began in 2014, with France making a discreet comeback while maintaining its strategic ambiguity toward Moscow.

The forgotten alliance

The cordon sanitaire strategy

The victor of the First World War, France came up as the European continent's foremost military power in 1918. Through its military, which had a presence in all the states that emerged from the disintegration of the central empires, Paris strove to create a network of alliances comprising several Central European countries.¹ This construct was an attempt to adapt to the reality of the new order established after the First World War. France had initially envisaged peace with the support of the Russian Empire, but the October Revolution forced Paris to come up with new solutions for building

1. I. Davion, "Comment exister au centre de l'Europe ? Les relations stratégiques franco-polonaises entre 1918 et 1939", *Revue historique des armées*, Vol. 260, 2010, pp. 54-64.

a bulwark against German revanchism and forming a “cordon sanitaire” against Bolshevism.² Its alliance with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was, thus, an ad hoc adjustment. France’s aims chimed with the concerns of the nascent states that wanted to protect themselves against both Germany and the USSR, two powers that had in the past shared and occupied the region.

French influence took the form of military missions sent to help train the military of these new states and occasionally take part in conflicts against the communists. Many of these missions date back to the First World War. In response to the setbacks suffered by its Romanian ally during the war, France sent almost 2,000 troops under the command of General Berthelot to advise its defense staff, train its troops, and provide equipment. The mission was terminated in March 1918 when Romania withdrew from the conflict. French troops remained, however, and formed the “Army of the Danube,” which took part in the Hungarian-Romanian War in the summer of 1919, in which the Romanian army, aided by Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian, and French troops, fought against the Hungarian Soviet Republic, a communist regime established by Béla Kun.

In Poland, the Henrys mission³ had a similar purpose: to organize and train the army, via the creation of the General Staff Academy,⁴ and to supervise material assistance.⁵ In Czechoslovakia, General Pellé became the new army’s first chief of staff and was commander in chief during the 1919 war against Hungary. He also helped to reorganize the Ministry of Defense and establish military academies. Overall, although these missions did important work, they were not always welcomed. In Poland, for example, it was first necessary to overcome Marshal Piłsudski’s hostility on principle to the idea of French officers training Polish soldiers.

In parallel with these missions, France signed bilateral treaties. The Franco-Polish treaty, which was requested by Warsaw and signed in February 1921, stipulated discussions in the event of attack, an obligation to consult before either party entered into any new political agreement in Central or Eastern Europe, and undefined and non-automatic assistance from France in the event of an attack by Germany or a threat to the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. Meetings were held between the defense staff to discuss joint planning, and the Polish war industry developed on the back of

2. M. Boisdrion and G. Piégeais, “Introduction. S’allier à l’Est. Militaires et diplomates face aux fluctuations du système européen”, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, Vol. 288, 2022, pp. 3-6.

3. The French mission in Poland led by General Henrys should not be confused with the Interallied Mission, of which General Weygand was a member. The latter was only active until summer 1920 during the Polish-Soviet War, and its contribution to the Polish victory is now seen as very minor. See N. Davies and W. Eagle, *Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-20*, London: Pimlico, 2003.

4. L. Maliszewski, “Louis Faury (1874-1947): entre gloire et oubli”, *Revue historique des armées*, Vol. 260, 2010, pp. 37-44. Lt. Colonel Louis Faury was involved in the creation of the General Staff Academy and was appointed as its Director of Science, in which role he helped to design the study program and goals.

5. I. Davion, “Comment exister au centre de l’Europe”, *op. cit.*

French aid.⁶ These bilateral cooperation agreements did not resolve tensions in Central Europe. Territorial disputes persisted, for example in Cieszyn,⁷ which strained relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia during the entire interwar period, and as a result of Hungary's revisionism of the Treaty of Trianon, against which Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia formed the Little Entente in 1920.

Security guarantees and the breakdown of alliances

Cooperation petered out during the 1920s, partly because the strategic rapprochement France wanted to see between Poland and Czechoslovakia failed to materialize, but above all because of Paris's desire to create a Paris-Warsaw-Moscow axis, a rather unappealing prospect for its two supposed allies.⁸ For the Kremlin, the biggest threat remained the countries of the cordon sanitaire, chief among them Poland and Romania.⁹

In parallel, the signing of the Locarno Treaties between France and Germany in 1925 caused concerns about security in the countries of Central Europe. Although Berlin officially renounced its revisionist ambitions and joined the League of Nations in 1926, the treaties only guaranteed its western borders. Germany's eastern borders were neither recognized by the German government nor guaranteed by the signatories to the treaties.¹⁰ Aware of this danger, France decided to offer "security guarantees" to the countries of the Little Entente. It concluded military alliances with Czechoslovakia in 1925, and Romania and Yugoslavia in 1926. Paris also supported Poland's armaments policy at the disarmament conference in the early 1930s. This French support was undermined, however, by the decision to authorize Germany's rearmament in the name of equal rights.

France also took part in the negotiations organized by Mussolini with Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) in 1932. The objective was to adopt a common position on European and colonial questions. Following Hitler's rise to power, however, the stated goal was to make territorial changes. Although France introduced an article that prohibited decision-making on questions concerning states that were not members of the pact, Poland felt it could be the first victim. In response, Warsaw modified its own foreign

6. *Ibid.*

7. The town of Cieszyn is located in the coal-mining region of Silesia. Warsaw wanted to reclaim this majority Polish-speaking area in line with the right of peoples to self-determination, a fundamental Wilsonian principle for resolving the First World War. However, Cieszyn was given to Czechoslovakia during the Polish-Soviet War, which Warsaw saw as a betrayal and a humiliation.

8. I. E. Magadeev, "L'alliance franco-polonaise dans les estimations militaires et diplomatiques de Moscou dans les années 1920", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, Vol. 288, 2022, pp. 51-64.

9. *Ibid.* This assessment was made at a time when Moscow did not have detailed information about the precise nature of France's guarantees to Poland.

10. *Ibid.* In Ferdinand Foch's view, guaranteeing only Germany's western borders amounted to an invitation for it to expand to the east.

policy. To safeguard its security and its western border, it distanced itself from France and moved closer to Germany, culminating in the signing of a non-aggression pact in January 1934. France's attempt to re-establish equilibrium by means of an eastern Locarno failed because of the Polish-Czechoslovakian dispute and the refusal of the Central European countries to accept Soviet guarantees of security. The limits of the French network of alliances became clear when Poland, mobilizing the minority rights argument, took advantage of the Munich Agreement to occupy Cieszyn, thus contributing to the carve-up of Czechoslovakia.

The deterioration of the situation in Europe led to the signing of the Kasprzycki–Gamelin Convention in May 1939. But this agreement was almost entirely ineffective following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, due to France's strategic prioritization of its own national defense. This was because the French plan was for Poland to confront Germany alone and weaken it before France entered the war.¹¹ Some French people helped to evacuate Poles to Romania and to arrange for the clandestine passage of 20,000 Polish soldiers to France, where they joined the forces of the Polish government in exile under General Sikorski.¹²

The Cold War: missed opportunities

After the Second World War, relations between France and Central Europe deteriorated as a result of the Cold War. During the 1950s, France, a founding member of NATO, saw the Warsaw Pact through the lens of collective defense against a proven military threat. A new era of *détente* began when General de Gaulle came to power in 1958. The French president denounced US and Soviet hegemony and launched a policy founded on the permanence of nations beyond ideological constraints. Direct dialogue was initiated with the members of the Warsaw Pact, and De Gaulle made several visits to the Eastern Bloc (USSR, Poland, and Romania). This dialogue concerned the denuclearization and gradual independence of the countries of Central Europe.¹³ Paris viewed the situation in the region through the prism of the German question. In De Gaulle's view, it was essential for the USSR to collapse so that Germany could be reunified and a new Europe could come into being, "from the Atlantic to the Urals", bringing an end to totalitarian regimes.

Dialogue continued in the 1970s between President Giscard d'Estaing, Ceausescu's Romania, and Gierek's Poland. Meetings were held to discuss disarmament, the SALT II Treaty, trade relations, and industrial

11. L. Maliszewski, "Louis Faury (1874-1947) : entre gloire et oubli", *op. cit.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. In 1964, the Polish minister Marian Naszkowski proposed to his French counterpart, Couve de Murville, a plan to denuclearize the two German states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Benelux countries. France was opposed to the idea because it thought a neutralized Germany would fall under Soviet influence.

cooperation. François Mitterrand became president in 1981, a few months after the Gdansk Agreement was signed in Poland. Although the declaration of a state of emergency in December 1981 by General Jaruzelski¹⁴ was condemned by the great majority of French politicians, foreign minister Claude Cheysson made the unfortunate remark that: “Of course, we will do nothing”. As things turned out, France’s closest partner during the 1980s was Romania, despite the Ceausescu regime’s systematic human rights violations. This tarnished Paris’s reputation at a time when countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia were keen to diversify their relations outside the German-speaking sphere. Ultimately, France played a fairly marginal role in the collapse of the communist regimes.¹⁵

A growing estrangement

While the fall of the USSR forced Paris to rethink its relations with Central Europe, its desire to treat Russia as a priority and to ignore the security concerns of the Central European countries prevented the renewal of strong cooperation ties.

Mitterrand’s proposed Confederation

After the end of the Cold War, solutions were envisaged for uniting all of Europe within common structures. One of these was put forward on December 31, 1989, by President François Mitterrand: the European Confederation.¹⁶ The idea was to prevent the destabilization of the USSR and the resurgence of nationalism, and to maintain the borders agreed at Yalta and Potsdam. Its proposed geographic scope was broad, bringing together every country “from Brest to Vladivostok”: in other words, including the USSR but not the US. Mitterrand did not see it as a way to dissolve Soviet instruments of coercion, but rather to develop them in order to stabilize Central Europe and lead it toward a mixed economic solution combining elements of both capitalism and socialism. Finally, the Confederation was intended as a training forum in which the countries of Central and Eastern Europe could learn to cooperate and gain more awareness of their European identity and natural solidarity. There was, however, ambiguity around the relationship between the Confederation and other Euro-Atlantic institutions: was it an intermediate stage before accession, or was it designed for states that would never join the European Economic Community?

14. G. Mink, *La Pologne au cœur de l'Europe*, Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2015.

15. J. C. Romer and T. Schreiber, “La France et l'Europe centrale”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 60, No. 4, Ifri, 1995, pp. 917-25.

16. R. Dumas, “Un projet mort-né : la Confédération européenne”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 66, No. 3, Ifri, 2001, p. 690; F. Bozo, “The Failure of A Grand Design: Mitterrand’s European Confederation, 1989-1991”, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 393.

By late 1991, however, it was clear the project was doomed to end in failure. The German government had no interest in it,¹⁷ the US was wary of any plan that would exclude it from the reconfiguration of Europe,¹⁸ and the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, who also had a pan-European project that he called the “Common European Home”, was persuaded of the necessity for a US presence in Europe after meeting with President Bush in Malta. The Confederation also failed because of the skepticism of the Central European countries. Caught between two blocs, with the EEC and NATO on one side, and the USSR on the other, they were looking for security guarantees that would enable them to escape the security vacuum.¹⁹ Mitterrand’s project failed to take this need into account.²⁰ This shortcoming even led some to the conclusion that the French president’s goal was not to find a solution to the problems of Central Europe, but rather to support Gorbachev, even if that meant Soviet republics remaining under Moscow’s supervision.²¹ The Confederation thus revealed France’s limitations when it came to understanding the new order.

Accommodating Russia: enlargement and the Founding Act

This concern with Russia was reflected in France’s position on NATO’s expansion to Central Europe. The process started in the first half of the 1990s when momentum developed around the idea of enlarging NATO eastward. Despite the wave of enthusiasm that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, these countries, which wanted to join NATO for security reasons,²² were initially offered no more than flexible and non-binding cooperation under NATO’s partner programs, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace. Several NATO member states, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark, as well as Secretary General Manfred Wörner, were nevertheless in favor of enlargement. Researchers also tackled the question, which became the subject of academic debate. The combination of these factors led to the decision by the NATO states in December 1994 to task NATO with producing a study examining the form and content of a potential enlargement policy. The resulting “Study on NATO Enlargement”,

17. M. Webber, J. Sperling, and M. A. Smith, *NATO’s Post-Cold War Trajectory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 3.

18. F. Bozo, “The Failure of a Grand Design”, *op. cit.*

19. A. Krzeczunowicz, *Krop po kroku*, Krakow: Znak, 1999, p. 66.

20. None of the Confederation’s “Assises”, held in Prague, discussed security or defense (*Assises de la Confédération européenne*, La Tour d’Aigues: Éditions de l’Aube, 1991).

21. A. Grachev, “From the Common European Home to European Confederation: François Mitterrand and Mikhail Gorbachev in Search of the Road to a Greater Europe”, in: F. Bozo, M.-P. Rey, N. P. Ludlow, and L. Nuti (eds.), *Europe and the End of the Cold War*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 213.

22. A. Zima, “La construction politique de l’atlantisme en Europe centrale”, *Études internationales*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2018, pp. 393-420.

published in 1995, reformed the accession policy and specified the new criteria to be met by candidate states.²³

France, however, felt that accession to the EU should take precedence over NATO membership, and that the Central European countries should be embedded in the European space rather than the transatlantic relationship, which was dominated by the US.²⁴ Paris also made enlargement subject to two conditions: reaching an agreement with Russia, and rebalancing power relations between the US and Europe, in particular by transferring command posts to European control.²⁵ These French stipulations were, however, undermined by its failure to rejoin NATO's integrated command structure.

When it came to enlargement, France supported Romania's candidacy as a francophone country that seemed useful for counterbalancing the "pro-American axis" that would be created by Poland's accession. The Romanian bid was also supported by other member states who felt that NATO should not focus on the Visegrád countries, which, unlike the Balkans, were already secure.²⁶ But the French position was weakened when Jacques Chirac dissolved the Assemblée Nationale, leading to the victory of the Socialist Party, whose new government under Lionel Jospin was uncertain about enlargement. At the Madrid Summit held in July 1997 to decide the enlargement arrangements, the decision was made to include the Visegrád three, supported by the US, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, the UK, and Germany.²⁷

In parallel with its enlargement, NATO pursued a policy of rapprochement with Russia. This was due to the feeling that enlargement must not create new divisions within Europe, and that although Russia had no desire to join the Alliance, it should contribute to the new European security architecture. The chosen solution was to create a specific partnership with Russia in acknowledgment of its importance and responsibility as a European, international, and nuclear power. At the meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council held in Noordwijk in May 1995, specific areas of cooperation were defined that went beyond the framework of NATO partnerships.²⁸

23. A. Zima, *L'OTAN*, Paris: PUF, 2023.

24. R. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 90-91.

25. Speech by Hervé de Charrette to the North Atlantic Council in February 1997; F. Bozo, *Où en est l'Alliance atlantique? L'improbable partenariat*, Paris: Ifri, 1998.

26. R. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, *op. cit.*, p. 120, pp. 214-15.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 238-247; M. Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir*, New York: Miramax Books, 2003, p. 259.

28. "Areas for Pursuance of a Broad, Enhanced NATO/Russia Dialogue and Cooperation", May 31, 1995, available at: www.nato.int; "Chairman's Summary of the Meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council", summary of the Noordwijk council, May 1995, available at: www.nato.int.

The negotiations concluded with the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in Paris in May 1997,²⁹ which provided for the appointment of permanent Russian military liaisons to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and the implementation of a regular consultation process.³⁰ The most significant Russian opposition was neutralized by the announcement that NATO's enlargement would not involve any changes to its nuclear or military posture.³¹ The territory of the new members would be defended by interoperability and without the deployment of "significant fighting forces". But Moscow's demand for a guarantee that the former Soviet republics would not join NATO was rejected, as was its request for the right to examine NATO's internal decisions. Finally, the Founding Act was not legally binding. Although Russia wanted it to be, NATO was unable, as an intergovernmental organization, to ratify such a document. As a result, violating it carried no legal sanctions.

The truly novel aspect of the Founding Act was the creation of a NATO-Russia Council. This unique bilateral arrangement served as a framework for consultations on all kinds of security questions, and for conducting joint actions in fields such as peacekeeping, disarmament, and the fight against weapons of mass destruction. The Act was thus seen as a means to ensure the indivisible security of "a Euro-Atlantic community [...] based on the allegiance to shared values, commitments and norms of behavior in the interests of all states".³² The stated goal was to further the creation of a community sharing a collective identity.

The 2000s: misunderstandings and tension

In the early 2000s, the process of expanding to Central and Eastern Europe was in full swing, both for NATO (with two waves of accession in 2004 and 2009) and the EU (2004 and 2007). However, this did not translate into any significant rapprochement with France. The participation of several countries from the region in the US coalition against Saddam Hussein's regime was scorned by President Chirac, who declared in February 2003 that the EU candidate countries who supported the Iraq War were "badly brought up" and "had missed a good opportunity to keep quiet".³³ These comments exacerbated the growing estrangement between Paris and Central Europe. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe saw themselves as international

29. "Summary: Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation", NATO, May 27, 1997, available at: www.nato.int.

30. "Statement: NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council Meeting at Defence Ministers Level", June 12, 1998, available at: www.nato.int.

31. Final Communiqué issued at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, NATO, December 10, 1996, available at: www.nato.int.

32. "Founding Act", NATO.

33. "Jacques Chirac critique la position pro-américaine des futurs membres de l'UE", *Le Monde*, February 18, 2003.

actors in their own right, and had no intention of letting anyone else dictate their conduct.

Tensions were also fueled by France's position on the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. The EU's involvement, led by Nicolas Sarkozy, was not a diplomatic success but led to ratify Russian territorial gains. This was due to the fact that although the EU did not officially recognize the new border, the document signed under the guidance of the French president made no mention of Georgia's territorial integrity. France and the EU were also unable to prevent the forced expulsion of Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁴ Overall, it was a political success for Moscow.

This favorable attitude toward Russia also explains why Paris opposed the granting of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. At this summit, a rift emerged between the member states of Central and Eastern Europe, who were in favor a MAP for Kyiv, and the Western countries, led by Paris and Berlin, who rejected the proposition so as not to provoke a negative reaction in Moscow.³⁵ The summit acknowledged the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia, and Kyiv continued to enjoy a special relationship with NATO via the bilateral NATO-Ukraine Commission, created in 1997.³⁶

France's desire to maintain dialogue with Russia widened the gap still further. It saw Moscow as a partner on questions of European security, rather than an enemy, and a bilateral dialogue developed between the two countries' defense and foreign ministers.³⁷ These contacts led to arms contracts, with Russia ordering two Mistral-class projection and command ships in 2011. Finally, this French policy was reflected in the Obama administration's "reset" policy.

During this period, French involvement in the region primarily concerned NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, to which it contributed from 2007. This mission, launched in 2004, was designed to secure the airspace of the Baltic states, which did not have their own fighter aircraft. The format was not specifically created for the Baltic region but was an extension of an existing NATO mission in Iceland, in which France was also involved. France's participation was in line with the policy of France-NATO rapprochement initiated by President Sarkozy, which culminated in 2009 with France's return to the integrated military command structure.

34. Interview with S. Serrano, "Guerre de 2008 en Géorgie : le 'cadeau' de la France à la Russie", TV5 Monde, August 7, 2013.

35. R. Sikorski, *Polska moze byc lepsza*, Krakow: Znak, 2018.

36. A. Zima, *L'OTAN*, op. cit.

37. C. Calmels, *Influence in a Military Alliance: The Case of France at NATO (2009-2019)*, Paris: Institut d'études politiques de Paris, 2021.

Between discreet return and strategic ambiguity

France made no major changes to its Russia policy following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the outbreak of war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Although Paris, under pressure from its allies, canceled the sale of the *Mistral*-class Landing helicopter dock (LHD) amphibious assault ships to Russia, it also fought to uphold the NATO-Russia Founding Act, reflecting President Hollande's desire to pursue a dual policy of dialogue and a firm hand. The French government believed that any rupture in relations would increase the risk of escalation. The so-called "Normandy Format" meetings, co-chaired with Germany, were launched after D-Day celebrations in June 2014 – where Vladimir Putin was invited along with his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko – and continued until February 2022. France's position stood in clear contrast to those of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which saw the threat posed by Russia as a priority and felt that Russia's actions since the Georgian conflict in 2008 had invalidated the Founding Act. Finally, France, which suffered more terrorist attacks in 2015 and was active in the Sahel, Iraq, and Syria, argued that NATO should adopt a 360° approach that paid more attention to the security threats from the Southern neighborhood.

The annexation of Crimea: back-up support for Central and Eastern Europe

Following the annexation of Crimea, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe asked for a NATO operation to be set up in their territories. The first step was taken at the Wales Summit in summer 2014, where a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was adopted.³⁸ This contained measures to reassure the eastern flank, including:

- Tripling the number of troops in the NATO Response Force (NRF) to 40,000 soldiers;
- Creating a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) consisting of 20,000 soldiers, capable of deployment in just a few days;
- Establishing two new multinational headquarters in Szczecin, Poland, and Bucharest, Romania, as well as eight NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in Central and Eastern Europe to assist the deployment of NATO Forces in the east in an emergency and help coordinate training and joint exercises;
- Introducing enhanced Air Policing (eAP) in the Baltic region via the creation of a standby detachment at Ämari, Estonia, as well as a detachment at Šiauliai, Lithuania. Another detachment was temporarily

³⁸. "Readiness Action Plan", NATO, available at: www.nato.int.

in use in Malbork, Poland, with French Air Force participation (Rafale and Mirage 2000).

In February 2016, NATO's defense ministers decided to create the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Poland and the Baltic states, a move that was endorsed by the chiefs of defense at the Warsaw Summit that summer.³⁹ The eFP force, in which the majority of NATO member states play a part, serves to symbolize NATO's solidarity and unity.⁴⁰ Its relatively small scale – four 1,000-strong multinational battalions – means its role is less defensive than deterrent. The goal is not, therefore, to counter a large-scale attack, but rather to “deter the enemy from launching an initiative by making it clear that the planned undertaking is irrational”.⁴¹

As was widely acknowledged during the Cold War, the problem with NATO's “extended deterrence” is the asymmetry of interests: would the US risk New York for Berlin? One of the mechanisms envisaged at the time to make the commitment more credible was the use of forward forces, sometimes described as “tripwire” forces, since as with a tripwire, it is not the resistance itself that prevents the enemy from taking action, but rather the anticipated consequences of triggering it. This was one of the roles of the US forces deployed in Europe, whose function was not just so much to defend the region than to act as a guarantee of their involvement in the event of a Soviet attack, even a limited one that did not directly threaten the US, as described by strategist Thomas Schelling in 1966:

What can 7,000 American troops do [in West Berlin]? Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there.⁴²

This idea was revived between 2014 and 2016 when NATO decided to deploy battlegroups in the eastern flank countries bordering Russia. These four battlegroups, each with just over 1,000 soldiers comprising detachments from fifteen different member states, were tangible proof of NATO's commitment to the Allies most vulnerable to Russian strategic intimidation. Their mere presence on the ground significantly reduces an aggressor's hope of being able to minimize the consequences of an attack. The tripwire mechanism also has the advantage of satisfying the “security dilemma”, in other words, the enemy's perception of the threat posed by such an arrangement. Since it is too small to offer a credible offensive capacity –

39. A. Zima, “La présence avancée renforcée de l'OTAN dans les pays baltes et en Pologne. Apports et limites de la dissuasion conventionnelle multilatérale”, *Note de l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire*, No. 131, Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, 2022.

40. When the force was set up in 2017, it comprised 4,762 soldiers from 22 NATO member states. In February 2022, just before the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the eFP involved 24 countries with a total of 4,957 soldiers (see the eFP factsheets published by NATO in November 2017 [www.nato.int] and February 2022 [www.nato.int]).

41. L. Poirier, cited in: J. Henrotin, “Dissuasion”, in: B. Durieux, J. B. Jeangène-Vilmer, and F. Famel (eds.), *Dictionnaire de la guerre et de la paix*, Paris: PUF: 2017, pp. 56-64.

42. T. C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 47.

around 4,000 soldiers across four countries, equivalent to the size of one brigade, against several Russian divisions – it cannot plausibly be perceived as a threat that could justify preventive action by the enemy.⁴³

Negotiations around the eFP as a strictly “non-offensive defense” tool led to the decision, in part under French pressure, to deny the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) any authority over eFP forces on the basis that they were being deployed in peacetime. As a result, the eFP was neither a mission nor an operation, because its battalions do not execute plans.⁴⁴ Its official status was labelled as an “activity”, an ad hoc category introduced specifically for it. Its troops were rotated every six months, apart from those from the framework nations. This rotation was implemented to comply with the Founding Act, under which NATO committed to not station “significant troops” in the territories of its new members. It also met France’s desire for a light, rotational presence compatible with its then commitments in the Sahel, Middle East and on homeland security. Paris thus continued to act in line with the Founding Act, even though some member states felt it had been rendered null and void by Russia’s actions.

The battalions were led by framework nations: Germany in Lithuania, Canada in Latvia, the US in Poland, and the UK in Estonia.⁴⁵ As it considered its available manpower strained by its other operations, France decided against making a major commitment to the Central European member states, committing only a company-size unit, dubbed *Lynx* mission, integrating alternately the German-led battlegroup in Lithuania and the UK-led battlegroup in Estonia.⁴⁶

As a supplement to the eFP, which is concentrated in the northeastern section of the flank, judged to be most directly threatened by Russia, the decision was also taken at the Warsaw Summit to create a tailored Forward Presence (tFP) for the southeastern zone. The tFP consisted of a small command and control structure stationed in Craiova, Romania and aimed at staffing a still multinational brigade Southeast (MNB-SE). Its objective is different because Romania and Bulgaria, which have maintained better relations with Russia, preferred cooperation in the air and naval domains to a high-visibility land presence.

Franco-Russian dialogue at all costs?

This remained France’s position until the end of the 2010s. As President Macron called NATO “brain dead” in a famous *Economist* interview in 2019,

43. C. Calmels, *Influence in a Military Alliance*, op. cit.

44. A. Zima, “La présence avancée renforcée”.

45. An initial suggestion also consisted of giving command of the eFP to all the Alliance’s nuclear nations as a way to strengthen its deterrent effect. However, this idea was abandoned because Paris expressed no desire to be a framework nation.

46. “French Troops Deployed in Estonia Within the Framework of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) - April 2019”, Permanent Representation of France to NATO, available at: www.otan.delegfrance.org.

he was at the same time trying to revive relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia. This momentum was pursued even though the Russian government had shown no goodwill on Crimea or the Donbas, and despite accusations from Macron's own campaign team that the Russian state-funded propaganda outlets *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* were trying to sabotage his candidacy in a supposed hack-and-leak operation.

In 2017, shortly after he was elected, Macron received Putin at Versailles to discuss joint actions. The French president hosted his Russian counterpart again at Brégançon in summer 2019, using Gaullist rhetoric with references to a "Europe stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok", and to the idea of re-anchoring Russia to Europe. However, these attempts merely demonstrated his illusions about the capacity for dialogue to influence Russian policy and about the value of pragmatism.

The rise in tensions in late 2021, with Putin's warning against armed action, did not significantly change the situation. France still saw the Founding Act as valid, and Macron continued his dialogue with Putin in the hope of convincing him not to invade Ukraine. From an operational perspective, in January 2022 the French armed forces minister raised the possibility of a French eFP-type engagement in Romania, going back on her position at the Warsaw Summit.⁴⁷

47. "Déclaration de M^{me} Florence Parly, ministre des armées, sur le partenariat stratégique franco-roumain et l'OTAN", Bucharest, January 27, 2022, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

The foundations of a new approach: Russia, Ukraine, and Europe

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, came as a psychological and intellectual shock in France, where most political and military elites had remained skeptical about the imminence of a major conflict in Europe, despite the fact that defense officials had been regularly stressing in the previous years the prospect of a looming return of high-intensity warfare.⁴⁸ France's military and strategic response was implemented at several levels:

- ▀ A gradual but eventually dramatic change in France's attitude toward Russia, leading to a level of antagonism between the two countries unprecedented in a long time;
- ▀ Provision of aid to Ukraine, both bilateral and through various European or international mechanisms, in the form of equipment and supply deliveries, maintenance and logistical support, as well as out-of-theater combat training missions;
- ▀ An ambitious agenda underpinned by the European Political Community project, but also a clear change of attitude in NATO's favor.

France-Russia: from understanding to confrontation

For at least a century, France's security and defense policy toward Central and Eastern Europe has been determined largely by its geopolitical stance on Russia. This attitude, which from 1991 to 2022 was characterized by a desire for dialogue and conciliation, has been profoundly altered by Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, despite desperate attempts by Paris to keep the Minsk process alive. The (gradual) toughening of France's political tone toward Russia is the first factor transforming its posture on the eastern flank.

A major political shift

The change in perspective regarding Moscow came gradually. Until April 2022, while firmly condemning Russian aggression, fully applying the EU's

48. É. Tenenbaum, "High-Intensity Warfare: What Challenges for the French Armed Forces?", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, July 2023.

sanctions and showing clear support for Ukraine, the French President tried to maintain a form of dialogue with Vladimir Putin and stressed the importance of “not humiliating Russia”⁴⁹ (June), and the need to think about offering Moscow “security guarantees”⁵⁰ in the event of negotiations (December). Macron also adopted some aspects of Russia’s narrative, rejecting the idea any “arms deployments that could threaten Russia”.⁵¹

France’s political position evolved gradually over the course of the year. First, following the discovery of mass graves in Bucha and Irpin in April 2022, the Ukrainian government asked several countries for assistance in examining the bodies. President Macron agreed to this request, and sent a forensics team from the *Gendarmerie nationale* (IRCGN) to collect evidence for a war crimes dossier to be submitted to the International Criminal Court.⁵² In his New Year’s address on December 31, 2022, Macron changed his tone again, stating that he intended to support Ukraine “until victory”.

This political shift gained momentum in May 2023, at the GLOBSEC conference in Bratislava, when Macron praised NATO’s resilience (retracting his previous “brain death” diagnosis) and admitted that France had “sometimes missed opportunities to listen”,⁵³ a direct reference to Chirac’s disparaging remarks in 2003 that Eastern and Central European leaders had “missed an opportunity to keep quiet” (see above). That same month, he invited Volodymyr Zelensky as a surprise guest to the G7 Summit in Tokyo and called for “sustained security [...] commitments”⁵⁴ to guarantee unwavering Western support for Ukraine.

In July 2023, at the NATO summit in Vilnius, France completed its U-turn by supporting Kyiv’s request to join the Alliance—a request that it had until then opposed vigorously, particularly at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. The roles have reversed: the US, which supported Ukrainian accession at that time, is now more skeptical.⁵⁵ In fall 2023, when a major aid package to Ukraine was blocked by Congress, France’s position on support for Ukraine was seen by Paris as an opportunity to assume European leadership and increase its credibility in Eastern Europe.

49. P. Ricard, “Emmanuel Macron se met à dos une partie des pays alliés de l’Ukraine en ne voulant ‘pas humilier la Russie’”, *Le Monde*, June 7, 2022.

50. “Guerre en Ukraine : Macron maintient ses positions sur les ‘garanties’ à la Russie”, *Les Échos*, December 20, 2022.

51. D. Minic, “La politique russe d’Emmanuel Macron : étapes et racines d’une nouvelle approche, 2017-2024”, *Russie.Eurasie.Visions*, No. 133, Ifri, April 2024.

52. C. Morin, “Ukraine : l’engagement plurimissionnel de la gendarmerie en zone de guerre”, *Gendarmerie nationale*, September 25, 2023.

53. President Macron’s closing speech, GLOBSEC summit in Bratislava, May 31, 2023.

54. G7 Leaders’ Statement on Ukraine, May 19, 2023.

55. P. Ricard, “Emmanuel Macron propose de garantir la sécurité de l’Ukraine, à défaut d’intégrer le pays au sein de l’OTAN”, *Le Monde*, June 1, 2023.

The growing Russian threat

France's tougher stance toward Russia has inevitably provoked a reaction from Moscow – although the Putin regime's aggressive actions long predated France's change of position following the war in Ukraine. Having remained in a competition mode until the mid-2010s, Russia has started disputing French interests increasingly openly. Russia's activities toward France fall into three broad categories: diplomatic tensions and efforts to undermine it in the countries of the Global South (particularly in Africa), frequent frictions in the non-kinetic military domain, and subversive interference and meddling on French territory.

At the diplomatic level, although relations remained cautious until 2022, Macron's tougher tone and increasingly hardline position on the Ukrainian issue provoked a growing number of verbal attacks and taunts. In a sign of rising tensions, the Russian ambassador to France was summoned to the French foreign ministry after the death of two French humanitarian workers in Ukraine in February 2024. The provocation continued in March 2024 when the French ambassador in Moscow was sent "tin soldiers" in a gesture intended to mock Macron's "warlike rhetoric" and his supposed "Napoleon complex".⁵⁶ In an interview on French news channel BFM TV, Pyotr Tolstoy, the deputy chairman of the State Duma expressed his opinion that France was governed "partly by perverts".

These verbal attacks took place against a background of longer-term diplomatic activity, dating back to at least the early 2020s, designed to weaken France's position in the world, especially in Africa, where Russia has systematically tried to forge partnerships with "Pan-African" nationalist actors hostile to good relations with France as the former colonial power.⁵⁷ This trend took a sharp turn in the winter of 2021-2022, when Russia deployed Wagner mercenaries to support the ruling junta in Mali and increased its influence over Bamako, ultimately leading to France's withdrawal from the country.⁵⁸ A similar scenario played out in Burkina Faso following the removals of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and his brief successor, Paul-Henri Damiba. Finally, although the coup d'état in Niger in August 2023 was not incited by Russia, it was welcomed by the Kremlin, which took advantage of France's departure to establish a security partnership with the junta that was made official in 2024.⁵⁹

56. C. Pietralunga, P. Ricard, E. Vincent, and B. Vitkine, "Insultes, provocations militaires et cyberattaques : l'agressivité de Moscou envers Paris redouble de vigueur", *Le Monde*, March 22, 2024.

57. M. Audinet, "Le Lion, l'Ours et les Hyènes. Acteurs, Pratiques et Récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone", *Étude de l'IRSEM*, No. 83, Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, 2021.

58. M. Le Cam, "Ces Africains sur qui Moscou s'appuie pour étendre son influence", *Le Monde*, July 28, 2023.

59. A. Sylvestre-Treiner, "Au Niger, l'arrivée de l'Africa Corps consacre le rapprochement de la junte avec la Russie", *Le Monde*, April 2, 2024.

At the military level, Russia has been responsible for an increasing number of unfriendly actions against France. In the past years, the French Air Force has intercepted a number of Russian long-range bomber flights brushing close its national airspace, peaking at nineteen in 2020.⁶⁰ Tensions have also arisen in the naval domain, as Admiral Vandier, then chief of staff of the French Navy, pointed out in 2022: “the Russians are regularly less than 2,000 meters from our ships [in breach of international shipping conventions], their weapons systems are active, as they regularly let us know by lighting up our vessels with their fire-control radars”.⁶¹ At a hearing in February 2024, the French armed forces minister Sébastien Lecornu referred to “attempts to take control of our aircraft or naval ships and attempts to blind our helicopter or frigate pilots”.⁶² Similar actions have taken place in the space domain, as shown by the revelation of proximity operations carried out in 2019 and then again 2023 by the Russian spy satellite *Olymp K-2*, suspected of having approached French military intelligence satellites.⁶³

Finally, since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has intensified its destabilization, interference, and subversion activities. While espionage and clandestine actions are part of its usual approach, they have been particularly intense in recent years.⁶⁴ In April 2022, France expelled six Russian agents involved in an undercover operation.⁶⁵ The pace picked up further after the invasion in Ukraine, with around fifty expulsions in the year that followed. This clandestine activity is not limited to intelligence efforts, but also includes propaganda and destabilization operations designed to exploit existing tensions within France. In October 2023, with emotions running high following the October 7 attacks in Israel, Stars of David were graffitied in Paris by two Moldovan nationals and images of them were spread by false accounts on social media, creating a controversy that was reported in the Russian media.⁶⁶ A similar network, linked to Russia via intermediaries from European nations, is thought to have been responsible for painting stenciled “red hands” on the Wall of the Righteous, at the Shoah Memorial in Paris, in mid-May 2024, and of placing fake “coffins” representing “French soldiers in

60. L. Lagneau, “Selon le président Macron, les aviateurs français ont intercepté ‘19 raids de bombardiers étrangers’ en 2020”, *Zone militaire*, January 20, 2021.

61. Hearing of Admiral Pierre Vandier, Chief of Staff of the French Navy, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée Nationale, July 22, 2022.

62. Hearing of Sébastien Lecornu, Minister of the Armed Forces, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée Nationale, February 27, 2024, p. 9.

63. L. Lagneau, “L’engin espion russe ‘Luch/Olymp K-2’ est soupçonné de s’être approché de deux satellites français”, *Zone militaire*, October 26, 2023.

64. R. Mielcarek, *Les Moujiks: La France dans les griffes des espions russes*, Paris: Harper Collins, 2024.

65. T. Prouteau, “Espions russes en France : près d’une cinquantaine d’agents de Moscou expulsés depuis un an”, RTL, April 26, 2023.

66. A. Albertini, D. Leloup, and F. Reynaud, “Étoiles de David taguées à Paris : la piste d’une opération d’ingérence russe privilégiée”, *Le Monde*, November 7, 2023.

Ukraine” under the Eiffel Tower in June.⁶⁷ These acts are designed to exacerbate internal tensions by exploiting cultural and religious sensitivities.

But it is disinformation on digital platforms that constitutes the central pillar of Russia’s destabilization strategy. Operation “Doppelgänger”,⁶⁸ uncovered by a collective of investigative journalists, mimicked the appearance of established media outlets, particularly *Le Parisien* and *Le Figaro*, to spread false information. Similarly, in February 2024, France’s VIGINUM agency unmasked Operation “Portal Kombat”, a network of 193 pro-Russian propaganda websites all forming part of the same digital infrastructure. Rather than producing original content, these websites all disseminate content published by social media accounts run by Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies, and official websites of local institutions or actors.⁶⁹

Finally, on a broader level, Russia has systematically in Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) activities in the economic and political spheres by developing networks of influence in France. This activity was clearly pointed at by the work of the parliamentary inquiry committee set up by the National Assembly to investigate “political, economic and financial interference by foreign powers”,⁷⁰ which called Russia the “principal threat in terms of influence” from France’s perspective. Beyond the disinformation activities discussed above, the report emphasized Russia’s strategy of “winning over certain elites, whether through naivety or collusion”, using levers as diverse as ideology or financial gain. Although chaired by Jean-Philippe Tanguy, a MP from the far-right National Rally (RN), the Committee did not shrink from mentioning the “specific case” of the RN, as having “very close political and ideological ties”⁷¹ to Russia, and receives financial support via bank loans facilitated by the Kremlin.

“Until victory”? France’s support for Ukraine

Although it had made intermittent contributions since 2014, French aid to Ukraine took on a new dimension after February 24, 2022. Since February 16, 2024, it has been structured by a bilateral agreement between the two countries that includes civilian clauses – such as humanitarian aid,

67. A. Albertini, D. Leloup, and F. Reynaud, “Cercueils à la tour Eiffel : un lien direct établi avec l’affaire ‘des mains rouges’ et des soupçons pointant vers la Russie”, *Le Monde*, June 3, 2024.

68. D. Leloup and F. Reynaud, “‘Doppelgänger’: autopsie de l’opération de désinformation russe”, *Le Monde*, June 14, 2023.

69. Portal Kombat, “Un réseau structuré et coordonné de propagande pro-russe”, technical report, February 2024.

70. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into political, economic and financial interference by foreign powers aimed at influencing or corrupting French opinion-formers, leaders or political parties, Assemblée Nationale, June 1, 2023.

71. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into political, economic and financial interference by foreign powers, p. 100, p. 148, pp. 166-79.

budgetary support, and assistance with institutional reform and with reconstruction – along with military and strategic ones, such as cooperation on cybersecurity and measures to combat the manipulation of information.⁷² According to the Kiel Institute Ukraine Support Tracker, the multi-faceted aid provided by France between February 2022 and June 2024 amounted to more than €12 billion, making Paris the fourth national contributor after the US, Germany and the UK.⁷³ However, military aid has been the subject of particular attention, with some controversy around its exact valuation.⁷⁴ Two main categories of military aid can be distinguished: equipment transfers or funding for off-the-shelf purchases, and training support.

Material aid: from stocks to flows

Deliveries of weapons and equipment to Ukraine are the most visible aspect of military aid. They are an integral part of the European and international cooperation and coordination arrangements set up to offer a collective response to Ukraine's needs. The process operates at two levels:

- **The European level:** On February 26, 2022, the Military Staff of the European Union (EUMS), under the leadership of the French admiral Hervé Bléjean, established a “clearing house cell” (CHC) to “identify Ukrainian needs, on one hand, and to make equipment from member states available, on the other”.⁷⁵ Donors can be partially reimbursed (50 percent) for equipment transfers via the European Peace Facility (EPF), created in 2021, which has allocated €11.1 billion to Ukraine following three top-ups in March and June 2023, and March 2024. France has provided 18 percent of the funding for this mechanism, or almost €2 billion, making it the second-largest contributor to the EPF after Germany.
- **The international level:** Instigated by the US, which still provides most of the material support, the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG) was established in April 2022 under the control of the US Department of Defense. It meets on a monthly basis at the US Ramstein Air Base in Germany and coordinates the contributions of the 54 countries involved in the delivery of military equipment to Ukraine. Its work is supplemented by the Security Assistance Group Ukraine (SAGU), created in November 2022 under the command of EUCOM and based at Wiesbaden, which is responsible for the day-to-day military

72. Agreement on security cooperation between France and Ukraine, February 16, 2024.

73. This figure includes bilateral aid and France's contribution to EU aid packages (European Peace Facility, Micro Financial Assistance, and European Investment Bank). See P. Bompreszi, I. Kharitinov, and C. Trebesch, “Ukraine Support Tracker – Methodological Update & New Results on Aid ‘Allocation’”, Kiel Institute, April 25, 2024.

74. V. Lamigeon, “3,8 milliards d'euros : la France gonfle-t-elle les chiffres de son aide militaire à l'Ukraine?”, *Challenges*, February 26, 2024.

75. Hearing of Vice Admiral H. Bléjean, Director General of the EU Military Staff, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée nationale, November 16, 2022, p. 6.

coordination of military supplies and training provided to Ukraine by the countries of the UDCG and the EU.⁷⁶

In its own right, France started to deliver lethal weapons in late February 2022, including of *Milan* anti-tank missiles and *Mistral* short-range air-defense missiles, along with individual equipment and weapons, to help Ukraine withstand the initial Russian offensive. These weapons, like those supplied by other Western nations, were intended to slow the Russian advance and, if necessary, make it possible to establish robust guerilla-style resistance.

When the situation stabilized in the spring 2022, France followed other Western countries and moved to more complex systems to help Ukraine face the renewed Russian offensive in the Donbas: light and armored vehicles (VLTP4 and VAB) but above all artillery, including the TRF1 and CAESAR 155 mm howitzers. This continued in the fall with the transfer of two LRU multiple rocket launchers taken from the stocks of the 1st Artillery Regiment. The French contribution also included surface-to-air defense equipment, with two short-range *Crotale* NG systems supplied in response to the intensification of Russian strikes using various drones and missiles.

In early 2023, in the midst of controversy around the supply of heavy tanks to Ukraine (particularly due to Germany's reluctance to authorize the transfer of Leopard 2 tanks⁷⁷), France sent around thirty AMX-10 RC wheeled "light tanks" designed for reconnaissance missions. It also transferred twelve new CAESAR guns and announced, jointly with Italy, the delivery of a MAMBA/SAMP long-range air defense system, accompanied by a GM200 surveillance radar, another modern capability.

Table I-1: military equipment transferred by France to Ukraine in 2022 and 2023

Category	Type	Quantity delivered by end of 2023
Personal equipment	Helmets	6,200
	Bulletproof armor	6,500
	CBRN protective suits	1,100
	Flight gear	100
	GPS	200
	Cold weather gear	3,100
	Night vision goggles	445
Small-caliber weapons	7.62 mm machine gun	55
	12.7 mm machine gun	560
	FAMAS	1,000
	AT4 rocket launcher	1,002

76. L. Royer-Perreat and C. Naegelen, "Rapport d'information sur le bilan du soutien militaire à l'Ukraine", Commission de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées, Assemblée Nationale, March 8, 2023.

77. See L. Péria-Peigné and É. Tenenbaum, "Zeitenwende: The Bundeswehr's Paradigm Shift", *Focus stratégique*, No. 116, Ifri, September 2023.

Anti-tank systems	MILAN system	3
	MILAN missiles	Undetermined
Artillery	TRF1 howitzers	6
	CAESAR guns	30
	LRU	4
	120 mm mortars	10
Armored vehicles	AMX10 RC	38
	VAB	250
Transport/liaison vehicles	VLTT P4	120
	GBC 180 trucks	6
Nautical vehicles	Zodiac FUTURA	30
Engineering	Primers	38,000
	Detonators	17,000
	Pyrotechnic material	43,000
	Anti-tank mines	3,600
Air-launched cruise missiles	SCALP-EG	Not specified
Drones/anti-drone systems	Drone detection systems	10
	Drones	160
Surface-to-air defense	CROTALE NG	2
	CROTALE missiles	Not specified
	GM200 radar	1
	MISTRAL	6
	MISTRAL missiles	Not specified
	MAMBA SAMP	1
	ASTER missiles	Not specified
Munitions	Small arms ammunition	1.1 million
	12.7 mm cartridges	1.74 million
	Grenades	10,500
	105 mm AMX10 RC	9,000
	155 mm CAESAR & TRF1	30,000
Transmission systems	Frequency scanners	100
	IRIDIUM terminals	30
Fuel	Fuel tanks	10
	Petroleum products	150 t
	Jet fuel	30,000 m ³

Source: French Minister of the Armed Forces, March 2024.

Finally, at the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, Macron announced that France would provide SCALP air-to-surface cruise missiles, following on the heels of the UK's decision to supply Storm Shadows, while the US refused to supply any AGM-158 JASSMs, and Germany blocked the transfer of the Taurus missiles requested by the Ukrainian Air Force.⁷⁸ In mid-January

78. B. Gabel, "Livraison de missiles Scalp à l'Ukraine : un changement de stratégie de la France?", *France 24*, July 12, 2023.

2024, Macron announced a second delivery of “around forty” SCALP missiles, as well as “hundreds” of INS/GPS guided AASM Hammer bombs.⁷⁹

Altogether, according to the armed forces minister, the major equipment transferred by France to Ukraine falls into three categories, with varying effects on capability planning:

- End-of-life equipment that was already being retired, such as the VAB, P4, TRF1, and AMX-10 RC, which has almost no effect on procurement planning or active stockpiles but simply accelerated the schedule;
- Aging equipment but still with some time ahead, whose transfer was liable to cause temporary capability gaps, such as the Mistral, Milan, and Crotale-NG;
- Modern equipment at the peak of its service life whose replacement directly impacted operational activity levels and the procurement process set out in the military programming law: CAESAR, LRU, SAMP/T, and SCALP-EG, which are already in short supply in the armed forces.

As the first two categories have been progressively depleted and the third has a deleterious effect on the operational readiness of French units, Paris stated it wanted to “shift from a [stock] transfers mindset to an order and procurement mindset”.⁸⁰ This was the purpose of the visit by armed forces minister Sébastien Lecornu to Kyiv at the end of September 2023, accompanied by a delegation of French defense firms representatives, which led to the signing of around ten memoranda of understanding.

This shift to flow-based supply has, however, encountered several problems. The first is the contractualization of an initial €100 million, subsequently topped up by €200 million and then €400 million via the special fund for aid to Ukraine. The fund was set up to allow Kyiv to conclude contracts directly with the French defense industry, to be reimbursed at a later date. Besides its modest financial value – the German bilateral military aid package exceeded €4 billion in 2023–, the mechanism has been plagued by implementation problems, particularly in relation to “extended reimbursement delays”. It requires Ukraine to advance money on contracts to be reimbursed despite Kyiv’s obviously precarious budgetary situation.⁸¹

The second problem concerns the transformation of industrial capacity to meet demand. This challenge is part of the broader “war economy” ambition announced by Macron in June 2022 and confirmed in the 2024-2030 military programming law (LPM) passed the next year. To deal with

79. P. Chapleau, “Des Scalp et des bombes air-sol A2SM pour l’Ukraine”, *Lignes de défense*, January 17, 2024.

80. “Soutien à l’Ukraine : 16 accords industriels pour une aide directe et durable”, Ministère des Armées, October 2, 2023.

81. Hearing of Oleksandr Zavitnevych, President of the Verkhovna Rada’s National Security, Defense, and Intelligence Commission, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée nationale, February 14, 2024, p. 9.

the high attrition and consumption rates of the war in Ukraine, the Ministry of Armed Forces and the Defense Procurement Agency have tried to develop France's defense industrial and technological base (DITB) in order to be able to “produce more and faster”.⁸²

Thanks to updated standards, increased production speeds, the purchase of new machines, and the relocation of certain functions, output has indeed increased⁸³: CAESAR production went from 4 to 8 per month (with machining for each unit reduced from 30 to 17 months); MBDA has doubled its Mistral missile production capacity from 20 to 40 per month, cutting delivery times from 30 to 15 months; and 155 mm shell production capacity has risen in the space of a year from 1,000 to 3,000 per month.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the war economy continues to be hampered by France's extremely limited budget, resulting in order levels falling well below the stated goal.⁸⁵ This point is especially relevant in the specific case of aid to Ukraine: while the bilateral agreement of February 2024 stipulates aid “up to €3 billion”, its funding remains uncertain, particularly at a time of increased strain on public finances and pressure for a return to budgetary orthodoxy.⁸⁶

Training initiatives

In parallel with material aid, France is also helping to train the Ukrainian armed forces. While the US, UK, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, and Canada have been doing so since 2015, this marks a new step for France, which joined the program in the summer of 2022. The initiative is part of the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), which was officially launched on November 15, 2022. The mission is under the command of the EUMS's Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), which consists of around thirty senior officials in Brussels dedicated to running EUMAM. On the ground, the mission command structure reflects the “high levels of tension between Germany and Poland”,⁸⁷ with each nation keen to assume the role of framework nation. This has resulted in two separate training facilities:

82. “Économie de guerre : produire plus et plus vite, le défi !”, Ministère des Armées, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

83. K. Savornin and F. Aubert, “Comment l'industrie de défense s'est mise en ordre de marche”, *Esprit défense*, No. 7, Spring 2023, pp. 34-36.

84. Hearing of Emmanuel Chiva, General Delegate for Armaments, on the draft military programming law for the years 2024 to 2030, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée Nationale, May 2, 2023, p. 6; Hearing of Sébastien Lecornu, Minister of the Armed Forces, before the National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, Assemblée Nationale, February 27, 2024, p. 9.

85. R. Bellais, “Économie de guerre: réalité d'un concept et enjeux pour la France”, Fondation Jean Jaurès, October 3, 2022; V. Lamigeon, “Derrière le discours sur 'l'économie de guerre', ces usines plombées par des réductions de commandes”, *Challenges*, April 16, 2024.

86. E. Vincent and E. Conesa, “Guerre en Ukraine : la promesse d'Emmanuel Macron d'aider Kiev vire au casse-tête budgétaire et politique”, *Le Monde*, March 27, 2024.

87. Hearing of Vice Admiral H. Bléjean, p. 8.

- The Combined Arms Training Command (CAT-C) in Wędrzyn, Poland, a Polish army base with an existing maneuvering camp and urban combat training facilities, now supplemented by new facilities (such as trenches).
- The Special Training Center (ST-C) in Strausberg, Germany, established at a Bundeswehr training site in the state of Brandenburg.

In addition to these two centers, each of which receives contingents of instructors from the various countries participating in EUMAM, other national facilities have also been made available in countries such as France, Spain, and Italy. Training programs are diverse – collective or individual – and relatively short, lasting from five to eight weeks. The initial goal of training 30,000 soldiers in 2023 was subsequently raised to 40,000: this figure was met and even exceeded, with more than 46,000 Ukrainian soldiers thought to have completed training by spring 2024.

France contributes to this training initiative through Mission Gerfaut, which is supported by the new Commandement Terre Europe in Lille, the French land forces' European HQ (see below).⁸⁸ It takes two forms: a detachment of around 200 military personnel (120 instructors and 80 members of the National Support Element) at CAT-C in Wędrzyn, Poland and, in parallel to Gerfaut, “Task Force 19”, which is dedicated to hosting Ukrainian contingents on French soil, particularly at the La Courtine camp, in the Creuse region, and at other facilities such as the Urban Combat Training Center in Sissonne, in the Aisne region. This aid, which, according to the French Ministry of Armed Forces, cost €300 million in 2023, has allowed France to train almost 8,000 Ukrainian military personnel – roughly half at CAT-C and half in France –, or a fifth of the EUMAM total.

Although the content of the training courses varies widely (from first aid to artillery observation, to military engineering), some Ukrainian soldiers have expressed concerns that it does not reflect the reality of the war they are fighting at home. One young battalion commander trained in Poland felt that “the activities [...] were limited to practicing basic infantry moves without enemy fire, without shells, without minefields or snipers, even though that’s our daily life on the ground”.⁸⁹ One of the recurring criticisms is the omission of “enemy drones, which are a crucial part of our current conflict”. Another soldier who had completed training stated that “the only time we were offered drone-related training, it was to observe our own infantry maneuvers from the air”,⁹⁰ rather than learning to use them or combat them. Although this aspect seems to be gradually improving, the instructors themselves feel that the Ukrainians need to learn to reduce their “dependence on drones”⁹¹:

88. C. Pietralunga, “En France, la ‘Task Force 19’ forme au combat d’infanterie des soldats ukrainiens”, *Le Monde*, November 13, 2023.

89. J. Follorou, “Avec les soldats ukrainiens formés à l’étranger : ‘Je leur disais, aux formateurs de l’OTAN, que leurs manuels ne s’appliquaient pas chez nous’”, *Le Monde*, September 26, 2023.

90. J. Dettmer, “Ukraine’s Forces Say NATO Trained Them for the Wrong Fight”, September 22, 2022.

91. N. Barotte, “En Pologne, des militaires français forment les soldats ukrainiens appelés à rejoindre le front”, *Le Figaro*, April 6, 2024.

the Gerfaut supervisors are thus training them to operate without the technological advantage they provide, arguing that drones can be a vulnerability as well as an asset.

The future of aid to Ukraine

With the Ukrainian conflict now in its third year, the nature of Western military assistance has also been transformed, with a system that started as an improvised, emergency arrangement now becoming institutionalized. The biggest change concerns the US initiative to create capability coalitions within the UDCG. Their purpose is to provide Ukraine with a focal point for expressing its needs, centralizing them, and standardizing them across the entire spectrum covering the relevant function (from procurement to training and maintenance).

France is part of five of the eight existing coalitions. Its principal responsibility, assigned in fall 2023, is to manage the artillery coalition, in which role it has been supported by the US since mid-December 2023. The coalition's work has four main pillars. The first involves equipment, and supplies not just CAESAR howitzers, the coalition's showpiece, but also systems covering all calibers and ranges, with the objective of rationalization, consistency, and modernization. The second pillar (led by the US) deals with munitions production and issues concerning compatibility and interchangeability. The third is dedicated to training gunners, commissioned and non-commissioned officers, and maintenance and IT specialists. The fourth and final pillar focuses on support for the artillery forces, including dedicated command systems, targeting resources, and maintenance.

France also co-manages the air defense coalition with Germany, and is part of the air force coalition led by the US, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The latter two nations are the principal donors, alongside Norway and Belgium, of the F-16 fighter jets that are seen as the future of Ukrainian combat air force. It is through this mechanism that the French Air Force has contributed to the initial training of Ukrainian pilots at Cazaux Air Base. The six-month course has been running since spring 2024 and includes around 50 hours on simulator and 80 hours on *Alpha Jet* training aircraft.⁹²

Finally, President Macron's announcements on June 7, 2024, marked a new phase in French aid to Ukraine.⁹³ The first concerned the delivery of *Mirage 2000-5s*, which puts France among the nations contributing to the air force coalition by transferring combat aircraft. Depending on available components, this aid could, as in the case of the F-16s, take the form of a coalition, most likely with a contribution from Greece, which is currently in

92. J. M. Tanguy, "La formation des pilotes ukrainiens d'avions de combat F-16 a commencé en France", *Air & Cosmos*, April 24, 2024.

93. Interview with Macron on TF1 and France 2 to mark the 80th anniversary of the Normandy landings, June 7, 2024.

the process of replacing its own *Mirage 2000-5s* with *Rafales*. As with the F-16s, this new coalition will not be limited to the transfer of single units, but is also set to include training and mission equipment.⁹⁴

The second announcement concerned the training and equipping of a full Ukrainian brigade of 4,500 troops, although it is still unclear whether this is in addition to the work already being done by Gerfaut, the TF19, and previous transfers, or whether it is intended to coordinate these efforts. While the deployment of French instructors to Ukraine, for the purpose of strategic signaling as much as improved military efficiency, has been considered and remains a possibility for Paris, the idea seems to have been abandoned in the absence of a coalition of willing countries.

Prospects in the east

The evolution of the Ukrainian conflict is gradually transforming France's relationship to the eastern flank and altering its long-term prospects in the region. Here we will discuss two aspects in particular. The first concerns the security "assurances" given by Paris to Kyiv, and French refusal to draw a red line over sending armed forces into Ukraine, which would radically alter the strategic stakes and the region's place in French defense policy. The second, broader aspect relates to strategic reinvestment and the new awareness of security concerns in Europe.

"Troops" in Ukraine?

Macron's controversial statements at the Paris conference on February 26, 2024, must be nuanced by three key contextual elements. The first of these is the signing of a bilateral security agreement with Kyiv ten days previously, on February 16. This agreement, like those signed by Kyiv the day before with Berlin and in January with London, resulted from the process begun at the G7 Summit in Tokyo in May 2023 (see above). Although they have not been ratified by the respective parliaments, and so are not legally binding, the goal of these documents is to secure the respective countries' support for Ukraine over a ten-year period, regardless of the outcome of the war.

The second contextual element concerns the rising tensions between France and Germany over their respective policies on defense and military aid to Ukraine. In early 2024, German chancellor Olaf Scholz started to direct sharper criticism at Germany's EU allies, including France (and Italy), for providing "insufficient"⁹⁵ bilateral military support to Kyiv. France, for its part, while denying that it had fallen behind in the Kiel Institute rankings, criticized Germany for having hindered the expansion of European instruments that could enable more pooling of funding for military support,

94. L. Lagneau, "M. Lecornu confirme que les *Mirage 2000-5* promis à l'Ukraine seront prélevés sur la flotte de l'armée de l'Air", *Zone militaire*, June 7, 2024.

95. "Scholz Berates EU Allies over 'Insufficient' Military Support for Ukraine", Reuters, January 9, 2024.

such as Eurobonds (an idea suggested by the then-Estonian prime minister Kaja Kallas and taken up by Macron), which would be more suited to Paris's budgetary constraints.⁹⁶ As a final contrast, Germany's reluctance to supply the *Taurus* air-launched cruise missile boosted France's image as being less timid in certain areas, given that Paris, alongside London, had already agreed to deliver SCALP/*Storm Shadow* missiles. These disagreements heightened the sense – already perceptible in the debate over the AMX-10 RC versus the *Leopard* – that France, as a nuclear power, was less averse to escalation than Germany, and more disposed to take certain risks.

The third and final contextual element consisted of the upcoming European parliamentary elections (from June 6 to 9), in which far-right, populist, and potentially pro-Russian parties were expected to perform well. Macron probably believed that the position of the centrist parties (to which he belongs) in Ukraine would give them a moral advantage over their rivals. This may partly explain the unusual prominence in public discourse of the Ukraine question, which is normally more peripheral in French politics.⁹⁷

It was against this background that the conference took place in Paris on February 26, 2024. Held at France's initiative, with the EU's 27 heads of state all invited, the conference did not discuss the prospect of sending land troops into Ukraine. It did, however, address a wide range of questions, including the Czech proposal to purchase a batch of 800,000 (later raised to 1 million) artillery shells from non-European suppliers, and the creation of new deep strike and cyber-defense "coalitions". The suggestion was even put forward of developing certain activities within Ukraine itself in the areas of arms production, maintenance, mine-clearing, and training, although these last points provoked disagreements among the allies.

On the day before the conference, Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico was the first to bring up the idea of "European troops on the ground",⁹⁸ declaring that he would never accept it. This on purpose "leak" prompted a journalist to ask Macron whether the option was on the table. He responded that "there is no consensus to officially back any ground troops. That said, nothing should be excluded".⁹⁹ Such a cryptic answer was immediately misinterpreted as a call for direct military involvement in the war.

Although this statement met with both national and international outcry, Macron refused to retract it and has reiterated his position on several occasions, including during meetings with the heads of the political parties on March 7 and on national television on March 14. Fortified by explicit support from Eastern Europe (particularly Lithuanian foreign minister

96. S. Blanchard, "Les raisons des dissensions France-Allemagne sur l'Ukraine", DW, February 28, 2024.

97. C. Belin, "Macron the Hawk: Why Europe Should Follow France's Lead on Ukraine", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2024.

98. "Le Premier ministre slovaque prétend que l'envoi de soldats occidentaux en Ukraine est 'envisagé'", *Le Parisien/AFP*, February 26, 2024.

99. "Guerre en Ukraine : Emmanuel Macron a dit qu'il n'y avait 'aucune limite' au soutien français à Kiev, selon les chefs de parti présents à l'Élysée", *Le Monde*, March 7, 2024.

Gabrielius Landsbergis, Estonian Premier, Kaja Kallas, and President Zelensky himself), he defended the principle of “not drawing red lines against an enemy who has none”, while his advisors referred to the concept of “strategic ambiguity”, a central pillar of deterrence theory. In 2013, as an advisor to the then-president François Hollande, Macron was profoundly affected by Syria’s use of chemical weapons, when the US, France, and the UK found themselves caught in the trap of a “red line” that they ultimately failed to enforce.

These explanatory remarks tend, however, to overlook the first part of the original statement, in which Macron stated that “there is no consensus to send ground troops”, particularly for combat missions, and that France currently has no intention of going against the general view. That said, the level of activity in Ukraine itself could be set to increase, whether in terms of production, maintenance, or training.¹⁰⁰ Missions of this kind would involve putting French personnel – whose civilian or military status would have to be determined – “on the ground”, although they would not fall into the category of “troops”, a term that generally refers to “combat troops”.

Broader European ambitions

This U-turn in French policy reflects a broader ambition to rethink the European political and security architecture. This desire is embodied in the European Political Community (EPC) project proposed by Macron in May 2022. The community, which is an informal forum, brings together all the EU’s member states and partners to discuss energy, security, and infrastructure. Other than Russia and Belarus, almost all the European nations, including the post-Brexit UK and neutral states such as Switzerland, are part of the EPC, whose forty-seven countries meet on an equal footing.

Despite its stated ambitions, with Macron believing that the continent needs other ways to structure itself beyond the EU, the EPC remains a flexible body, with no budget or secretariat. It has achieved little in concrete terms since its launch. Its attempt to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was inconclusive. Projects focusing on migration and cybersecurity are underway, however, as is the development, in partnership with the EU, of centers of excellence in the EPC’s member states. Momentum seems to have picked up, with summits held regularly (Prague in 2022, Chişinău and Granada in 2023, and the UK in 2024).

Nevertheless, like Mitterrand’s proposed Confederation, this forum has raised concerns. This is because the EPC is intended for non-EU states, some of which, like Ukraine, want to join the EU. Is the EPC an antechamber to EU accession, or a consolation prize for states that will never become EU members? The EPC has at least avoided the principal failing of the

100. H. Cooper, J. E. Barnes, E. Schmitt, and L. Jakes, “As Russia Advances, NATO Considers Sending Trainers into Ukraine”, *The New York Times*, May 16, 2024.

Confederation by including security questions in its agenda. It also supports France's return to the eastern flank by providing the occasion for regular meetings between leaders, particularly between the French president and his Moldovan counterpart, Maia Sandu,¹⁰¹ with French efforts leading to the signing of a bilateral agreement between France and Moldova.

At a time when Chişinău is on the front line of the Ukrainian conflict, has welcomed more than 100,000 refugees, and has been targeted by repeated destabilization attempts by the pro-Russian, separatist region of Transnistria,¹⁰² France has shown its support by backing Moldova's bid to join the EU, alongside that of Ukraine, with both countries officially becoming candidates in June 2022. Nevertheless, as in Ukraine's case, the existence of a secessionist region is an obstacle to accession. Paris also signed a defense cooperation agreement in fall 2023. This agreement covers training of military personnel, support for capability development, and possible defense procurement. France also wants to help increase the security of Moldovan airspace. In the wake of this agreement, Moldova announced the purchase of a Thales GM200 radar.¹⁰³

101. Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the second EPC summit in June 2023. See also "À Chisinau en Moldavie, Emmanuel Macron entrouvre les portes de l'Union européenne à l'Ukraine", *Le Monde*, June 16, 2022.

102. Transnistria proclaimed its independence in December 1991, leading to a war that ended when the Russian army intervened in the summer of 1992. Over 1,000 Russian soldiers have since been stationed in the region under the pretext of a peacekeeping mission. Transnistria is not internationally recognized, even by Russia, and only has official relations with three other non-recognized states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Artsakh.

103. "Accord de défense entre la France et la Moldavie", Ministère des Armées, October 6, 2023.

Reinforcing deterrence and defense in the East

In parallel with prompting direct aid to Ukraine, Russia's war of aggression has also, and above all, compelled France to rethink its military posture in the east, and particularly its contribution to the Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) adopted by NATO in 2020.¹⁰⁴ Although some aspects related to nuclear deterrence, intelligence, or specific capabilities (cyber, space, and underwater) tend to remain under strict national control, NATO remains the key architecture for other domains of collective defense in Europe, prompting France to reinvest politically and militarily in the integrated command structure.¹⁰⁵ To grasp the strategic issues underlying this renewed commitment, we must first look at how DDA strategy has evolved since February 2022, in terms of forward presence and operational plans. We will then put France's contributions in the three main domains—land, air, and sea—into perspective against this background before going on to explore other forms of cooperation and security partnership in the region.

Europe's collective defense after 2022

Barely four months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO held its annual summit in Madrid. A new Strategic Concept was adopted, the first since 2010, on which work had begun in 2020. It noted the deterioration of the geostrategic situation, declaring that, for the first time in two decades, "the Euro-Atlantic Area is not at peace".¹⁰⁶ This document provides an overarching political framework for major changes in both posture and planning.

The forward presence and the eVA

On the evening of February 24, 2022, the North Atlantic Council authorized the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), US General Tod Wolters, to activate "Part 1" of the Graduated Response Plans (GRP) drawn up by SHAPE for emergency situations. As a result, the NATO Response Force (NRF) was deployed for the first time as part of a collective defense

104. S. Covington, "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area", Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 2, 2023.

105. G. Garnier, "La France dans l'OTAN : de l'allié difficile au contributeur essentiel", *Focus stratégique*, No. 115, Ifri, June 2023.

106. *NATO Strategic Concept*, Madrid, July 2022.

mission.¹⁰⁷ France was very directly affected by this decision, since in January 2022 it had assumed standby command responsibility for the NRF's land and air components for a year. The forces sent to the eastern flank, particularly those of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), supplemented a forward posture that had already been gradually strengthened, both through the NATO framework and via national initiatives, including the 20,000 US soldiers under the United States European Command (EUCOM) deployed as reinforcements as part of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).

The immediate reinforcement of the forward posture in the days that followed the invasion of Ukraine will remain in place for a long time to come. As attritional warfare was taking hold in Ukraine, the rest of the eastern flank is taking stepped up to boost the credibility of its defense along NATO's eastern border in the land, air, and sea domains, while the other domains, particularly space, cyber, and information, were also undergoing posture changes, albeit of a more limited and discreet nature due to prerogatives that fell largely within the national sovereign framework. All of these activities were now grouped together under the terms "forward presence", when referring to long-term deployments, and "enhanced Vigilance Activities" (eVA), in relation to time-limited operations, training, or exercises.

As is often the case, the land component has seen the lion's share of changes, since it is the most visible and thus most suited to demonstrating NATO's strategic solidarity against the Russian threat. Three noteworthy developments were launched at the Madrid Summit and intensified the following year in Vilnius:

- The creation of four new multinational battlegroups in the countries of the eastern flank that had until then hosted the tailored Forward Presence (tFP): Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. There is now a continuous "curtain of allied forces" stretching from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea in the south. Although the term eFP is still widely used, the official designation is now Forward Land Forces (FLF).¹⁰⁸
- These forces, hitherto limited in scale to battalions, can now be scaled up to brigade-size units "where and when required".¹⁰⁹ This takes different forms depending on the framework nation and host country: while Germany and Canada, the framework nations in Lithuania and Latvia, envisage the permanent deployment of full brigades, others, such as France, the UK, and US, prefer to adopt a more reactive posture by establishing advance brigade command and control elements,

107. "SACEUR Statement on the Activation of the NATO Response Force", NATO, February 25, 2022. The NRF has only been activated twice, both times for humanitarian missions: Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and following the earthquake in Pakistan in 2006. See "NATO Response Force", NATO, July 27, 2023, available at: www.nato.int.

108. A. Whyte "Estonia Now UK Military's Largest Overseas Deployment Worldwide", Eesti Rahvusringhääling, August 10, 2023.

109. "Madrid Summit Declaration", NATO, June 29, 2022, available at: www.nato.int.

prepositioning stocks, and installing infrastructure to accommodate a larger number of allied forces.

- Finally, the reinforcement of “multinational” command structures at the division and corps levels to enable a swift scale-up of land forces in the event of conflict in the east. This development depends on the acceleration of the project to improve military mobility in Europe and logistical support in the rear area.

The air component of the forward presence has also undergone major changes. In January 2023, NATO’s Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) based at Ramstein took steps to harmonize activities by grouping all eastern flank missions under a comprehensive directive known as Air Shielding. This mission is subdivided into two pillars:

- The first pillar comprises Air Policing and air defense missions carried out by fighter detachments in the Baltic states inherited from Baltic Air Policing and enhanced Air Policing, now reinforced by Vigilance Activities flown in some cases from the countries of Western Europe.
- The second pillar, known as “Reinforcement”, relies on voluntary contributions from nations to carry out diverse missions such as the deployment of surface-based air and missile defense (SBAMD), but also the adoption of a new concept for the reactive use of air power (Agile Combat Enhancement, ACE).

Finally, the naval component of the forward presence has experienced the least radical transformation. The four permanent naval groups have been reinforced and, most importantly, delegated to SACEUR: Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG) 1 and 2, each consisting of three to six frigate-class vessels and a destroyer or command ship and generally deployed in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, respectively; and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasure Groups (SNMCMG) 1 and 2, each consisting of four to eight minehunter ships and also deployed in the two maritime basins adjoining the NATO countries. Also worthy of note is the regular activation of STRIKFORNATO, a naval command based in Lisbon under the direct authority of SACEUR, which is responsible for the operational control of US carrier battlegroups, and now also French and even British ones (see below).

Presence, deterrence, or defense?

The reinforcement of the “forward presence” on NATO’s eastern flank raises a fundamental question about the strategic purpose of these forces. This mission was launched in 2004 in the air domain to fill a capability gap in air policing, then in 2016 changed into one of “reassurance”¹¹⁰ for NATO’s eastern members. The goal then was to demonstrate strategic solidarity

110. G. Lasconjarias, “Forces terrestres et réassurance : quelles options pour l’Alliance ?”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 65, Ifri, January 2016.

within NATO, *despite and without jeopardizing* the guarantees offered to Russia in the 1997 Founding Act.

The “tripwire” mechanism, well-known during the Cold War (see above), rested essentially on the concept of deterrence by punishment: it gave the attacker a chance of military success, but relied on its ability to influence his calculations that the cost of the inevitable response would outweigh the benefits of aggression. It was, of course, a bet that assumed a certain level of risk aversion on Moscow’s part. Russia’s crossing of the threshold on February 24, 2022, despite threats of Western sanctions, did nothing to reassure NATO’s eastern flank members, even though it was outside the territory covered by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The consolidation of the forward presence forces initiated in 2022 thus attested to a shift toward a defensive posture, or one of deterrence by denial. The very term “forward defense” was avoided, however, because it referred specifically to NATO’s Cold War doctrine. The problem during this period, particularly for the Federal Republic of Germany, was similar to that now facing the countries of the eastern flank. In any defensive system relying on retaliation in the event of attack and the subsequent arrival of reinforcements, all or some of the most exposed territories will inevitably be occupied and transformed into a battlefield if the deterrence fails. Ukraine’s struggle to regain areas that were lost in the first days of the large-scale Russian offensive in February 2022 has further increased the concern about a lack of forward defense arrangements. Following this logic, the Baltic states have adopted a stance of ceding “not one inch” of occupied territory.

During the Cold War, as now, this forward defense approach had a more mixed reception in the capitals less exposed to the threat. Three principal arguments were then, and are now, put forward. The first concerns an operational dilemma: the further forward the forces, the greater the distance to defend, and the higher the risk of lines being stretched too thin. Operational logic favors a large reserve force that can be used to plug gaps rather than a fixed posture liable to be caught in a vice. The second counterargument is more strategic: a reluctance to commit too many forces that can then no longer be used for other missions. Again, this dilemma was well known during the Cold War, notably when Germany accused France of depleting its European forces for the sake of its colonial ventures. The third and final counterargument relates to the “security dilemma” and the question of strategic stability: the stronger and further forward the defense force, the more likely it is that the enemy it is supposed to deter will interpret it as an offensive posture.

A new deterrence and defense architecture

As well as reviewing the forward presence posture, NATO has adapted to the new strategic reality by thoroughly updating its military strategy regarding collective defense. From the first wake-up call in 2014, NATO drew certain conclusions about Russia's military revisionism in Europe that fed into ideas about reviving the collective defense missions for which it was originally founded. This evolution was confirmed by the adoption of the DDA concept in June 2020, before work had even started on the future Strategic Concept that determines its broader political framework. In the years to come, the DDA will gradually transform the collective defense architecture by affecting the force model, the command structures, and operational and capability planning.

Force model and command structure

One of the innovations adopted at the Madrid Summit was the New "NATO Force Model" (NFM), designed to replace the system inherited from the 1999 Strategic Concept and the post-9/11 years, when NATO's fundamental orientation was necessarily expeditionary. The Alliance's core military strategy was then reoriented toward force projection and crisis management at a time when its members were quickly decreasing their high intensity warfare capabilities. The result was an exclusive focus on the NRF, which was created in 2002 and initially comprised 13,000 troops. Even after the NRF was expanded to 20,000 and then 40,000 soldiers, it covered no more than 5 percent of NATO's total military, not including the US. Although forces "affiliated" to the NRF at the Force Sourcing Conferences could, up to a certain point, be audited by SACEUR, the latter had almost zero visibility on the readiness levels of most of the remaining forces, which made it difficult to plan large, conventional campaigns.

The NFM adopted in Madrid covers most existing "usable" forces in the Euro-Atlantic area. It creates a pool of forces divided into three levels of readiness: Tier 1, with "over 100,000 personnel" at a high level of readiness of up to ten days, Tier 2, with "around 200,000" personnel deployable in thirty days, and Tier 3, with "at least 500,000 personnel" that can be mobilized in less than three months. Altogether, these 800,000 personnel – including some from reserve forces – represent the bulk of NATO's usable forces in a major conflict. Looking beyond the numbers, which say little about capabilities, SACEUR's strategic advisor states that Tiers 1 and 2 include a total of 100 brigades, 1,400 fighter aircraft, and 250 ships and submarines.¹¹¹

Based on the NFM, which as of 2024 is still in the process of being implemented, the Madrid Summit stipulated the creation of an Allied Reaction Force (ARF) to replace the NRF and the VJTF as a joint rapid response force. Although the contours of the ARF remain vague, it is likely to

111. S. Covington, "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence", *op. cit.*

be smaller than the old NRF, with around 15,000 soldiers, in other words one or two joint brigades accompanied by air and naval components, all from Tier 1 but directly put under the operational command of SACEUR.¹¹² This “strategic reserve” could be used by the supreme commander in an emergency to respond very rapidly to a developing situation. Its deployment is, however, subject to final approval by NATO members of the new planning architecture and the new alert system.

Finally, alongside the revised force system there has also been a partial revision of the combined command system. In 2018, the NATO Military Committee created two new operational-level commands to complement the existing Joint Force Commands (JFC) in Brunssum and Naples.

- The first of these is JFC Norfolk, in Virginia, US, co-located with the headquarters of the US Second Fleet, which was dissolved in 2005 and reactivated in 2018 in response to Russia’s reinforcements in the North Atlantic. Oriented essentially toward naval control and maritime logistics, it has resumed old Cold War missions designed to secure lines of communication between Europe and North America against potential Russian interdiction efforts.
- The second is the Joint Support Enabling Command (JSEC) at Ulm, in Germany, which also has a logistics function. It ensures mobility and security in the rear area, particularly by enabling the transport of reinforcements in the event of conflict on the Alliance’s eastern flank.

Operational planning and capability implications

The final phase of the DDA reinforcement mission is a complete overhaul of the family of operational plans. Since 2015, NATO’s military strategy regarding collective defense has relied on five Graduated Response Plans (GRP) that emphasized responsiveness and deployability and were “for the VJTF [...] quite specific, then broader and less detailed for the NRF, and then finally quite broad and lacking in detail for the Follow-on Forces”.¹¹³ In line with the 2020 DDA Concept, in 2021 SACEUR produced a “strategic plan” (SASP) covering his entire area of responsibility, divided into three regional plans (North-West, Central, and South-East) and seven subordinate plans for the various combat domains (such as land, air, and sea).

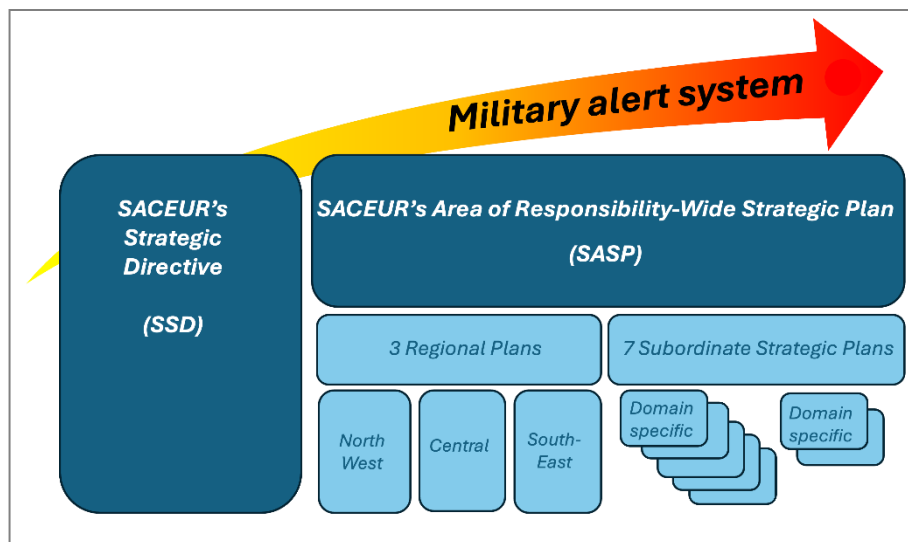
Finally, the activation of these plans depends on the new military alert system (MAS), which is based on three grades (“yellow”, “amber”, and “red”) corresponding to the different levels of NFM implementation and authority delegation to the operational chain under SACEUR’s command. Moving to an amber alert at SACEUR’s recommendation would enable activation of the SASP and all or some of the plans. As of spring 2024, the adoption of this

112. S. Pagani, “Focus on the ARF: What’s the Future of the Alliance’s Readiness forces?”, *ER: The Magazine of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps*, No. 36, Winter 2023, pp. 6-8.

113. S. Rynning, “The Future of NATO’s Conventional Deterrence”, *Atlantisch Perspectief*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2017, pp. 19-22.

new DDA family of plans and of the MAS had still not been confirmed by SACEUR, who is currently waiting for the Allies' agreement on certain delegations of authority from member states to the Allied Command Operations (ACO) chain.

Figure III-1: DDA Family of plans



Source: K.-H. Kamp, *NATO at 75: Time to Deliver on Its Promises. What Has to Happen at the Washington Summit*, DGAP, 2024.

While waiting for this new planning architecture to be put in place, NATO is also working to bring the capability planning process into line with the requirements of the DDA. For the new 2022-2026 cycle of the NATO Defense Planning Process (NDPP), the decision was made to align capability planning, managed by the Allied Command Transformation (ACT), more closely with the ACO chain's operational planning. The two processes have, until now, been only moderately harmonized.

In March 2024, the Supreme Commands (ACO and ACT) and the International Staff jointly produced the Minimum Capability Requirements (MCR) for a major joint operation, translating SACEUR's regional and strategic plans into actual figures in terms of capability volumes and readiness levels. Although the document has not been made public, its message has already started to trickle through. Significant efforts are anticipated (with an overall increase in capabilities of around 30 percent) to ensure proper execution of the plans, with particular attention paid to:

- ▀ Bettering Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD), a capability that was neglected for many years due to NATO's expeditionary posture;
- ▀ Increasing land forces in quantity and quality: they were most affected in terms of format by the expeditionary shift of the 2000s, and the land domain has the least favorable power balance with Russia;
- ▀ Improving combat service support functions, particularly in logistics, transportation, and medical support capable to cope with large casualties;

- ▀ Increasing defense spending with multi-year programming instruments and building up support to the industrial base;
- ▀ Paying attention of the question of human resources, given the widespread difficulties encountered by NATO's armies in recruiting and retaining candidates with profiles suitable for the military careers of the future: this problem includes, although is not limited to, the reserves, as well as the selective conscription systems used in certain Northern European countries.

More French boots on the ground

Reinforcement of the land component is the most visible aspect of the changes to France's posture on the eastern flank. It is primarily part of the build-up of the eFP in the form of battlegroups or, where needed, brigades. Three elements are worth mentioning here: first, France decided to make permanent its contribution to the British-led FLF-BG in Estonia, alongside a build-up of Franco-Estonian bilateral cooperation; second, France finally stood up to a long overdue expectation in assuming responsibility to lead as a framework nation of a multinational battlegroup in Romania; and third, the creation of the Army Command for Europe in Lille with a view to increasing deployments on the eastern flank.

Estonia: the Lynx goes on hunt

France's Estonian choice

From March 2017 to early 2022, the French Army contributed to the eFP mission in the framework of the *Lynx* mission, by deploying a combined arms company team (SGTIA), alternating every year between Estonia, within British-led battlegroup – rotating with a Danish company – and Lithuania, where it was stationed alongside five other nations in the German-led battlegroup.

According to eFP rotational plans, the French were set to leave Estonia in March 2022 and be relieved by the Danish army's Viking Company, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed the state of play: the decision was made to keep the SGTIA, comprising 12 Leclerc tanks, 8 VBCI, 8 VAB, and 2 EBG vehicles, in Tapa, Estonia. This combined arms company of around 350 soldiers was reinforced by the arrival, on March 17, of a light infantry company from the 7th Mountain Infantry Battalion, which joined a second British BG that doubled the size of the international force in the country.¹¹⁴ France continued to increase the profile of its activities in the months that followed, as shown by Operation Thunder Lynx, during which a full company from the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment was dispatched from France and

114. L. Brooke-Holland, "UK Forces in Estonia", House of Commons, November 21, 2022.

dropped from an A400M into an area secured by Estonian soldiers.¹¹⁵ The operation was repeated in May 2023, this time with more than 200 paratroopers.¹¹⁶ While the new forward presence format was being negotiated in Madrid and at the NATO HQ in the months that followed to ensure its long-term viability, several key decisions were taken. France would now have a permanent SGTIA within the British-led Forward Land Forces (FLF)-Battlegroup (BG), dubbed Operation Cabrit, taking the place of Denmark, which would instead contribute on a rotating basis to the Canadian-led FLF-BG in Latvia.

France's decision to take up a permanent position in Estonia was driven by two main factors. First, the bilateral defense relationship between Paris and Tallinn has grown significantly closer, at least since the decision in 2018 to send a contingent from an Estonian infantry section to Gao as part of Operation Barkhane, followed by the contribution of Estonian special forces to the Takuba Task Force.¹¹⁷ A sense of brotherhood in arms has developed, strengthening the relationship between the land forces and resulting in 2023 in the signing of a partnership agreement – on a strictly bilateral basis – between the French Army and the Estonian Defense League (see below).

Estonia has also supported several of Paris's diplomatic initiatives, including the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) launched by Macron in 2018.¹¹⁸ In return, France backed Estonia's proposal to issue Eurobonds to finance military aid to Ukraine. This mutual support is based in part on the relationship of trust that seems to have grown between the French president and then Estonian prime minister, Kaja Kallas. Finally, at the industrial level, Franco-Estonian relations are also growing closer. In 2023, Estonia joined the French initiative to jointly procure a batch of Mistral 3 very short-range surface-to-air missiles, and in 2024 announced its intention to purchase 12 CAESAR howitzers.¹¹⁹

The second reason for France's decision to remain in Estonia is the view that an FLF-BG consisting of just two nations, the UK and France, which have long-standing experience of interoperability (through joint exercises) and a shared strategic culture, would have broader "tactical coherence". In contrast, the German eFP in Lithuania was seen as a "Tower of Babel"¹²⁰ that lacked consistency. Nevertheless, the cancelation of the French detachment's move to Lithuania had to be explained to Vilnius, and "compensated" by the

115. B. Mallen, "Guerre en Ukraine : des parachutistes français sautent sur l'Estonie sur fond de tensions avec la Russie", *France 3 Centre et Val-de-Loire*, June 24, 2022.

116. "Largage de 200 parachutistes pour Thunder Lynx", *French Land Army*, June 1, 2023.

117. L. Lagneau, "L'Estonie donne le détail de sa participation à l'opération Barkhane", *Zone militaire*, May 11, 2018; "Les forces spéciales estoniennes en ordre de marche au Mali", *Forces Operation Blog*.

118. A. Glydén, "Kaja Kallas, Première ministre d'Estonie, invitée des 70 ans de *L'Express*", *L'Express*, December 12, 2023.

119. "La France, la Belgique, l'Estonie, la Hongrie et Chypre vont acheter des missiles sol-air Mistral", *France 24*, June 19, 2023; L. Lagneau, "L'Estonie envisage de commander au moins 12 CAESAR auprès de la France", *Zone militaire*, April 3, 2024.

120. Interview, État-Major des Armées, Paris, February 2024.

decision to maintain a fighter detachment for the Air Shielding mission in the country (see below).

Table III-2: FLF-BG and French troops in Estonia (Spring 2024)

Units		Principal equipment
1 armored cavalry squadron (UK)		14 Challenger 2 tanks 2 Warrior/4 Bulldog armored vehicles
2 infantry anti-tank companies (UK)		39 Warrior/19 Bulldog armored vehicles Javelin and NLAW missiles
1 artillery battery (UK)		6 AS90 155mm howitzers 7 M270 MLRS rocket-launchers
1 combat engineer company (UK)		20 Mastiff armored vehicles 4 construction vehicles and 2 dump trucks
1 SGTIA Lynx (FR) ~215 personnels	1 infantry company	11 Griffon armored vehicles
	1 engineer platoon	3 Griffon armored vehicles 2 EGRAP and 2 dump trucks
	1 light cavalry platoon	3 AMX 10-RC tanks/Jaguar and 4 VBL
	1 artillery observation team	1 VAB ATLAS
	1 medical team/ROL1 (SSA)	2 VAB SAN
1 light infantry company (FR) Outside FLF-BG		<i>Eryx/MMP</i> ~120 light troops
Combat service support team (FR)		1 VAB ELI, 12 GBC 180, etc./ ~ 80 personnels

Source: interviews at the FLF-BG, Tapa, March 2024.

Since the departure of the Danish contingent in 2023, the forward battlegroup in Estonia has thus been strictly “Franco-British”. It is stationed at the Tapa military base, around 100 km east of Tallinn, which also houses the Estonian 1st Brigade HQ. It comprises just over 1,000 soldiers from the two countries, slightly under a third of whom are support personnel. Strictly speaking, the battlegroup is an armored unit built around two Challenger 2 squadrons and a battery with a mixture of AS90s and MLRS270s. The French SGTIA is more focused on the middle segment, with a Griffon company and a platoon of AMX 10-RCR tanks. An artillery platoon of four CAESAR guns is regularly sent forward to reinforce the “fires” component.

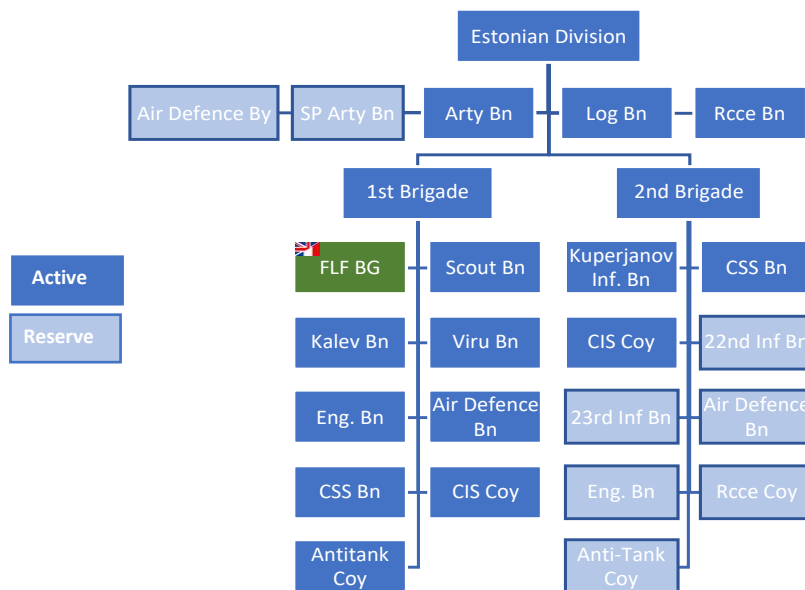
Finally, an additional light infantry company (LIC) of around 120 soldiers from paratroopers, marines or mountain troops is attached to Lynx for support purposes but operates outside the NATO FLF framework and under the umbrella of Franco-Estonian bilateral cooperation. The mission of the LIC, which was created in 2023, is to develop relations with the Estonian Defense League (*Eesti Kaitseliit*), a paramilitary organization dedicated to territorial defense.¹²¹

Future challenges for Mission Lynx

The central challenge for Mission Lynx is to develop interoperability with France's Estonian and British allies. This is both a tactical imperative for ensuring the efficient functioning and integration of a fairly small unit, and a strategic necessity to enable France to establish itself as an “model ally” in the Baltic region.

The Franco-Estonian military partnership is now booming. Estonia is rapidly modernizing its armed forces with the help of significant defense expenditure, which has risen from 2 percent to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in ten years and is set to rise to 3 percent over the next few years. With a population of 1.3 million and a military budget of €1.5 billion, it remains a lightweight country, with a land army of around 1,500 professional soldiers and 2,500 conscripts, whose service time has been extended from 8 to 11 months. It does, however, have a large number of well-trained reserves, with up to 30,000 available troops as well as a paramilitary force, the highly active Estonian Defense League.

Figure III-3: Structure of the Estonian division



Source: Estonian Defense Forces, mil.ee, 2024.

121. “La France renforce son partenariat avec l’Estonie en déployant une compagnie d’infanterie légère”, French Ministère des Armées, September 5, 2023.

Estonians land forces are structured around a single division of two brigades, only one of which is fully composed of active units. Capabilities are focused on infantry combat, with a rapidly growing artillery segment (purchases of Korean K9 howitzers, HIMARS rocket-launchers, and CAESAR howitzers). There is a clear emphasis on interdiction capabilities, as seen in the procurement of a multi-layer ground-based air defense system (Mistral 3 and Iris-T) and anti-ship coastal defense (Blue Spear missiles).

Estonia is also adapting its doctrine and its force employment concept in response to the lessons of the war in Ukraine. Its new national security concept, updated in 2023, represents a shift in doctrine.¹²² Whereas the previous plan envisaged fighting to slow down a potential Russian attack in order to give allied reinforcements time to arrive, the prevailing logic is now that of “deterrence by denial”. This takes the form of strengthened forward defenses (“not one inch of occupied territory”) in coordination with the other two Baltic states, which along with Tallinn have begun to construct a continuous line of modern fortifications along their eastern borders.¹²³ In the event of a conflict, the 1st Brigade, to which the FLF-BG is attached, will have the mission of defending the area north of Lake Peipus, which divides the country into two, with the 2nd Brigade covering the south.

Estonian armed forces are also swiftly incorporating the tactical lessons of the war in Ukraine. Reinforcing artillery and deep precision strike capabilities, building up fortified defenses, training in trench warfare and a more intensive use of drones are all key trends to increase operational readiness. French Lynx soldiers benefit from Estonia’s excellent urban combat training facilities, which include “ghost villages”, as well as camps for practicing trench combat. One particularly welcome aspect is the ability to organize maneuvers in open terrain, in forests, swamp areas, and across fields. The Light Infantry Company deployed alongside the Estonian Defense League also trains in partisan warfare (*coup de main*, ambush, hit-and-run operations) in the rear area, which resonates well with French units’ tactical heritage, be them paratroopers, French Marines, or Foreign Legion.

Relations with the British Army are very strong. With around 215 soldiers (not including the service support team), the Lynx SGTIA is more than twice as big as the other British basic units in the FLF-BG. Thanks to its coherence and its tactical autonomy (a mixed infantry and cavalry component with artillery and engineering support) as well as its wheeled mobility, which makes it highly responsive, it has quickly established itself as a key asset for the British tactical commander. At the personal level, there is

122. National Security Concept of Estonia, Republic of Estonia, March 22, 2023.

123. L. Lagneau, “Les pays baltes vont établir une ‘ligne défensive’ face à la Russie et à la Biélorussie”, *Zone militaire*, January 20, 2024.

also a strong sentiment of being brothers-in-arms. The 120th anniversary of the *Entente* was celebrated at Tapa by the two forces.¹²⁴

A number of aspects do, however, require further attention. On the British side, recurrent problems with maintaining equipment in operational condition have negatively impacted availability, particularly for the Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles. These availability issues seem to have limited opportunities for joint action. On the French side, officers are still not proficient enough in English to enable the optimal integration of forces. At a more technical level, the interoperability of tactical communication and information systems (CIS) has turned out to be a complex challenge; to date, it is insufficient for more than coordination. The various obstacles include data encryption keys for radio transmissions, but also differences in how networks are classified: the British operate at the Mission Secret level down to the lowest ranks, whereas the French communicate in Mission Restricted starting at battalion level. As a result, the deployment in 2023 of vehicles in the Scorpion range will not have enabled full exploitation at the Allied level of all the possibilities offered by collaborative, digitalized combat.¹²⁵

Finally, another major challenge for Mission Lynx over the next few years will be to keep pace with changes related to the build-up of forces. The Madrid Summit set an objective of increasing the volume of forward forces at the brigade level. The first eastern flank country to do so was Lithuania, where Germany, the framework nation, has committed to deploying a full brigade of around 4,700 troops on a permanent basis until 2027, structured around the existing multinational battlegroup, as well as two additional full battalions, including equipment and support services.

Estonia has not yet issued a request for a similar deployment of British forces, which are, in any case, not in a position to consider it due to their own problems with human resources, equipment, and funding.¹²⁶ Tallinn also says it would be satisfied with a demonstration of brigade projection capability during an exercise.¹²⁷ This requirement should be met during the Estonian Land Forces' Hedgehog (*Sii*) exercise in 2025 when the UK plans to deploy one of its two armored brigades from the 3rd Division.¹²⁸ The Lynx force must be able to match this upward trend by evolving at the battalion level, and to do so at the same time as the deployment of a full brigade to Romania as part of Mission *Aigle*.

124. @FrForcesEstonia, "This Day Marks the 120th Anniversary of the Entente Cordiale, a Diplomatic Agreement Signed Between the United Kingdom and France", X, available at: www.x.com.

125. Author interviews, Tapa, March 2024.

126. C. Gallardo, "UK Resists Pressure to Station Troops Permanently in Estonia", *Politico*, July 11, 2023.

127. Interviews at the Estonian Ministry of Defense, Tallinn, March 2024.

128. J. Klementi, "Brigade Assigned to Estonia Likely to be One of British Army's Strongest", *Eesti Rahvusringhääling*, October 23, 2023.

Romania: The Eagle's takeoff

The idea of a French deployment to Romania was initially floated in late 2021. When France assumed responsibility for the NRF standby command in January 2022, Macron announced his “readiness to go further and, within the NATO framework, commit to new missions in order to assume our full responsibilities in eFP-type missions, particularly in Romania, should they take place”.¹²⁹ The choice of Romania was unsurprising: it was one of the three countries on the eastern flank, along with Slovakia and Bulgaria, that did not benefit from the eFP in 2017 (see above). It is also consistent with a long-standing “Romanian penchant” that France demonstrated on multiple occasions over the last two centuries (itself founded on alleged Romania’s francophone and Francophile tradition).

In late January 2022 a survey mission was dispatched by the French Ministry of Armed Forces to work out the details of such a deployment, with France as the framework nation, which was seen as a chance for Paris to make up for the opportunity missed in 2017 (see above). As a result, the emergency deployment of what would become Mission *Aigle* (Eagle) in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine did not completely catch the French Army unprepared, although it took place more rapidly than planned, and in an even tenser strategic context.

Emergency deployment

When the NRF was activated on February 25, the pre-identified standby units were the 1st Infantry Regiment, with its VBCIs (heavy infantry fighting vehicles), and the 3rd Hussars Regiment, on AMX-10 RCs (light wheeled tanks), which were both preparing to take part in NATO’s Exercise Brilliant Jump 22 in Norway.¹³⁰ However, the urgency of the request and their levels of technical readiness meant it was not possible to deploy them within the necessary timeframe. It was ultimately the light infantrymen from the 27th Mountain Infantry Battalion, then on rotation at the combat-training center (CENTAC), who were chosen to form the VJTF’s “spearhead” battalion.

On February 28, 72 hours after NRF was activated, 500 French soldiers were boarding the five strategic transport aircraft chartered from the Ukrainian company Antonov, which fortunately happened to be outside Ukraine when Russia attacked. They were quickly joined by 300 Belgian soldiers at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base (MKAB), near the city of Constanța on the Black Sea. Although the Romanian maneuvering camp at Cincu, in the Carpathian Mountains, had been pre-identified to host the deployment, the lack of suitable infrastructure forced the spearhead battalion to remain 4

129. E. Macron, “Vœux aux armées du Président de la République”, January 19, 2022.

130. “Exercice Brilliant Jump 22 : intégration multinationale de l’état-major de la Brigade franco-allemande”, État-major des armées.

months at MKAB, where a US brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division was already deployed as part of the reinforcement of the European posture.

Following the deployment of heavy engineering capabilities at the Cincu training center, the site was able to host all the French and Belgian forces in the fall, temporarily joined by Dutch troops.¹³¹ The garrison was named “Camp Général Berthelot” as a tribute to the man who led the Army of the Danube during the First World War, and the French Military Mission to Romania (see above). The initial deployment conditions, which were rudimentary to say the least (partly housed in tents and plagued by all kinds of supply problems), were reported in the press, with concern expressed by two MP.¹³² The much-anticipated arrival of heavy capabilities, including Leclerc tanks but also CAESAR howitzers and LRU rocket-launchers, was also delayed by regulatory bottlenecks in Germany, where civil authorities barred the TRM 700-100 tank transports from driving on German highways because their “axle load” exceeded the level permitted by German road traffic regulations.¹³³ The convoy ultimately had to be sent by rail, which while an effective mode of transport requires transloading and increases projection time, with military trains taking longer to set up.

Table III-4: The FLF-BG Aigle in Romania in spring 2024

Basic units	Principal equipment
1 armored squadron	13 Leclerc XL main battle tanks, 32 VBL, 2 DCL, 2 MMP
1 mechanized infantry company	18 VBCI, 2 MMP, Eryx
1 mechanized infantry company (3 BEL sections - 1 LUX section)	~20 Piranha IIIC (BEL) and several Dingo 2 (LUX) and SPIKE
1 artillery battery	4 CAESAR, 3 LRU, 4-6 120 mm mortars, 2 COBRA radars, 2 MURIN radars, 1 drone system (SMDR)
1 engineer company	7 engineer VAB, 2 EGRAP, 3 EBG, 2 SCANIA dump trucks, 1 SDPMAC (mice- clearing), etc.
1 transmission section	-
Total: c. 1,000 including c. 800 French soldiers	
+ National Support Element (400 French soldiers)	

Source: interviews at BFCE/MND-SE, Bucharest, March 2024.

131. F. Cormier-Bouligeon, “Avis sur le Projet de Loi de Finances 2023, Tome VI – Préparation et Emploi des Forces: Forces terrestres”, National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, October 19, 2022.

132. J. Brabant, “Les soldats français déployés en Roumanie ont ‘froid’ et ‘faim’”, Mediapart, November 3, 2022.

133. L. Lagneau, “Les chars *Leclerc* n’ont pas été autorisés à emprunter les routes allemandes pour rejoindre la Roumanie”, *Zone militaire*, November 8, 2022.

Once it reached full capacity at the end of 2022, the battlegroup proved satisfactory, both in terms of operational readiness – holding its first NATO exercise (*Black Scorpion*) at the end of November – and strategic signaling. The media coverage of a dozen of *Leclerc* tanks maneuvering in the Turda and Smardan training ranges, twenty kilometers from the Ukrainian border, was a clear statement of political will. The same goes for the demonstration of unit firing capabilities during Exercise Eagle Royal in February and April 2023, as well as the coordinated firing of the French LRU and Romanian and US M142 HIMARS at the Capu Midia coastal firing range.¹³⁴

The challenges of the Romanian theater

The long-term sustainability of Mission *Aigle* is a major challenge for France, putting its credibility on the line as a leading NATO military power capable of acting as a “framework nation”. Its responsibilities are clearly defined around three requirements:

- To combine national and multinational contributions to ensure long-term force generation matching the expected force volume – at the battalion and, if needed, at the brigade levels;
- To be the main point of contact with the “host nation” and ensure the coherence of the unit by serving as an integrator at the tactical and support levels;
- To provide key capabilities to enable large units with command and control (C2), combat and combat service support, in coordination with the host nation.

As in Estonia, but with the additional responsibility of the framework nation, the challenge of interoperability with partners is key for two reasons. The first is the multinational nature of the FLF-BG *Aigle*. Drawing on its experience in the Baltic states, France has chosen, as in Estonia, to prioritize cohesion and mutual trust rather than collaborate with many different nations. Although the original plan was to include small company- or platoon-level contributions from countries such as Portugal or Slovenia, France finally decided to focus on a limited number of partners to maximize operational effectiveness in the event of actual combat.

Belgium was an obvious choice due to its cultural and linguistic ties with France, but also because of the motorized capacity (CaMo) partnership, as part of which the Belgian Land Component is in the process of procuring vehicles from the French *Scorpion* program.¹³⁵ The force is rounded out by a Luxembourgish section on *Dingo 2* vehicles, natively integrated with the

134. “Mission *AIGLE* – Retour sur l’exercice EAGLE ROYAL”, Ministère des Armées, May 15, 2023.

135. L. Lagneau, “Général Schill : le partenariat franco-belge CaMo est le ‘modèle à suivre’ pour les futures coopérations européennes”, *Zone militaire*, April 1, 2024.

Belgian company.¹³⁶ The third partner was initially set to be the Netherlands, which volunteered to contribute a paratrooper company from 11 Air Assault Brigade.¹³⁷ However, the latter's integration into a German division and the existence of the German-Dutch corps led the Dutch government to prioritize upcoming deployments in Lithuania as part of the German FLF-BG in Rukla. The decision was ultimately made to form a long-term partnership with Spain, specifically the Marine Infantry Brigade's 3rd Mechanized Landing Battalion, which is set to deploy a company on Piranha IIIC vehicles by the end of 2024.¹³⁸

The partnership with the Romanian army also poses some challenges. Beyond a shared history and certain recent deployments – Romania contributed to EUTM Mali and the Takuba Task Force –, the two militaries remain quite dissimilar. First, the francophone argument is much overrated. While French used to be widely spoken in Romanian elite, it is now a fairly rare skill among Romanian officers whose new generation is often US-educated. For many of them, past deployments in Iraq and/or Afghanistan amount to a key experience, much more influential than anything else.

Second, despite the geographic proximity to Ukraine, the threat perception of Russia is less acute than in northeastern Europe. Bucharest's strategic concerns are first toward the Black Sea and maritime security (see below), followed by the stability of neighboring Moldova and finally that of the Western Balkans, with an almost 500-kilometer border with Serbia. Although, unlike in Bulgaria, pro-Russian sentiment is extremely marginal, Romania's attitude toward Moscow is more cautious than that of its northern neighbors. Bucharest has kept a low profile on its military aid to Ukraine and has tried to play down border incidents, such as the downing of several Shahed-136 drones over the Danube Delta in the Fall of 2023. As happy as it is with NATO's forward presence on its soil, it has also shown concerns about not appearing too provocative toward Russia, occasionally translating into a more cautious attitude regarding French strategic signaling attempts.

Finance management is another well-known area of concern in Romania.¹³⁹ Beyond the problem of corruption, which has decreased sharply in the last twenty years, the management of public accounts negatively impacts the effectiveness of military spending. Despite the government's stated target of spending 2.5 percent of GDP on defense in 2023, the actual figure was barely 1.5 percent because of lower-than-expected revenues, and changing priorities during the election campaign.

136. "AIGLE – Cérémonie d'intégration de la section luxembourgeoise", Ministère des Armées, March 24, 2023.

137. "AIGLE – Arrivée de la compagnie d'infanterie néerlandaise", Ministère des Armées, August 8, 2022.

138. Interview, État-Major des Armées, Paris, February 2024.

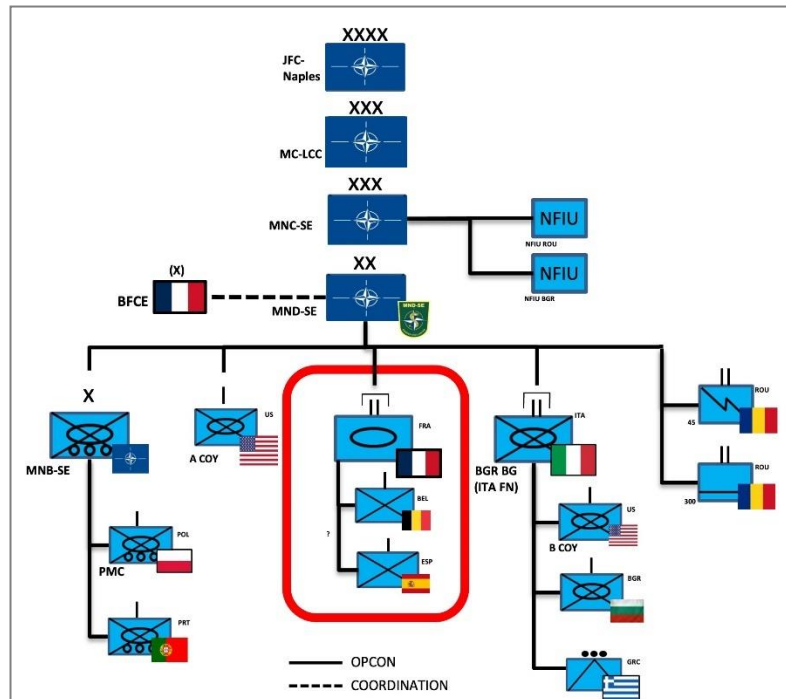
139. The proper use of public spending was identified as a "vulnerability" in the Romanian *National Defense Strategy* published in 2020.

As in other countries with declining demography, the human resources challenge is also considerable: with total numbers reported at around 70,000 troops (45,000 in the land forces), the armed forces are struggling to meet their manpower targets, impacting their readiness levels. Although the military remains respected as an institution, low salaries (barely adjusted for inflation) and a lack of trust in government authorities, have tainted the image of public careers. Nevertheless, there are no plans to reintroduce conscription. This means that specialist positions are chronically understaffed, particularly in technical support and maintenance. This shortfall is reflected in variable or unsatisfactory equipment readiness rates.

Infrastructure problems are also significant, as shown by the initial difficulties met on the Cincu site. Beyond housing conditions, the opportunities offered by the training ranges are more limited than the relatively low population density (81 inhabitants per sq.km) would lead to think. For financial reasons, numerous sites have been sold to the private sector real estate, and their lack is being felt as the focus turns toward rebuilding military strength. Training facilities are minimalists, and terrains lack tactical features, reflecting an operational culture dominated by firepower rather than maneuver. Finally, it is almost politically and administratively impossible to carry out maneuvers in open terrain, which further limits options for exercises.

The logistical challenge is considerable. At the strategic level, and despite concerted efforts to improve military mobility within Europe, regulatory barriers to road movements remain strong. At the theater level, the country is cut in two by the Carpathians, the lack of road infrastructure presents a huge logistical problem, with just 1,000 km of expressways and a patchy network of secondary roads for a land of 240,000 sq.km. Around 75 percent of bridges cannot take tank transporters, which greatly complicates mobility during exercises.

Figure III-5: FLF-BG in NATO Command Structure



Source: Interviews at BFCE, March 2024.

In terms of communications, the problems are the same as in Estonia. While the compatibility of operational communication and information systems (CIS) with the Belgian company does not seem to be an insurmountable problem, interoperability with the Romanian forces is more at the level of cooperation than tactical integration.

As for C2 (see Figure III-6), the FLF-BG answers to NATO's "peacetime" chain of command, with ACO operational command and national control. The battlegroup is directly under the authority of the Multinational Division South-East (MND-SE), which has its headquarters in Bucharest and reports in turn to the Multinational Corps (MNC-SE) based in Sibiu. In ACO's complex chain of command, the Corps answers to the Allied Land Command in Izmir and the JFC in Naples. The MND-SE also has authority over the Bulgaria battlegroup, led by Italy, as well as a multinational brigade (MNB-SE) that hosts small Portuguese, Polish, and US detachments.

Following the Madrid Summit, France worked closely with MND-SE to set up a Brigade Forward Component Element (BFCE) as a spearhead staff for a future full brigade to be deployed on exercises or, in the event of activation, for certain defense plans. Staffed by personnel from either of the two French Army's armored brigades, BFCE's mission in Romania is to prepare the shift from battalion to brigade level. The annual national exercises Dacian Spring and Dacian Fall provide opportunities to test this capability, with the first full deployment of the French 7th Armored Brigade slated for Dacian Spring 25. Around fifty *Leclerc* tanks may be deployed for

the occasion. If confirmed, it would be the first time in twenty years: the last exercise on this scale took place in Ukraine in 2002.¹⁴⁰

Future challenges for the land component

To round out this discussion of the two FLF-BGs to which France contributes, it is worth taking a step back and highlighting the principal challenges the land forces will have to overcome in order to establish themselves on the eastern flank. This was one of the main motivations behind the creation, in October 2023, of the Army Command for Europe (*Commandement Terre pour l'Europe* – CTE) in Lille under the Land Forces Operational Command (CFOT). Creation of CTE stems from a more general drive to recreate area-specific operational-level headquarters for the Africa, Asia, and Homeland. It has three missions:

- National supervision of French land forces deployed under NATO or EU operational command in Europe, such as Mission *Gerfaut* within EUMAM in Poland, the EU/NATO Operation *Althea* in Bosnia, as well as *Aigle* and *Lynx* missions: in each of these, France has Senior National Representatives (SNR) who ensure strategic coherence and liaison with the French national authorities.
- Operational control for operations or missions under national chain of command, such as the LIC in Estonia or the Operational Training Detachment (DIO) in Armenia¹⁴¹;
- Service Support in the form of dedicated teams, in liaison with national logistics support systems to ensure the consistency of logistical aspects in the broad sense (especially maintenance, transportation and financing).

One of the peculiarities of the French Army's activities in Europe is that, with a few exceptions (notably the *Althea* mission in Bosnia), they are classed as "operational missions" (MISSOPS) rather than external operations (OPEX). This has a variety of consequences on aspects ranging from the rules of engagement to parliamentary control, but particularly on support since the additional costs are covered by the French Army's operational program budget (BOP) rather than the interministerial OPEX budget. At almost €300 million for 2023, this figure is putting a strain on the support available for the land forces, leading the Defense Commission's rapporteurs for opinion to request the transfer of these budgets to the OPEX BOP.¹⁴²

140. "Il y a quasi 20 ans, 45 chars *Leclerc* étaient déployés en Ukraine pour un exercice majeur", blog Mars Attaque, February 7, 2022, available at: <https://mars-attaque.blogspot.com>.

141. L. Lagneau, "La France va envoyer des instructeurs militaires en Arménie", *Zone militaire*, October 23, 2023.

142. F. Cormier-Bouligeon, "Avis de la défense nationale et des forces armées sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2024, tome IV – Préparation et emploi des forces : forces terrestres", Assemblée Nationale, October 26, 2023, pp. 43-44; B. Lachaud, "Avis de la défense nationale et des forces armées sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2024, t. III – Défense soutien et logistique interarmées", Assemblée Nationale, October 26, 2023, pp. 36-37.

The logistical challenge

The various challenges related to French land component on the eastern flank include the question, mentioned above, of logistics, and in particular the transportation. According to current defense staff estimates, an average of sixty days needs to be allowed to transport an equipment convoy from a military site in mainland France to the Cincu garrison in Romania.

This problem was first flagged in 2017, when General Hodges, then commander of US Army Europe (USAREUR), was held in his plane for several hours on the runway at Papa Air Base in Hungary while waiting for administrative authorization to disembark.¹⁴³ The subject was highlighted as a priority on the EU-NATO cooperation agenda, and in a declaration by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs.¹⁴⁴ In 2018, an Action Plan on Military Mobility was adopted by the Commission, and the Netherlands launched a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project. Updated in a “Military Mobility Plan 2.0” adopted in 2022, this initiative tackles the problem at three different levels: civil infrastructure, regulatory barriers, and specific resources deployed by the armed forces.

Civil infrastructure (roads, railroads, ports, and airports) is the basis of any military mobility: the EU Action Plan estimates that there is a 93 percent overlap between the military network priorities and the projects of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), benefitting from the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), a fund worth €1.7 billion for 2021-2027. The main objectives include increasing airports’ capacity for military operations, developing road sections, improving land and sea accessibility in ports, repairing bridges and viaducts, and modernizing rail-road terminals.¹⁴⁵ One of the most obvious challenges is the development of railroads in the Baltic states, where the track gauge is different from the European standard, forcing French convoys heading for Estonia to transload in Lithuania.¹⁴⁶

When it comes to regulatory constraints and specific standards for military convoys, the difficulties arise from national sovereignty and a lack of political will, as exemplified by the German restrictions on tank transporters. The European Defense Agency (EDA) has implemented a Cross-Border Movement Permission protocol signed by the twenty-seven EU member states and Norway. Three Technical Arrangements, which specify the administrative procedures for each mode of transport, must be followed for cross-border movements.

143. D. Herszenhorn, “Call for ‘Military Schengen’ to Get Troops Moving”, *Politico*, August 4, 2017.

144. Improving Military Mobility in the European Union, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, 2017

145. M. S. Chihaiia, “Advancing Military Mobility in Europe: An Uphill Battle”, Friederich Naumann Foundation, April 11, 2023.

146. Interview at the Defense Mission, Tallin, March 2024.

The third point relates to the specific measures taken by the French armed forces to overcome the obstacles encountered when dealing with the first two points. For the French armed forces, this task falls to the Center for Operations and Transport Support (CSOA), which works closely with the Doctrine for the Employment of the French Armed Forces. The latter has assessed various options for different itineraries and modes of transport. While the road route through Germany is theoretically the most efficient, administrative constraints make it preferable to use rail, despite the transloading required. Alternative routes have been tested, including a sea route to Romania via the Greek port of Alexandroupoli, which since 2022 has become a key artery for delivering military supplies to Ukraine.¹⁴⁷ It was first used in November 2023 while disengaging *Aigle 2* as part of Operation *Notos*.¹⁴⁸ A third route via Italy and the Western Balkans has also been proposed and is currently being investigated. Finally, air transport is preferable for staff rotations but is unsuitable for transporting equipment, given the scarcity of strategic lift.

The adoption of operational plans for rapid reinforcement and a force build-up at the brigade level and beyond does, however, raise the inevitable question of the prepositioning of equipment stocks near the theater – an issue identified by the US in 2016 through the European Deterrence Initiative (see below). In France, the Ministry of Armed Forces has begun work to this end with plans for an operational logistics base (OLB) in Lugoj, in western Romania, and a forward logistics support point (FLP) in Czechia, which would be located at the crossroads of North-East and South-East theaters. These sites would include pre-positioned stocks and depots, and possibly equipment for other NATO allies, as well as maintenance and repair facilities.

147. F. Alexandre, “Le port d’Alexandroupoli, l’atout grec de l’Otan”, RFI, January 7, 2024.

148. N. Gain, “Première relève par la mer pour la mission Aigle”, blog Force Operations, November 10, 2023.

Map III-6: Military mobility toward the eastern flank



Source: interviews at CTE, 2024; © É. Tenenbaum/Ifri.

Large units: a capability challenge

A second major undertaking for the land forces in Europe is the ability to shift to large units. After thirty years of overseas expeditionary operations focused on stabilization and counter-terrorism, with the combined arms battlegroup as the main tactical unit, the new DDA family of plans put the emphasis on large unit warfare at brigade, division, and corps levels. Each of these present its own challenges, but they all pose a twofold challenge to the French Army: on force generation and key organic enablers.

At the brigade level, the main issue is force generation, and the need, whether expressed by the host nation, to have it stationed on an intermittent, regular, or permanent basis. France has clearly indicated that it does not want to go down the same route as Germany in Lithuania by permanently stationing a brigade in Romania or a battalion in Estonia. This position is understood and, for the moment, accepted by both partners, but it depends on the ability to demonstrate the rapid deployment of a N+1 unit level if needed, which is the very purpose of exercises such as Dacian Spring in Romania, and Spring Storm and Hedgehog in Estonia.

The division and corps levels pose different problems. For many years now the French Army has suffered from capability gaps needed to enable these big units to perform their tasks, especially when it comes to deep area. These include niche capabilities present, if at all, in preciously small numbers

in the French land forces, such as ground-based air defenses, electronic warfare, and above all deep fires and precision strikes, along with associated intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR) systems, which supposes in turn a large load of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Other support capabilities, such as military police for rear area security or medical support, are also insufficiently resourced. France does, however, retain certain rare enabling assets, typical of divisional or corps-level capabilities, such as qualified and experienced C2 staff and communications and information systems (CIS), special operational forces and combat helicopters. For this reason, there are plans to deploy a French Army Aviation (ALAT) detachment in Romania.

Finally, there is a human dimension to the division and corps levels that plays an important role in establishing partnerships. The French Army's 1st Division, strategically focused on Europe, has started to develop close ties with the MND-SE in Bucharest. Establishing partnerships of this kind with the Estonian division, but also between the French Rapid Reaction Corps (RRC-FR) and the counterpart MNC-SE in Sibiu and MNC-NE in Szczecin, could increase rapport and interoperability in the future.

Beyond the FLF: a full range of partnerships

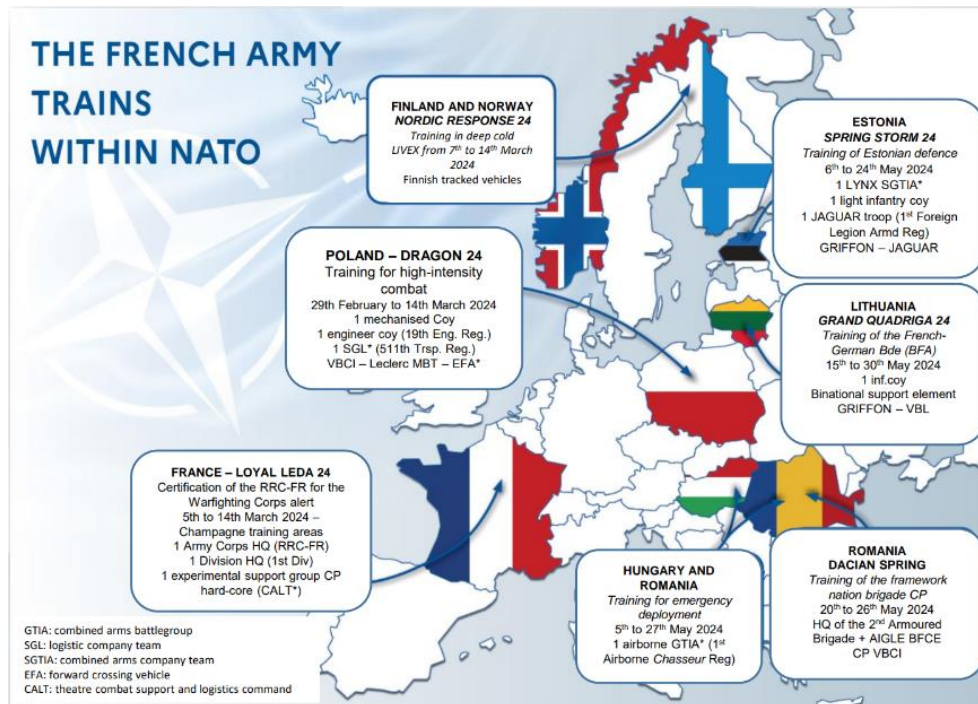
The scale of the FLF deployments in Romania and Estonia is only the most visible part of French land forces' activities on the eastern flank. As the logistical issues demonstrate, the eastern flank needs to be envisioned as a single theater, or at least three heavily interconnected theaters (North-East, Central, and South-East), stretching from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Although it is obviously not feasible to deploy permanent units everywhere, it does seem essential to develop relationships with all potential partners.

National or multinational exercises, especially those coordinated by NATO via various bodies, such as the Joint Warfare Center in Stavanger, Norway, provide essential opportunities to demonstrate this expanded horizon. They include Steadfast Defender, organized by SHAPE, which generally combines numerous national exercises that are integrated into the NATO framework. In March 2024, for example, France took part in the Polish exercise Dragon 24, which brought together 20,000 soldiers from 9 nations as part of Steadfast Defender. France was the second-largest contributor, with a GTIA of around 700 soldiers from the 7th Armored Brigade and 12 *Leclerc* tanks.¹⁴⁹ Almost concurrently, the 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade also deployed a GTIA to the Nordic Response exercise in Norway and Finland.¹⁵⁰

149. C. Pietralunga, "L'OTAN renoue avec les exercices militaires d'ampleur", *Le Monde*, March 10, 2024.

150. H. de Lestapis, "Face à Vladimir Poutine, les grandes manœuvres de l'armée française en Norvège", *Le Monde*, April 5, 2024.

Map III-7: Major French Army exercises in spring 2024



Source: Letter from the French Army Chief of Staff (CEMAT), April 2, 2024.

In the South-East zone, beyond the special case of Romania, joint exercises and training help to strengthen ties with key partners in the theater. The time spent in Greece by the *Aigle 2* as part of Operation *Notos* provided an opportunity to hold the *Olyco* exercise at the Petrochori training range, where French VBCI and *Leclercs* maneuvered and fired alongside Greek *Marders* and *Leopard 2s*, as well as US *Abrams* tanks.

Finally, France is also active in the areas adjoining the eastern flank, such as the Western Balkans and the Caucasus. In Bosnia, for example, France has recommitted to the EUFOR (Operation *Althea*), which has been held jointly with NATO since 2004, with the mission of maintaining security stability in the country following the Dayton Agreement. Its principal contributors are Romania, Turkey, and Italy. On top of its small contingent dedicated to human intelligence, in 2024 France will staff the Strategic Reserve Force (SRF) out of a squadron from the 5th Dragoon Regiment in Mailly-le-Camp.¹⁵¹ Finally, as mentioned above, the DIO deployed by France in Armenia in late 2023 also helps to strengthen knowledge and partnerships on the periphery of the Euro-Atlantic area.

151. L. Lagneau, “L’armée de Terre se déploie de nouveau en Bosnie-Herzégovine”, *Zone militaire*, April 8, 2024.

Air Shielding, French style

Although overshadowed by the land component since February 2022, the French Air Force has been the first service to deploy on the eastern flank in recent history. Since 2007, it has regularly taken part – on average for four months a year – to NATO Air Policing over the Baltic states. The mission has been significantly expanded since then, with a first phase of reinforcement in 2014 and a second in 2022 as part of the eVA (see above). But AIRCOM's Air Shielding directive issued in 2023 also includes other air activities, such as air support, NATO surface-to-air defense, and increasing resilience in high-intensity conflict through the creation of a new form of partnership based on the Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept.

From Air Policing to Combat Air Patrols

The Air Policing mission is a key part of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD), which ensures permanent surveillance and protection of NATO members' airspaces. Each ally implements Air Policing over its own territory, such as France, through its permanent air security posture. Aerial surveillance is undertaken using a network of ground radar stations and Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft, from NATO's E-3 AWACS fleet or equivalent national systems, all coordinated by the NATINAMDS information system that provides NATO's Air Command (AIRCOM) in Ramstein and national or regional Combined Air Operations Centers (CAOCs) with a common Recognized Air Picture.

Air policing is one of AIRCOM's two permanent peacetime missions, along with Ballistic missile defense (BMD). It enables Quick Reaction Alerts (QRA) to intercept foreign or unidentified aircraft over the Alliance's airspace. When they joined NATO in 2004, the Baltic states did not have a combat aviation able to perform air policing and had no prospect of being able to afford any. As a result, it was decided that the most capable Allies would, on a rotating and voluntary basis, carry out this mission in the Baltic states' relatively small airspace. France joined in 2007 and has completed ten four-month mandates in 16 years.

Until 2014, just one NATO detachment, comprising four air-to-air capable jets operated out of Šiauliai air base in Lithuania. In May 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, and before even the Newport NATO Summit, the posture evolved quickly to enhanced Air Policing (eAP). The number of aircraft based at Šiauliai was doubled, and two new air defense QRAs manned by 4-ship detachments were created, one at Ämari, Estonia and one at Malbork, Poland, although the latter was later manned exclusively by the Polish Air Force. This arrangement remained in place, with a few variations depending on availability, until February 2022.

On the morning of the Russian full-scale invasion on February 24, the French Air Force once again displayed a high level of readiness, as it had in the past (notably during Operations *Harmattan*, *Serval*, and *Chammal*). On standby after military intelligence signaled alarming changes in the Russian order of battle, and because of its responsibility as commander of the air component of NATO's VJTF, it launched four *Rafales* in air-to-air configuration with MICA and long-range *Meteor* missiles from Mont-de-Marsan 118 Air Base. Supported by A330 Phénix and KC-135 tankers, it carried out a Combat Air Patrol (CAP) mission lasting several hours in Polish airspace, controlled by the French CAOC (CAPCO) in coordination with the NATO CAOC in Uedem, Germany.¹⁵²

CAP missions in Poland continued in the following days, and the transport fleet was mobilized, with a C-130J from the Franco-German squadron which carried out its first operational mission with a mixed crew, followed by an A400M transporting munitions and other equipment for the spearhead battalion deployed in Romania (see above). Meanwhile, as the EU issued a first sanction package on Russia, the National Air Operations Center (CNOA), based at Lyon-Montverdun, closed French airspace to all airplanes registered in Russia, or chartered, piloted, or owned by Russian companies or Russian nationals. The eAP posture continued its programmed cycle with a deployment of *Mirage 2000-5F* to Āmari, where they relieved Belgian F-16s in 2022, and then to Šiauliai in 2023 and 2024.¹⁵³

Table III-8: Structure of a French eAP detachment

Roles	Personnel
Fighter pilots	6
Mechanics	c. 40
Air commando team	c. 15
Firemen	6
Service Support Team (CIS, medical corps, etc.)	c. 30
Total	c. 100

Source: eAP press report, French Air Force, 2023.

From the summer of 2022 on, the course of the war in Ukraine, which was consuming a substantial part of the Russian air forces' activity, led AIRCOM to slightly reduce its posture in order to save its potential and use its resources more efficiently. A French eAP deployment is generally manned by *Mirage 2000-5F* from the 1/2 *Cigognes* fighter squadron. Altogether, the

152. S. Bourigault, "Réactions et conséquences de la guerre en Ukraine pour l'Armée de l'air et de l'espace", *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol. 2, No. 857, pp. 18-23.

153. "Renforcement de la posture défensive et dissuasive de l'OTAN sur le flanc Est", French Air and Space Force, available at: www.air.defense.gouv.fr.

mission mobilizes around 100 airmen and service support personnels for four months, under NATO operational control.

Operational activity revolves around two types of alert scrambles: training flights, known as Tango scrambles, and “real alerts”, known as Alpha scrambles, which are triggered by any suspicious aircraft entering an Allied flight information region (FIR) – not limited to Allied national airspace – and meeting any of the three following criteria:

- is not in radio contact with civilian air traffic control;
- has not filed a flight plan addressed to one of NATO’s two CAOC;¹⁵⁴
- is not using its transponder.

In such a situation, NATO’s CAOC (Udem, for the Baltic states) makes the decision to Alpha Scramble the QRA. Controlled by a Regional Control Center (RCC), the intercepting flight of two fighter aircraft takes off, and the lead aircraft approaches the suspicious aircraft from astern, positioning itself on its left side, slightly to the front, identifying it visually, and escorting it out of the area. If necessary, radio contact may be established, and route restriction measures may be implemented.

In practice, in the Baltic region, almost all intercepted aircraft are Russian (Belorussian aircraft do not penetrate the FIR of NATO countries) flying over international waters as part of the regular military traffic shuttling between Saint Petersburg and the Kaliningrad exclave. These routine flights often shortcut their flight plan routes and sometimes enter NATO national airspace. The aim of these shortcuts is most likely to reduce transit times, but could also be there to assert a strategic posture and to test NATO’s responsiveness and behavior. French pilots do report, however, that the Russian aircraft posture is “generally polite”,¹⁵⁵ although they occasionally face aggressive maneuvering (such as offensive barrel rolls to evade interception). It is not known whether such behaviors, which clearly violate the International Civil Aviation Organization regulations, reflect a lack of discipline among Russian pilots, or deliberate provocation from the Russian air command.

Table III-9: French Air Force eAP activity since 2016

	2016	2018	2020	2022	2023
Flight hours	400	600	698	800	500
Sorties	280	Unknown	479	360	300
Alpha Scrambles	23	23	15	20	15

Source: French Joint Staff, 2017-2024.

154. “NATO Air Policing: Securing Allied Airspace”, NATO, May 23, 2024, available at: www.nato.int.

155. Interview at the État-major de l’armée de l’Air et de l’Espace, Paris, February 2024.

Despite heightened political and military tensions since 2022, the level of activity does not seem to have changed a great deal. The mobilization of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) for the invasion of Ukraine has even led to a relative decline in activity in the Baltic.¹⁵⁶ Political and institutional communications around these interceptions, however, indicate the signaling value attributed to the mission. In late February 2024, just after the signing of the France-Ukraine agreement and against the background of Russian threats following Macron's statements, the French Ministry of Armed Forces decided to publicize the interception by *Mirage* 2000-5 F of "two Su-30 fighter aircraft visually identified off the Latvian coast, [followed in] the afternoon by a second Alpha Scramble [that] was able to successively identify and escort an Il-20 Coot and an An-72 off the Lithuanian coast, also heading north".¹⁵⁷

ISR mission and enhanced training

Since 2022, the eAP initiative has been supplemented by other missions under the eVA banner and as part of the broader Air Shielding mission. These fall into three broad categories:

- eVA CAPs: reactive or pre-planned deployment of a 2-ship CAP from France, at the request of Udem (northern zone) or Torrejón (southern zone) CAOCs;
- eVA Airborne early warning (AEW)s: French E-3F AWACS missions to monitor and surveillance NATO airspace on the eastern flank;
- Support missions: KC-135 and A330 MRTT tanker missions to support the CAPs or other NATO activities, and provision of the French fleet of A400M transport aircraft.

Following the scaling-down of the forward air posture in the summer of 2022, the eVA CAP missions from mainland France, which were resource-intensive and offered little operational value, have been considerably decreased. In contrast, the AEW sorties remain an important part of the French Air Force's contribution to the DDA posture and feed NATINAMDS' recognized air picture. Although France decided not to contribute financially to the NATO Airborne Early Warning & Control program, which operates the E-3A fleet based at Geilenkirchen (soon to be replaced by E-7A Wedgetails), it contributes "in kind" to NATO's situational awareness by making its own E-3Fs available as well as occasionally assigning French controllers to NATO E-3As. At AIRCOM's request, E-3Fs are regularly deployed to support air activities and monitor the airspace, particularly in Poland and Romania.¹⁵⁸

156. L. Lagneau, "Le nombre d'interceptions d'aéronefs militaires russes par l'Otan a chuté d'environ 47 % en 2023", *Zone militaire*, December 30, 2023.

157. "Point de situation des opérations", État-major des armées, February 29, 2024.

158. "AWACS: NATO's 'Eyes in the Sky'", NATO, November 14, 2023.

Alongside these specific contributions to NATO's IAMD, France has since 2022 (and before then) deployed intelligence air assets, whose findings it can then choose to share with its allies. E-3F AWACS contribute to this mission, as shown by the incident in February 2024 when one of them, on temporary deployment at the Borcea base in Romania, was intercepted along with the two *Rafales* escorting it by a Russian Su-27 "Flanker" over the Black Sea.¹⁵⁹ According to the French Minister of armed forces, the Russian aircraft "threatened to shoot down"¹⁶⁰ the French plane. The incident echoed another that took place in October 2022, when a Royal Air Force RC-135 Rivet Joint was shot at by a Russian Su-27 with an air-to-air missile in the same area.¹⁶¹ Since this incident, French, British and US surveillance aircraft deployed in the area are always escorted by a fighter patrol.

Other French airborne ISR assets have been mobilized in addition to the AWACS. The planned withdrawal of the Transall C-160G *Gabriel* electronic warfare (EW) aircraft, combined with the delay of the *Archange* program, has led to a gap in SIGINT capability that is seen as "particularly harmful in the current circumstances".¹⁶² In the meantime, *Mirage 2000D*, equipped with the ASTAC ELINT pod, have been deployed several times to carry out intelligence-gathering activities over the Black Sea, either from the Nancy air base thanks to in-flight refueling, or projected from the Campia Turzii air base in Romania.¹⁶³ Light reconnaissance aircraft were also deployed in Estonia at the latter's request in January 2024.¹⁶⁴ Finally, the French Navy also contributes to intelligence in the Black Sea through the regular deployment of ATL-2s and, more occasionally, of E-2C Hawkeyes.

France also participates in a wide array of air exercises and training activities that help to boost its presence on NATO's eastern flank. Exercises are generally the most visible phase of operational readiness. Alongside large-scale NATO joint forces exercises (such as Steadfast Defender, and Brilliant/Noble Jump) or exercises that are specific to the air component (Ramstein Legacy), several national exercises are also open to Alliance countries, including Air Defender, which is led by Germany (although with minimal French participation), or Joint Warrior, led by the UK, whose theme in recent years has been primarily focused on the eastern flank. Another

159. L. Lagneau, "Les E-3F AWACS sont-ils désormais escortés par des *Rafale* lors de leurs missions en mer Noire?", *Zone militaire*, March 6, 2024.

160. "La France affirme que la Russie a menacé d'abattre des avions français au-dessus de la mer Noire", Associated Press, February 22, 2024.

161. L. Lagneau, "Mer noire : un Su-27 russe a tiré un missile près d'un avion espion RC-135 Rivet Joint de la Royal Air Force", *Zone militaire*, October 20, 2022.

162. F. Giletti, "Avis sur le Projet de Loi de Finances 2024, t.VI – Préparation et emploi des forces : Air", National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, October 26, 2023.

163. "Point de situation des opérations du jeudi 31 mars au mercredi 5 avril 2023"; the use of ASTAC-equipped 2000Ds for intelligence on the eastern flank is discussed by F. Giletti, "Avis sur le Projet de Loi de Finances 2024, t.VI – Préparation et emploi des forces : Air", National Defense and Armed Forces Commission, October 26, 2023.

164. G. Powis, "La France espionne aussi la Russie : un ALSR de l'Armée de l'Air et de l'Espace autour de Kaliningrad", *Air & Cosmos*, January 29, 2024.

example is the Arctic Challenge Exercise (ACE) jointly held in June 2023 by Sweden, Norway, and Finland, in which fourteen nations took part and for which the French Air Force and the French Navy deployed an E-3F plane and sixteen fighter aircraft (five *Mirage* 2000-5, five *Mirage* 2000D, and six *Rafale* M). Over the two weeks of the exercise, the French planes flew almost 300 sorties in high-intensity air combat scenarios.¹⁶⁵

Looking beyond exercises, complex training missions seem best suited to demonstrating the French Air Force's commitment to the region, and the development of complex modes of action. Particularly relevant here are the Combat Enhancement Training (CET) and Force Integration Training (FIT) phases, which provide an opportunity to take certain techniques to the next level. This is also true of Flexible Deterrent Options (FDO), which the French Air Force can develop with other air forces to operate in complex combat formations (Composite Air Operations, or COMAO), in order to train for key missions such as suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD).

Mastering a wide range of skills and capabilities, particularly thanks to its nuclear mission, the French Air Force also works bilaterally with the US Air Force Europe (USAFE) and the US Strategic Air Command's Bomber Task Force as part of the DDA mission on the eastern flank. These missions are principally intended to train and develop the skills and capabilities needed to carry out long-range airstrikes in non-permissive environments.¹⁶⁶

Protection and dispersion: two challenges of high-intensity combat

Although the French Air Force's activities on Europe's eastern flank are often described solely in terms of flight missions, there have also been significant changes to the air posture in terms of the ground segment. Two developments stand out here: first, France's contribution to reinforcing the region's surface-to-air defenses via the deployment of a SAMP medium-range surface-to-air missile system in Romania as part of Mission Aigle; and second, the development of partnerships with host nations based on the new reactive air power implementation concept (MORANE).

Air defense: a key asset of the ground segment

Ground-Based Air & Missile Defense (GBAD & AMD) is a well-known NATO capability gap regularly highlighted by the NDPP as a priority, especially since the process was revised in close alignment with new DDA plans. Working with SHAPE, Ramstein has defined a Joint Prioritized Key Assets List (JPKAL) consisting of several hundred sites, only a few of which currently have suitable surface-to-air systems to protect them. This is one of

165. Weekly situation update, État-major des armées, June 2023.

166. Interviews at the État-major de l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace, Paris, February 2024.

the reasons why France deployed a SAMP at the Capu Midia air base on May 16, 2022, in response to Romania's request.

Although not directly connected to the FLF-BG's land component, the SAMP detachment is part of the Aigle force and adds a surface-to-air dimension to France's presence in Romania. Comprising around 120 aviators, the SAMP operational group is supported by the deployable command and control wing (EAC2P), which uses a Ground Master 200 radar. The mission's objective is to protect the coastal zone within a radius of around 50 km, including the major port of Constanța and the strategic Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, where a US Army brigade and several intelligence aircraft from the US Air Force and other allied nations have been stationed since 2022 (see below).

In addition to protection, the SAMP deployment also provides training opportunities under the CET/FIT framework discussed above. As part of the Air Shielding mission, regular surface-to-air defense exercises are held by AIRCOM to improve GBAD resilience, survivability, and, if possible, SEAD capabilities. In June 2023, the French, Romanian, and Italian air forces trained with the SAMP at Capu Midia in a scenario in which “two Italian Eurofighter Typhoons and the SAMP [were] pitted against an ‘attack’ from a French Rafale, two Italian Eurofighters, and two Romanian F-16s”.¹⁶⁷

Table III-12: the SAMP Air Defense detachment

	Unit	Personnels
SAMP	3 launch modules (TEL)	c. 100
	2 radar identification modules	
	1 electricity generation module	
	1 command module	
	Various support modules	
	1 GM200 radar	
	1 CMD3D module	
	1 CPA 20 commando team	c. 20
	Combat Service Support	c. 50
	Total	c. 170

Source: Interviews at the French Defense mission, Bucharest, March 2024.

167. Weekly situation update, June 30 to July 6, 2023, État-major des armées.

ACE/MORANE: toward extended, agile air bases

The other main focus of NATO's efforts to increase the resilience and credibility of its deterrence and defense in the air environment on the eastern flank is the new Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept. Introduced by a US Air Force doctrine note in August 2022, it was developed to rectify the forward posture's vulnerability due to a shortage of air bases. Advances in targeting and strike capabilities in recent years, via the democratization of open-source tools for the former, and the development of diverse systems (from ballistic missiles to long-range drones), have made the salvo competition disadvantageous in the many cases where the only forms of available air defenses are expensive anti-air and anti-missile systems that can only be deployed in small quantities.¹⁶⁸

The central idea of ACE is to address this threat by relying increasingly on the spontaneous dispersion of air power, achieved by rapidly deploying air assets throughout an expanded network of primary and secondary allied air bases. It is designed to deliberately "complicate the enemy's targeting process, create political and operational dilemmas for the enemy, and create flexibility for friendly forces".¹⁶⁹ The concept, now adopted by NATO through AIRCOM, is thus primarily a posture adjustment that will only be possible if changes are made to C2, infrastructure, protection, and support.

In France, the Air and Space Force adopted a similar approach in the summer of 2022 in the form of reactive air power enablement (*Mise en œuvre réactive de l'arme aérienne*, or MORANE), which involves the development of a network of pre-identified foreign deployment bases and several adjustments to the logistical and human footprint of fighter deployments. Labeled "French ACE" at the NATO level to facilitate mutual understanding, MORANE is firmly integrated into the Air Force's plans for high-intensity combat while also aiming to generate substantial military effects in the competition and contestation phases, particularly by strengthening partnerships with other allies and offering opportunities for strategic signaling targeted at potential adversaries.

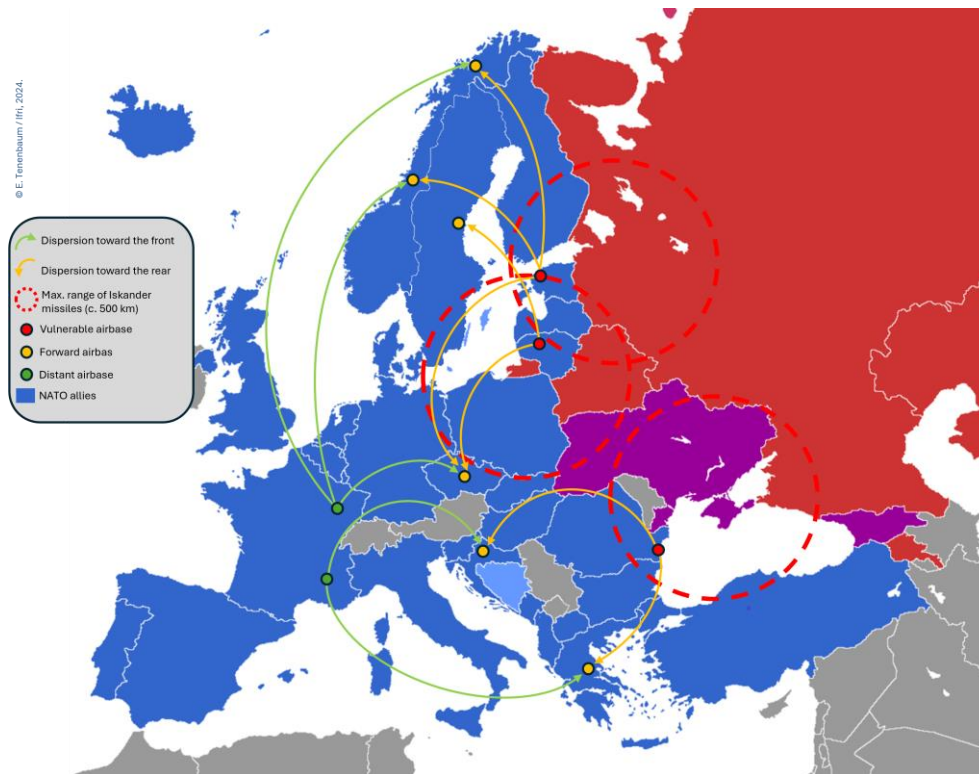
ACE and MORANE are concepts with numerous implications that should reshape the C2 function, which has traditionally been very centralized in the Western air forces. But at their core, they rely above all on the establishment of logistics, operational, and strategic partnerships with a network of allies capable of hosting the dispersed assets. The "Extended Airbase" (E-AB) program has been brought into NATO's ACE agenda by the US, France, and the UK. In conjunction with the new DDA planning architecture, the E-ABs could play a twofold role in a hypothetical high-intensity conflict:

168. "Agile Combat Employment", Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21, August 23, 2022.

169. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

- Dispersing air forces stationed in the US and Western Europe toward the front;
- Dispersing air forces whose bases are vulnerable to interdiction strikes by various means (ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones) toward the rear.

Map III-13: Notional model for a dispersion maneuver on the eastern flank



Source: *Military Balance*, 2024; author's additions.

This arrangement – which gives the Central European countries an even more pivotal role – does not simply improve the survivability of the air component, but also maximizes its effects and sends a strong signal of strategic solidarity by aligning interests with host nations. However, its proper execution depends on a number of measures being taken before a conflict breaks out, in order to ensure mutual understanding of procedures, make consistent air defense planning, adapt infrastructure to logistical flexibility (compatibility of CIS, but also of cross-servicing equipment such as tow bars), pre-position maintenance equipment and in some cases mission equipment and munitions, and provide access to classified communication and information systems.

France has already identified several possible partnerships, for example with Norway, Czech Republic, Croatia, and Greece. The fact that the latter two are members of the “Rafale community” will facilitate commonality, and should increase the tactical, and especially logistical, interoperability of

airbases. As for Czechia, which has been selected to host a forward logistics base for the ground forces (see above), this would confirm its role as a pivot for France's projection capability to the east. Around ten exercises are already planned for 2024 as part of France's implementation of the E-AB concept.¹⁷⁰ These appear to have begun already, as shown by the recent deployment of a KC-135 tanker to Zagreb air base for use by Spanish F-18s, Italian Eurofighters, and French Rafales "in order to strengthen relationships and interoperability with the Croatian air force".¹⁷¹

A multi-faceted naval posture

Of the three main domains testifying France's renewed contribution to eastern flank defense, the maritime may be the least visible to the general public. It nevertheless amounts to a key permanent NATO mission consisting of four Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG) that protect the Alliance's maritime approaches. Although activity has intensified since 2022, the overall shape of the naval posture has undoubtedly undergone less dramatic evolution than those of the land and air domains, leading to calls for an urgent update.¹⁷²

Command structures and national contributions have, however, started to adapt. The 2022 activation of the NRF (see above), which has included the SNMG since the 2018 Brussels Summit, has had significant consequences for the command chain. The four SNMG, which were previously under the direct control of the political level, have become Task Groups (TG 441.01 to 441.04) under the authority of the JFC and the operational control of the Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) based at Northwood, in the UK.

France has made a clear show of recommitment to NATO's maritime activities, with its contributions to the SNMG increasing by 350 to 400 percent over the period 2019-2023.¹⁷³ This trend, initially low profile at first, accelerated from 2022 and culminated in April 2024 with France putting its carrier strike group (CSG) under NATO operational control (see below).¹⁷⁴ This development reflects France's political desire to demonstrate its commitment to the Alliance, as well as its concerns about the deterioration of the security and strategic situation in the area, but also a certain satisfaction with the evolution of NATO's approach. The new command chain format enables greater responsiveness and makes the SNMG less vulnerable

170. Interview at the État-major de l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace, Paris, February 2024.

171. Weekly situation update, Week 24: June 8 to 14, 2023, État-major des armées COM.

172. J. Tallis, "NATO's Maritime Vigilance: Optimizing the Standing Naval Force for the Future", *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2022; G. Vázquez, "NATO Needs a Maritime Strategy for a Darker Age", Center for European Policy Analysis, November 16, 2023.

173. Interview, Allied Maritime Command, London, April 2024.

174. *Ibid.*

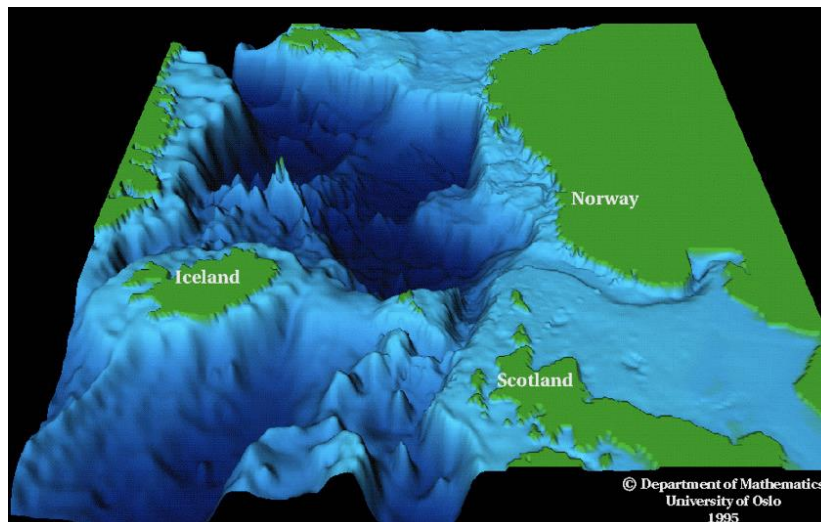
to political paralysis, a concern that long justified France's hesitation to integrate its naval vessels.¹⁷⁵

The naval dimension of the deterrence and defense posture on the eastern flank covers three large maritime spaces, each with their own geopolitical and hydrological characteristics and their own distinct issues. We will discuss each of them in turn, beginning with the North Atlantic and the Arctic, followed by the Baltic Sea, and finally the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, which controls access to it.

The North Atlantic and the Arctic: underwater confrontation

The North of the Atlantic ocean lies, of course, at the core of the Alliance, to which it gives its name, as the link between Europe and America. The denial or control of North Atlantic sea lines of communication (SLOCs) was the focus of intense fighting during both world wars and a key strategic challenges of the Cold War. Alongside its ballistic function, the Soviet submarine branch, which in the 1980s represented up to half the USSR's total naval tonnage, had the mission, in the event of war, of preventing, or at least disrupting, the transfer of US supplies and reinforcements to Europe, where the USSR had the conventional advantage on land.¹⁷⁶

Map III-6: Bathymetry of the GIUK Gap



Source: Oslo University, 1995; J. Smith and J. Hendrix, *Forgotten Waters: Minding the GIUK GAP*, CNAS, 2017.

The Atlantic theater was then neglected in the 1990s and 2000s, as exemplified by the dissolution of the US Second Fleet, before being awoken by a rise in Russian activity in the 2010s.¹⁷⁷ This took a less ambitious turn than during the Cold War, focusing principally on securing the Arctic

175. Interview, État-major des armées, Paris, February 2024.

176. B. S. Watson, *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities*, New York: Avalon Publishing, 1986.

177. P. Gros, É. Tenenbaum, and A. Taihe, "Arctique/Atlantique Nord: problématiques stratégiques et capacitaires", Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, July 30, 2020.

“bastion defense”, and particularly on the Barents Sea, where Russia’s fleet of ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) is stationed and patrols.¹⁷⁸ Russia has, however, gradually reasserted its ambition to cross the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, a deep sea passage well-adapted to submarines’ stealthy transit. Russian goal is not so much naval interdiction as the ability to pose a credible strategic strike threat – conventional or nuclear – with a view to making its enemies reassess their support for an ally at war with Russia.¹⁷⁹

While anti-submarine capabilities have drastically declined in NATO navies since the end of the Cold War, the levels of Russian activity have increased significantly since 2014.¹⁸⁰ They accelerated still further in early 2022, with the weeks preceding the invasion of Ukraine seeing a massive deployment of naval forces – 140 ships and 60 aircraft, including the vast majority of the Northern Fleet’s available carriers – for maneuvers off the coast of Ireland, a first since the end of the Cold War.¹⁸¹

Testifying before Congress in January 2023, General Cavoli, who is both SACEUR and USEUCOM, said that Russian submarine activity in the Atlantic was at its highest level in many years.¹⁸² Several months later, British defense secretary Ben Wallace referred to Russian submarines “in the North Atlantic and in the Irish Sea and in the North Sea doing some strange routes that they normally wouldn't do”.¹⁸³ France naturally monitors this activity closely, given its impact on its own nuclear SSBNs, which operate from the *Île Longue* base in the roadstead of Brest. As it turns out, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was briefly followed in late February 2022 by the reinforcement of the French nuclear posture, which involved deploying a second SSBN on patrol and boosting the technical and political credibility of the French nuclear deterrent.¹⁸⁴ France’s coastal approaches were also put under even closer surveillance, as shown by the spotting in October 2023 of the Russian *Krasnodar* submarine off Cherbourg, which was “escorted” to the North Sea by the FREMM-class frigate *Normandie*.¹⁸⁵

178. J. L. Lozier, “Arctic: Toward the End of the Exception? Strategic, Nuclear and Maritime Issues in the Region”, *Proliferation Papers*, No. 64, Ifri, April 2022.

179. S. Kaushal and R. Balletta, “An Asymmetric Approach to the Use of NATO’s Maritime Forces in Competing with Russia”, Royal United Services Institute, February 2024.

180. Interview, État-major de la marine, Paris, February 2024.

181. D. Mahadzir, “140 Russian Navy Warships Drilling Across Europe, Middle East as Ukraine Tensions Simmer”, US Naval Institute of News, January 26, 2022.

182. P. D. Shinkman, “U.S.: Russian Subs in Atlantic ‘More Active Than We’ve Seen Them in Years’”, *US News*, April 26, 2023.

183. E. Cook, “Multiple Russian Submarines Moving in ‘Strange Routes,’ U.K. Says”, *Newsweek*, April 19, 2023; A. Feertchak, “Un sous-marin russe ‘chassé’ par la marine britannique au large de l’Irlande”, *Le Figaro*, December 2023.

184. S. Jézéquel, “Les sous-marinières de l’Île-Longue en alerte maximale”, *Le Télégramme*, March 1, 2022; J.-L. Lozier, “Premiers enseignements nucléaires de la guerre en Ukraine”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, May 18, 2022.

185. O. Blanchard, “Un sous-marin et un navire russes repérés au large des côtes normandes”, *Ouest-France*, October 23, 2023.

These national permanent maritime security missions are paralleled by the French Navy's renewed activity within the NATO framework. In April 2022, the anti-submarine destroyer *Latouche-Tréville* was deployed as part of the US's Northern Viking exercise off Iceland before joining SNMG1 (TG 441.01) for Operation Brilliant Shield, the naval component of the recently activated NRF.¹⁸⁶ Following the FREMM *Aquitaine*'s rotation in May, it was the turn of the *Bretagne* to deploy for eight weeks in the Norwegian Sea, where it participated in the predominantly “anti-submarine combat”¹⁸⁷ Dynamic MongOOSE exercise alongside nine other nations.

Similar missions were carried out during 2023 by, in turn, four destroyers, a nuclear attack submarine (SSN), and a command and replenishment ship (BCR).¹⁸⁸ At the beginning of 2024, the trend continued with the *Normandie*, a Tripartite-class minehunter, and the SSN *Améthyste*, participating to the Nordic Response exercise off the Norwegian coast.¹⁸⁹ It was on this occasion that the French FREMM managed to “sink” a German Type 212 submarine, although not without the latter previously having “torpedoed” the Italian aircraft carrier *Giuseppe Garibaldi*.¹⁹⁰

This French expertise in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) – particularly necessary for confronting Russia in the North Atlantic – is now widely recognized by its NATO Allies. Since 2020, the FREMMs have won the three most recent “Hook’Em Awards”, handed out by the commander of the US Sixth Fleet to reward achievements in ASW. France’s good results rely in equal part on regular training – crucial for deterrence – and specific technical capabilities. The FREMM are equipped with the CAPTAS-4 system, comprising a very-low-frequency towed array sonar and multipurpose hydrophones, supported by a hull-mounted sonar, digital sonobuoys, and the NH90 Caïman’s dipping sonar, which combined pose a formidable threat to submarines.¹⁹¹

The French Navy does, of course, take part in other activities besides ASW in the North Atlantic and Arctic areas, including various high-intensity naval combat training activities (air defense, surface warfare, mine warfare, and land strike exercises), maritime security (*Action de l’État en mer*), and ISR missions. Partly at the request of Norway, which until recently had tried to manage its border with Russia as bilaterally as possible, it also pays an increased attention to monitoring developments in the Arctic region, where activities have been very limited for decades. The deterioration of the security environment has now led Oslo to revise this position, and to request more

186. “Point de situation des opérations du 8 au 13 avril 2022”, État-major des armées.

187. “Point de situation des opérations du 10 au 16 juin 2022”, État-major des armées.

188. V. Groizeleau, “La Marine nationale continue de mobiliser d’importants moyens en Europe du Nord”, *Mer et Marine*, January 18, 2024.

189. “Point de situation des opérations du 22 au 28 septembre 2023”, État-major des armées.

190. S. Atlamazoglou, “NATO vs. NATO: How a French Warship ‘Sunk’ A German Submarine”, *The National Interest*, March 13, 2024.

191. L. Lagneau, “Quatre frégates françaises ont reçu le ‘Hook’em Award’ pour leurs opérations anti-sous-marines”, *Zone militaire*, February 1, 2023.

Allied support. France has responded by increasing the pace of deployments to the country and developing partnerships in the shipbuilding industry.

The Baltic: the specifics of a narrow sea

Although it is generally seen as a continuation of the North Atlantic space, the Baltic Sea, in fact, poses very different challenges. As an enclosed, shallow sea bordered by multiple countries, it presents an almost opposite picture to the Atlantic Ocean. France has historically had less of a presence there, both because of its geographic distance and because its key naval assets – aircraft carriers, SSNs, and lightly armed but long-range destroyers – are not at their best in such a maritime environment.

The “quasi-territorial” nature of Baltic Sea security causes regular tensions around the command structure. NATO’s JFC North at Brunssum, backed by the region’s countries, first among them Germany, would rather see a permanent allocation of forces in the basin with a dedicated command such as the German-led Baltic Maritime Component Command (BMCC) based at Rostock.¹⁹² This vision is opposed to that of MARCOM and the “oceanic nations” such as the US, UK, and France, which value naval forces for their flexibility and their ability to swiftly transfer from one theater to another in a short period of time if necessary – which is why patrols in the Baltic are generally deployed jointly with the North Atlantic.

The strategic issues are clear, however: although the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance has led some observers to describe the basin as a “NATO lake”, the presence of Russia’s Baltic Fleet at the key sites of Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad – as well as its anti-ship and anti-air weapons, and long-range interdiction capabilities – make the Baltic a zone of permanent friction and potentially high lethality in the event of a conflict. The relative weakness of the Russian fleet in the region and the increasing vulnerability of the Kaliningrad garrison, which has been depleted to boost the war effort in Ukraine, do not make escalation any less dangerous and, in fact, increase Moscow’s sense of threat. Other combat domains are also emerging where the power balance could be less in NATO’s favor, such as seabed warfare. Prominent examples of this include the sabotage in September 2022 of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, which multiple studies now attribute to Ukrainian forces, and the rupture in October 2023 of the Baltic-connector pipeline and associated telecommunications cables.¹⁹³

Another notable aspect of Baltic Sea tensions is the return of mine warfare. An old threat that was used on a large scale by combatants in the region during the two world wars and the Cold War, naval mines are once

192. L. Péria-Peigné and É. Tenenbaum, “Zeitenwende”, *op. cit.*

193. P. Reltien, “Sabotage des gazoducs Nord Stream : l’ambassadeur d’Ukraine à Londres soupçonné d’être impliqué dans l’explosion”, France Info, March 21, 2024; B. Jones, “Making Sense of the Baltic Cable Incidents”, The Brookings Institution, October 25, 2023.

again being used by Russia in the Black Sea (see below) to interdict shipping routes and threaten the economic exploitation of the basin's resources. With more than 250,000 known naval mines, a diversified arsenal, and continuous expansion of production since 2014, Russia can pose a permanent threat to the Baltic Sea's heavy maritime traffic.¹⁹⁴ Some NATO members, such as the Baltic states and Poland, plan to develop their own mine-laying capabilities in order to interdict Russian ships.

France has taken note of the resurgence of security challenges in the Baltic and is increasing its presence in the area, although on a smaller scale than elsewhere. It does, however, try to take part in large Allied exercises through its "Beluga" missions – a generic term for all its deployments in the Baltic. Between 2022 and 2024, six FREMM destroyers were successively deployed there (*La Touche Tréville*, *Chevalier Paul*, *Auvergne*, *Bretagne*, *Aquitaine*, and *Normandie*), making stops in the region's main ports.¹⁹⁵ The principal exercises include the long-running BALTOPS, led by the US Navy, and the more recent Northern Coasts, led by Sweden.¹⁹⁶

France also contributes to NATO's permanent posture through Neptune Shield, the naval component of the eVA, and the deployment of frigates to SNMG1 and, especially, minehunters to SNMCMG1. The French Navy currently has ten of these ships, whose mission directly adds to the security of the nuclear deterrent. The Tripartite-class minehunters (CMT) are old boats built in the 1980s by a joint program between France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and have some unique characteristics: fiberglass hulls to protect against magnetic mines, and special pads to muffle noisy or vibrating equipment in order to guard against acoustic mines. In terms of weapons systems, the French Navy's updated CMTs are equipped with high-definition hull-mounted sonars and two PAP 104 wire-guided submersible robots, known as "self-propelled fish". Finally, the CMTs carry the clearance diver equipment needed to identify and destroy devices, particularly in turbulent waters.¹⁹⁷ These ships, which are valued for their professional capabilities and more discreet than frigates or submarines, are deployed on a more regular basis in the Baltic, most often within the SNMCMG1, which generally includes six to eight hunters on two-month mandates.¹⁹⁸

194. V. Duenow, "Baltic Sea Mining as an Extension of the Russian Gray Zone", *Orbis*, April 2022; O. Laanemes, "Reinventing Mine Warfare in the Baltic Sea", *Proceedings*, Vol. 150, No. 5, May 2024.

195. L. Defranoux, "En mer Baltique, la frégate 'Aquitaine' patrouille sous l'œil attentif de Moscou", *Libération*, March 20, 2024; N. Barotte, "En mer Baltique, la frégate 'Normandie' entraîne ses oreilles", *Le Figaro*, May 5, 2024.

196. "L'Auvergne participe à l'exercice OTAN BALTOPS 23", *Marine nationale*, June 16, 2023.

197. V. Groizeleau, "À la découverte du chasseur de mines Céphée", *Mer et Marine*, October 27, 2023.

198. "Mer Baltique - Fin de l'exercice BALTOPS 2022", *Cols bleus*, June 17, 2022.

The Mediterranean and the Black Sea: between a rock and a hard place

The final maritime basin of importance to the eastern flank is the Mediterranean-Black Sea system, which also has its own distinctive characteristics. Although the Black Sea is the theater of the first high-intensity naval conflict since the Falklands War, its limited accessibility, due to the closure of the straits, means the French Navy's activity there is reduced, although not completely prevented. The Mediterranean, in contrast, remains the primary area of activity for France, which for the first time is working to deploy its full naval air power there to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense posture.

The Black Sea: a closed-off theater?

On February 27, 2022, pursuant to the 1936 Montreux Convention, Turkey took the decision to forbid access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian Navy ships, with Ankara considering the situation to amount to a "state of war". Based on a broad interpretation of the same convention, Turkey also chose to refuse access to the ships of NATO members without a Black Sea coast, despite the latter not being parties to the conflict. This move was prompted by Turkey's ambivalent approach to its Russian neighbor, against which it has declined to impose economic sanctions. This decision, which to date has not been challenged, has significantly increased the sense of vulnerability among the Black Sea countries, particularly Romania and Bulgaria.¹⁹⁹

The war in Ukraine has created two major, interconnected maritime security challenges in the Black Sea: the security of grain routes and the increased threat of sea mines. A third problem is now emerging around the security of energy infrastructure in the Turkish, Bulgarian, and Romanian economic zones.

The Russian attack on grain flows coming out of Ukraine and its consequences for international supplies (with a 40 percent increase in the price of foodstuffs), are well known.²⁰⁰ The implications for NATO's security and defense posture are less so. Having signed an agreement in July 2022 allowing Kyiv to export limited quantities of grain from three ports (Odessa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi), Moscow unilaterally decided to terminate it a year later and to impose a blockade combined with a campaign of missile and drone strikes against wheat storage sites in Odessa.

199. M. Lancaster, "Troubled Waters: How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security", NATO Parliamentary Assembly, October 7, 2023.

200. J. Kearns, "Global Food Crisis May Persist, with Prices Still Elevated after Year of War", International Monetary Fund, March 9, 2023.

Ukraine has responded by transporting its grain to the ports of Reni and Izmail, which are located on the Danube at the border with Romania.²⁰¹ In September, several Shahed-136 drones fired by Russia were shot down on the Romanian side of the border, further heightening tensions and triggering new requests for reassurance in anti-air defense.²⁰² Since then, a significant portion of Ukraine's exports has been transported by road and river into Romania to the port of Constanța, from where it is re-exported out of reach of air attacks.

The second problem concerns the threat of naval mines. Russia is thought to have laid between 400 and 600 mines along the Ukrainian coast, and a considerable number of these have drifted with the wind and tides, posing an unpredictable threat to maritime traffic in the basin.²⁰³ Finally, another important dimension is the discovery and initial exploitation of underwater gas fields in the exclusive economic zones of Romania and Bulgaria (including the Romanian Neptun Deep field, with estimated reserves of 100 billion cubic meters). The development of these projects, seen as a priority by the respective governments, inevitably poses the question of how to protect them in a degraded security environment.²⁰⁴

Although its fleet has had no access to the Black Sea since 2022, the French Navy has been able to maintain a presence in two main ways: maritime patrols from the air, and disembarked personnel, particularly clearance divers, sent to help with anti-mine efforts. In August 2022, a first detachment from the *Atlantique* clearance divers group arrived in Romania to participate for the first time in the Eurasian Partnership Mine Counter Measure Dive exercise, lending its support with underwater detection, clearance, transportation, and beaching of mines.

This type of deployment was repeated several times in 2023 and could be reproduced following the recent establishment by Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey of a permanent, trilateral NATO naval group known as Mine Counter Measure (MCM) Black Sea. Complementing the SNMCMG2 in the Mediterranean, the MCM Black Sea's mission is to re-establish NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea despite the ongoing closure of the straits. With the Task Force put under a rotational command, Romania has already hinted that it plans to invite NATO allies, including France, to participate in the initiative in an as-yet undefined form.

Finally, *Atlantique-2* maritime patrol aircraft from French Navy Flotillas 21F and 23F have been active since summer 2022 on Allied maritime security missions, including anti-mine efforts.²⁰⁵ Operating initially out of

201. F. Aubenas, "Reni ou Izmail, les ports du Danube, nouvelles cibles de Moscou", *Le Monde*, August 3, 2023.

202. L. Lagneau, "La Roumanie admet que son territoire a été touché lors d'une frappe russe contre des ports ukrainiens", *Zone militaire*, September 6, 2023.

203. M. Lancaster, "Troubled Waters", *op. cit.*, p. 13.

204. G. Scutaru, "Black Sea's Offshore Energy Potential and Its Strategic Role at a Regional and Continental Level", New Strategy Center, 2024.

205. "Un ATL 2 engagé dans des missions de surveillance maritime", Marine nationale, July 18, 2022.

the Souda naval base in Crete on regular ATL-2 deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean, the French aircraft were later directly deployed in Bulgaria (October 2023²⁰⁶) and then at the MK Air Base in Romania.

French assets in the Mediterranean

This mobility demonstrates the close connection between the theaters of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, which controls access to it. While France's opportunities for naval action remain limited in the former, it has plenty in the latter. The Mediterranean has historically been, and remains, the French Navy's primary deployment zone, whether on national or NATO missions, with a ratio of around 60/40 compared to the Atlantic in terms of numbers of ships, but even higher in terms of tonnage.²⁰⁷

While the region is ideal for deployments of the French Navy, the latter prefers to operate outside the NATO framework, particularly since an incident on June 10, 2020, when a Turkish frigate opposed the inspection of a ship deemed suspect by sailors on the French frigate *Courbet* and targeted the French vessel three times with its fire control radars. France withdrew from NATO's Operation Sea Guardian in protest, preferring to concentrate on the EU's Operation Irini.²⁰⁸ It has, however, continued to participate in the SNMG and SNMCMG deployed in the Mediterranean, and in 2021 in fact assumed command of SNMG2 for the first time in its history.²⁰⁹

Since February 24, 2022, the close relationship between the Eastern Mediterranean and the eastern flank has been clear to France. When the CSG was deployed as part of Mission Clemenceau 22, it was surrounded by a large Russian armada, partly from the port of Tartus and partly from the Pacific Fleet. As a precautionary measure, the aircraft carrier was repositioned further away in the Central Mediterranean, from where Rafale Marines and an E-2C Hawkeye can be projected into Romania and Bulgaria for reassurance and independent situation assessment.

Since then, the French Navy's contributions to the deterrence and defense posture in the Mediterranean have steadily increased. The number of ships and days at sea allocated to NATO's naval groups in the Mediterranean has also increased sharply, leading to two notable events occurring simultaneously for the first time in spring 2024:

- The assumption of Standing Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) command by the BCR *Somme*, marking the second time in two years that a French vessel has become flagship of this naval group;

206. "Point de situation des opérations du jeudi 12 au mercredi 18 octobre 2023".

207. Interview, État-major de la marine, Paris, February 2024.

208. "La France suspend sa participation à une mission de l'OTAN en Méditerranée", *France 24*, July 1, 2020.

209. V. Groizeleau, "Premier commandement français pour un groupe naval de l'OTAN", *Mer et marine*, June 17, 2021.

- The transfer of operational control of the *Charles de Gaulle* CSG to STRIKFORNATO, based in Lisbon, as part of Mission *Akila*, and the participation of the French CSG in a major Franco-Italian high-intensity naval combat exercise, *Mare Aperto*.²¹⁰

While the decision to place the French CSG under NATO OPCON provoked an inevitable reaction from French sovereigntists circles, it also sent an important message to NATO allies about France's determination and commitment to contributing its most decisive resources to the deterrence and defense posture.²¹¹

As we conclude this overview of France's contribution to NATO's deterrence and defense posture, it is clear how much progress has been made in recent years, particularly since the 2-2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In many respects, French armed forces have been steadier and more consistent than its politicians in their recommitment to the eastern flank; not promising more than they can deliver, but making a significant effort wherever possible. While numerous challenges remain, especially in terms of force generation, support, and the deployment of certain capabilities, the level of engagement is now undeniable and is already being reflected in changing perceptions, with France beginning to be seen as a reliable or even essential contributor to collective defense.

It would, however, be a mistake to believe that this growing recognition can quickly erase two decades of patent underinvestment and disinterest. Allied in the region typically see this engagement on Europe's eastern flank as "only right", and as France finally assuming the role it is expected to play as a matter of course, and not as an additional effort beyond its means. And for good reason, given that future geopolitical and strategic developments such as those observed in the east could lead to major adjustments, which must be anticipated now to avoid falling behind once again.

210. V. Groizeleau, "Le groupe aéronaval français va être déployé pour la première fois sous commandement de l'OTAN", *Mer et marine*, April 12, 2024.

211. R. Ruitenbergh, "In First, France's Aircraft Carrier to Deploy Under NATO Command", *Naval News*, April 11, 2024.

Prospects and recommendations

In the space of two years, France's posture on Europe's eastern flank has undergone major changes. However, questions remain about the direction, and the sustainability of this path in a constantly changing strategic environment. Beyond current developments (aid to Ukraine, and adaptation of the NATO posture), further shifts in the international order, and strategic adjustments by adversaries as well as allies, could very quickly topple this fragile equilibrium. Future strategies must be developed in anticipation of such spillover effects, and in line with the French government's stated level of ambition and the resources deployed to achieve it.

Russia and the US: two geostrategic unknowns

Like any theater of operations, the eastern flank is influenced by its international and geostrategic environment. While the main European allies seem fairly set on reinforcement of the DDA posture for now, the stability of the current European collective defense arrangement still depends on two key external factors: the relative containment of Russian power, and the continuous US commitment to the conventional defense. If one or both of these factors were to change in any radical way, France's military contribution would have to be thoroughly reassessed.

The evolution of the Russian threat

In contrast to other strategic areas in which France is engaged (Africa, the Middle East, and Indo-Pacific), the eastern flank is polarized around a single threat. Russia is now the only actor in the region with both the intention and the means to harm the interests of France and its allies. Although other actors, including states such as Belarus or non-state organizations such as private military companies and hacker groups, do feature in this threat landscape, they are, if not directly subordinate to, then at least aligned with, the strategic course set by the Kremlin.

While the unipolar nature of the threat in some ways simplifies calculations, it does not make the challenge less formidable. The global, multidimensional nature of Russian power allows it to operate in all combat domains and all phases of the strategic game, from competition to confrontation. Two aspects in particular help shed light on the future

development of the Russian threat: first, its aims and strategic objectives, and second, the means to achieve them.

Enduring strategic hostility

The first factor to consider is the Russian regime's long-standing political hostility to its Western neighbors and the European project. This is an old phenomenon that has fluctuated throughout Russia's history but has always been intimately linked to the construction of its national identity: the "threat from the West" has been a recurring motif since at least the nineteenth century, prompting reinterpretation of earlier episodes, from the fight against the Teutonic Order to the Northern Wars against Sweden and Poland, resistance to the French invasion in 1812 and of course the two World Wars against Germany and then again the Cold War era facing NATO.²¹² This idea has been steadily cemented under Putin's regime, forming the foundation for various narratives (civilizational, conservative, and anti-imperialist) disseminated by Moscow in an attempt to re-establish its international status.²¹³

Even more fundamentally, the US and its allies are perceived – or presented – as an existential threat to Russia in the military, political, and, above all, subversive sense. Russia's reinterpretation of the three decades following the fall of the Soviet Union rests largely on an analysis of the West's desire to reshape the world based on the ideas of liberal democracy. As in any authoritarian regime, criticism and political opposition are seen as a threat to national security, while any transnational expression of solidarity with internal opposition movements is classed as subversive interference.

Based on this perception, the Kremlin has gradually developed strategic ambitions of international revisionism that operate at three levels. The first is that of the "near abroad": the former territory of the USSR after the Second World War and, more or less, the 19th-century Russian Empire. Russia's attack on Ukraine, but also its war in Georgia, its positions in Moldova, and its intervention in Kazakhstan all reflect this view.²¹⁴ The second level is that of Europe. Although Moscow does not immediately intend to threaten its independence, the goal is to reveal its "decadence" by accelerating its separation from the US and exacerbating internal dissent, with the aim of shattering any political organization (particularly the EU and NATO) that could marginalize it.²¹⁵ The third and final level is global: the aim is to challenge the unipolar American order by creating a new bloc, presented as the "global majority", that will be guided by the principle of economic

212. O. Figes, *The Story of Russia*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2022; A. P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

213. M. Laruelle, "Russia's Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine", *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 46, Ifri, March 2024.

214. A. Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016; J. Gurganus and E. Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective", Carnegie Endowment for Peace, February 20, 2019.

215. O. Ignatov, "Saying the Quiet Part Out Loud: Russia's New Vision for Taking on the West", May 2, 2023.

development without political conditions, and the logic of spheres of influence for the great powers.

Of course, these prospects depend on decisions made by Russian leaders, currently Putin, and thus on the nature of the regime. While it is always possible to imagine scenarios in which some kind of political revolution in Russia leads to a fundamental challenge to this stance, the likelihood of this happening is, while difficult to assess, likely low. Even studies that forecast “rupture” also anticipate that many of the possible political outcomes would not necessarily alter Russia’s posture of hostility to European and Western interests.²¹⁶

Short-term resilience, serious medium- and long-term weaknesses

While Russia’s hostile intentions seem settled for the immediate future, there is more debate regarding its means to achieve its goals. Its resilience, which was widely questioned in the year following the invasion of Ukraine, now generally seems to be taken for granted, at least for the present. Its means can be divided into three broad categories: political and economic foundations, military capabilities and the defense industry, and vectors of action and destabilization.

- ***Political and economic resilience until 2027***

In political terms, Putin’s regime seemed to be rattled by the initial failure of its “special military operation”, by the need for a large mobilization campaign, and by Yevgeny Prigozhin’s attempted rebellion in summer 2023. Thus far, however, the events of 2024 seem to have demonstrated the system’s resilience: the death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny caused no major internal consequences, and the presidential election went smoothly.

Despite their high cost in human lives, neither the war in Ukraine nor terrorism – which remains a threat, as shown by the Islamic State attack in Moscow – seem to have fundamentally impaired the solidity of the regime. Although new institutional crises could still take place – likely triggered more by economic discontent than by the regime’s policies on civil liberties or defense – most analysts see the maintenance of power by the *siloviki* (members of the military forces and the security services) as “the most likely scenario”.²¹⁷

The country’s economic resilience came as an even greater surprise to many observers. Despite being placed under the world’s most drastic sanctions regime since 2022, Russia’s isolation from the economic and

216. C. Michel, “Russia Tomorrow: Five Scenarios for Russia’s Future”, Atlantic Council, February 2024; S. Kotkin, “The Five Futures of Russia and How America Can Prepare for Whatever Comes Next”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024.

217. M. Duclos and C. Le Mitouard, “La Russie, une puissance crépusculaire?”, Institut Montaigne, March 2024.

financial system has turned out to be very patchy. Economic sanctions have only been imposed by a minority of the world's countries – representing around 55 percent of global GDP –, allowing Russia to reorient its exports and imports with some success, particularly toward Asia. China became Russia's primary economic partner in 2023, with just over €240 billion in trade between the two countries.²¹⁸

Russia's revenues remain robust, particularly thanks to its hydrocarbon exports, which, despite the sanctions and the ceiling price set by the G7, continue to find outlets in a fluid and loosely regulated market. Although the increase in the share of its overall revenues derived from fossil fuels has created dependency and led to vulnerability to variation in world rates, it has provided a steady income of around €25 billion per month for the last two years. This regular source of revenue has allowed Russia to drastically increase its imports of manufactured products, particularly refined products, machine tools, and semiconductors, which are essential for the defense industry.²¹⁹

Finally, the partial militarization of the economy seems to be more sustainable than initially thought. The defense budget has increased significantly to around €100 billion in 2024, or 6 percent of GDP, a relatively high proportion but one that seems sustainable for several years. This expenditure supports growth because it is accompanied by further major investment in infrastructure. The labor shortage is also leading to a rise in real wages, while bonuses paid to deployed soldiers and compensation for the families of those killed in combat are increasing purchasing power.²²⁰

The apparent resilience of the Russian regime and economy should not, however, be overestimated. While the situation has stabilized noticeably since 2022, the current trend seems sustainable for a few years but much more uncertain in the longer term. The trade imbalance and the inflation-driving effects of public procurement are set to reach particularly concerning levels in 2026-2027. By then, however, the "Asian pivot" of the Russian economy will have begun to bear fruit, particularly via the development of gas infrastructure in Siberia.²²¹

In the long term, the economic fundamentals are on the decline: the population is shrinking and shows no sign of rebounding, while human capital has deteriorated considerably, partly because of the exile of a million

218. S. Feldstein and F. Brauer, "Why Russia Has Been So Resilient to Western Export Controls", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 11, 2024.

219. P. Luzin, "Chinese Machine Tools Serve as Russia's Safety Net", Jamestown Foundation, January 22, 2024.

220. V. Inozemtsev, "Guerre d'Ukraine : où en est l'économie russe ?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 88, No. 4, Ifri, 2023; Y. Michel, O. Schmitt, and É. Tenenbaum, "Les enjeux militaires de la guerre d'Ukraine : une impasse en trompe-l'œil?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 89, No. 1, Ifri, March 2024.

221. "Russie : le tracé du gigantesque gazoduc Force de Sibérie 2 bientôt finalisé", *Le Figaro*, September 6, 2023.

Russians since 2022. Although some of them are now returning to Russia because of administrative issues encountered while abroad.²²²

- ***The rebuilding of conventional capabilities***

Unlike what some in the West may have hoped or expected, Russian military setbacks and considerable losses suffered on the Ukrainian battlefield – estimated at around 400,000 killed or wounded – have not led to a collapse of Russian military capabilities. In a congressional hearing on April 10, 2024, General Christopher Cavoli, SACEUR and EUCOM commander, presented his analysis of the Russian armed forces' resilience:

The Air Force [VKS] has lost some aircraft, but only about 10% of its fleet. The navy has suffered significantly in the Black Sea – but nowhere else and Russian naval activity worldwide is at a significant peak. [...] In fact, it is mainly only in the land forces that Russia has suffered [...]. However, Russia is reconstituting that force far faster than our initial estimates suggested. The army is actually now larger – by 15 percent – than it was when it invaded Ukraine. [...] Russia has announced plans to pursue an ambitious ground forces restructure, increasing to 1.5 million personnel [...]. Perhaps most concerning, the Russian military in the past year has shown an accelerating ability to learn and adapt to battlefield challenges both tactically and technologically and has become a learning organization that little resembles the chaotic force that invaded Ukraine two years ago.²²³

The rapidly evolving situation of the Russian forces engaged in the Ukrainian conflict – which has both weakened the Russian military force structure and encouraged it to adapt – makes it extremely difficult to predict the level of military threat they could pose beyond 2025. Nevertheless, it seems a given that Russia's efforts to reorganize, rebuild, and re-equip its armies will mean the persistence of a major military threat on Europe's eastern flank for the next few years.²²⁴

The forced adaptation of Russian forces to a protracted war of attrition has also come at the cost of some form of regression in terms of structures, equipment, and, to some extent, tactics. Under massive pressure, the Russian ground forces, in particular, have unceremoniously turned their back on almost two decades of modernization efforts since the 2000s (the Serdyukov and Shoigu reforms)²²⁵ and returned to Soviet practices, although the eventual result remains debated among experts and analysts.²²⁶

222. "Russians Who Fled Abroad Return in Boost for Putin's War Economy", *Bloomberg*, May 2, 2024.

223. Statement of General C. G. Cavoli, United States European Command, United States House Armed Services Committee, April 10, 2024.

224. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024", Royal United Service Institute, February 13, 2024.

225. P. Baey, "Ukraine: a Test for Russian Military Reforms", *Focus stratégique*, No. 56, Ifri, May 2015.

226. D. Minic, "What Does the Russian Army Think About its War in Ukraine? Criticisms, Recommendations, Adaptations", *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 44, Ifri, September 2023.

Russia's DIB has also been severely tested and has adapted in response, shifting its focus away from technological niches, demonstrators and small series, and toward mass production and retrofitting older equipment. According to the state-owned Rostec corporation, in 2023 the total "production" of tanks increased by a factor of 7, that of light armored vehicles by a factor of 4.5, and that of artillery systems and rocket-launchers by a factor of 2.5. At the end of 2023, the Russian defense minister announced that 1,500 tanks, 2,200 armored combat vehicles, 1,400 missiles and artillery weapons, and 22,000 drones had been supplied.²²⁷

The majority of independent analysts believe that these figures include only a small percentage of new equipment and are, in fact, primarily derived from the refurbishment of old, damaged stockpiles and, to a lesser extent, the modernization of existing systems.²²⁸ Although levels of munitions consumption and equipment attrition in Ukraine remain the highest in the world, the system Russia has put in place could allow it to keep its capabilities afloat until 2025-2026 before it is gradually overwhelmed by the limitations of its industrial apparatus.

To compensate for this shortfall in local production, Russia will have no choice but to increase its dependency on imports of off-the-shelf military equipment, and not just production tools. This channel already exists, and currently relies on two main suppliers: Iran and North Korea. In the space of two years, Pyongyang reportedly delivered up to 3 million artillery shells, while Tehran has signed an agreement to deliver 6,000 drones by summer 2025. After that point, however, these two industries could themselves reach their limit, and in order to maintain its material advantage Moscow would be forced to turn to China, which has until now limited itself to supplying dual-use items or spare parts.²²⁹

Although the relative resilience of the Russian military-industrial complex is undeniable, it is currently entirely consumed by the conflict in Ukraine. This is a crucial point for scenarios featuring the eastern flank: as long as the war in Ukraine continues at the same level of intensity seen since 2022, Russia is expected to be unable to carry out other large or even medium-scale conventional operations. This reduces the immediate conventional threat represented by Russia but also forces us to consider the alternative resources it might mobilize in the event of a crisis or conflict occurring while the war in Ukraine is still going on.

227. M. Snegovava, M. Bergmann, T. Dolbaia, and N. Fenton, "Back in Stock? The State of Russia's Defense Industry after Two Years of the War", Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2024.

228. *Ibid.*; see also L. Péria-Peigné, "Stocks militaires: une assurance-vie en haute intensité?", *Focus stratégique*, No. 113, Ifri, December 2022.

229. Statement of General C. G. Cavoli, United States European Command, United States House Armed Services Committee, April 10, 2024.

- ***An enhanced role for nuclear weapons and hybrid warfare on steroids***

The first possibility is an increased use of nuclear rhetoric and a nuclear posture. With 4,489 active nuclear warheads, 1,614 of which are operationally deployed on delivery systems, Russia has maintained strategic parity with the US, giving it a unique status and a belief in its own superiority if a conflict with asymmetrical interests were to escalate.²³⁰ As a result, nuclear weapons are a permanent presence in the background of the war in Ukraine and the confrontation on NATO's eastern flank. They are a key asset for Russia that could become even more important in future. Several different levels are involved.

The first level is that of declaratory policy, which tends, in its official form, to reiterate the established doctrine regarding the conditions under which Russia could use nuclear weapons, while leaving room for doubt about the nature of the “existential threat” that could arise from developments in Ukraine or on the eastern flank. The rhetoric in the media, particularly from civilians with no authority in the nuclear chain of command, is much more forceful and does not hesitate to express much more concrete threats, generally associated with certain aspects of the support given to Ukraine by Western countries.²³¹

The second level is that of the international framework governing the use of weapons, toward which Russia has been particularly aggressive. Alongside Russia's probable violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in the 2010s, when it deployed the SSC-8 intermediate-range system, key moments have included the suspension, in February 2023, of its participation in the New START treaty (which expires in 2026), and the de-ratification of its Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban (CTBT) ratification in November that year, raising the threat of a return to nuclear tests for strategic signaling purposes. Finally, there was the announcement in March 2023, followed by the probable actual deployment, of non-strategic nuclear weapons (most likely Iskander missiles) in Belarus.²³²

The final level is that of the weapons themselves. Although investment in them has been steady for years, it accelerated sharply after Putin's announcements in his speech in the Moscow Manege in 2018. The weapons that feature most frequently in nuclear rhetoric include the RS-28 Sarmat intercontinental missile, which officially entered active service in summer 2023, and the 3M22 Zircon, a scramjet-powered cruise missile that can carry nuclear or conventional loads and is launched from Russian naval vessels.

230. H. Williams, K. Hartigan, L. MacKenzie, and R. Younis, “Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 23, 2024.

231. A. Fink, “The Wind Rose's Directions: Russia's Strategic Deterrence during the First Year of the War in Ukraine”, *Proliferation Papers*, No. 65, Ifri, August 2023.

232. P. Podvig, “Preserving the Nuclear Test Ban after Russia Revoked its CTBT Ratification”, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 7, 2024; A. Fink, “The General Staff's Throw-Weight: the Russian Military's Role in US-Russian Arms Control”, Centre national des armées, March 2024.

It was introduced in January 2023, and seems to have been deployed for the first time in Ukraine in March 2024. Finally, two other weapons are worth mentioning: the Avangard hypersonic glider and the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, which are less mature but still in development.

The second pool of assets in Russia's hand is its arsenal of subversive and destabilizing tools, use of which has become its specialty following years of thinking about how to avoid armed conflict.²³³ Russia deploys a whole array of clandestine actions (including sabotage, propaganda, and assassination) and disinformation actions, sometimes known as “active measures”. This category also includes operations conducted in space or on the seabed, which meet the criteria of clandestine actions because they sometimes go unclaimed.

The US commitment in question

The US military and security contribution to eastern flank defense is the other key variable that will determine the strategic outlook of the theater, and indirectly of France's contribution. Continuously engaged since the end of the Second World War, the US's presence has fluctuated significantly over time. Numbers have fallen substantially from the historic high of around 450,000 troops at the end of the 1980s, particularly following the Global Posture Review carried out at the beginning of the 2000s by the Bush administration. Under Obama, the posture stabilized at around 70,000 troops, mostly stationed in Germany (half the total), the UK, and Italy.

While Russia's first attack on Ukraine led the Pentagon to increase this figure in 2014, and even more so after 2021, when it deployed rotational forces to bring its total troops in Europe to over 100,000, this level of commitment will not necessarily be maintained. The frequent calls from some in the US establishment to shift the focus to the Indo-Pacific, which date back to at least the early 2010s, are becoming stronger as China's military power increases. Beyond the issue of prepositioned troops, the question is about the US capacity to simultaneously cope with two major conflicts – or two separate theaters in a single war.

Still a substantial presence in Europe

Despite nagging questions about the future of the transatlantic relationship, as of 2024, the US armed forces are still the most powerful military actors in Europe. On top of a backbone of robust, permanent forces, Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR), launched in April 2014, involves rotations of units from different countries for the purpose of conventional deterrence and reassurance, particularly on the eastern flank.

233. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes: Du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine*, Paris: Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2023.

OAR is funded through the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), a budget aggregate that reached \$3 billion in 2024 (see below) and includes additional costs associated with deployments, as well as spending on infrastructure and capacity building for its partner armies (training, and equipment transfers). Each service (US Army, US Air Force, US Navy, and US Marine Corps) now has a permanent presence, reinforced by temporarily rotating capabilities, to strengthen the deterrence and defense posture, especially on the eastern flank.

- **US Army**

US land forces on the continent are under the command of US Army Europe (USAREUR), based in Wiesbaden, Germany, and structured around a forward corps-level command post (V Corps) in Poznan, Poland. The bulk of the permanent force comprises two brigade combat teams (the 173rd Airborne in Vicenza, Italy, and the 2nd Cavalry in Germany) and two support brigades (the 12th Combat Aviation and the 41st Artillery in Germany), as well as reinforced surface-to-air defense capabilities.²³⁴

In 2021, USAREUR also inaugurated the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) in Wiesbaden, a new kind of battalion-level inter-service group with cyber and electronic warfare resources alongside conventional long-range strike capabilities – initially Tomahawk missiles, but eventually the new Precision Strike Missiles (PrSM) and Long-Range Hypersonic Weapons (LRHW), still in development.

These permanent capabilities are supplemented by OAR rotations, which originally consisted of an armored brigade and a combat aviation brigade. The Pentagon boosted these rotations in late 2021 in response to the massive Russian deployment on the Ukrainian border and increased levels even more after the invasion. By the end of 2023, the US Army had deployed two armored brigades in Poland, an airborne infantry brigade in Romania, and two combat aviation brigades, not to mention artillery and intelligence support units and two support brigades.

In the event of a major operation, current plans are to reinforce USAREUR within three months with at least one division comprising two brigades and their associated combat aviation, artillery, and air defense support.²³⁵ To reduce transportation problems, the US Army has increased its rapid reinforcement capabilities via the Army Pre-Positioned Stocks (APS) program. The European theater now has a stock known as APS-2, stored at four sites (Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Poland, as well as a fifth in Germany reserved for the Marine Corps). APS-2 was initially meant to store equipment for an armored brigade and an artillery brigade but has been

234. P. Gros, N. Vilboux, and D. Gros, “La posture de défense en 2022”, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, December 2022.

235. B. Ottosson and K. Pallin (eds), *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023*, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, March 2024, p. 194 ff.

expanded to accommodate equipment for an entire division, including logistical and medical services.²³⁶

- **US Air Force**

Following a similar pattern, the air forces are structured around US Air Force Europe (USAFE), headquartered in Ramstein, as a forward-deployed component of the Third Air Force (3AF). Its main combat units are three Fighter wings based at Lakenheath, Spangdahlem, and Aviano, as well as Air Refueling, Special Operations and Rivet Joint air wings at Mildenhall and Airlift and AEW air wings at Ramstein. Under the OAR banner, these structures also receive operational rotations from the Bomber Task Force (B1-B and B-52H) and from various fighter squadrons (F-15, F-35, and F-22).

In the event of a major conflict in Europe, the agility of air assets would enable rapid reinforcement, probably in the form of three to four fighter squadrons and an air refueling wing.²³⁷ More fighter squadrons, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR) assets, and other strategic enablers could be deployed within a further three months. Finally, the US Air Force also has a program for storing maintenance equipment, fuel, and munitions at twenty-three Pre-Positioned War Reserve Materiel (PWRM) sites, four of which are in Europe.

- **US Navy and Marines**

US naval activities in Europe are carried out under the command of the US Navy's Sixth Fleet, based in Naples, and the Second Fleet, in Norfolk, respectively covering the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic areas. The Sixth Fleet's only permanent units are a command ship, the USS *Mount Whitney*, and Destroyer Squadron 60, which is based in Rota, Spain, and consists of four guided-missile destroyers that also contribute to ballistic missile defense in the European theater.

Like the other components, the US naval presence within EUCOM's area of responsibility has been strengthened since 2022, notably with the deployment of a carrier strike group in the Mediterranean, and a further two after the attacks in Israel on October 7. The latter are accompanied by battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, as well as nuclear cruise missile submarines. The Second Fleet's activity level in the North Atlantic has also increased, contributing to the DDA posture (see above).

Finally, the Marine Corps does not have forces permanently pre-positioned in Europe. The 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), based on the US East Coast, has been designated to intervene in the event of a conflict. A regiment-sized Marine Expeditionary Unit equipped with HIMARS rocket-launchers visits Europe on rotation every year as part of OAR. The Corps also

236. Defense Primer: Department of Defense Pre-Positioned Materiel, Congressional Research Service, December 23, 2023.

237. B. Ottosson and K. Pallin, *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023*, op. cit.

has a storage facility pre-positioned near Trondheim, Norway, in a complex of caves that was already in use during the Cold War.

**Table IV-1: Principal US deployments in Europe
at the beginning of 2024**

	Units	Location	Country	Manpower
USAREUR	173 rd Airborne Brigade	Vicenza	Italy	4,000
	2 nd Cavalry Regiment (equivalent to a brigade)	Vilseck	Germany	21,500
	41 st Artillery Brigade (2 bn)	Grafenwöhr		
	2 nd MDTF	Wiesbaden		
	12 th Combat Aviation Brigade (2 bn)	Katterbach		
	10 th Army Air and Missile Defense Command (3 bn)	Sembach, Ansbach, Baumholder		
	2 armored brigades (ABCT) 1 FLF-BG 1 PAC-3 battery	Poznan, Powidz, Zagan, Skwierzyna, Świętoszów, etc.	Poland	15,000
	1 airborne brigade (XVIII Airborne Corps)	MKAB	Romania	4,000
	Various small units	Bulgaria, Greece, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, etc.		2,000
	USAFE	1 F-16C/D squadron 1 C-130J squadron	Ramstein	Germany
1 B-1B detachment		Fairford	UK	10,000
2 F-15E squadrons 2 F-35A squadrons		Lakenheath		
1 RC-135 squadron 1 KC-135 refueling wing		Mildenhall		
2 F-16C/D squadron 1 SAR H-60G squadron		Aviano	Italy	4,800
1 ISR MQ-9A squadron 1 RQ-4B detachment		Sigonella		
US Navy	4 DDG (destroyers)	Rota	Spain	3,200
	2 CSVs 2 DDG 3 DDGs 2 SSN (LA/Virginia)	6 th Fleet (Mediterranean)		12,500
	1 P-8A squadron	Sigonella	Italy	3,600
USMC	1 ARG/MEU	Trondheim	Norway	1,000

Pivot calling

Current levels of US presence in Europe raise questions about the reality of the “pivot to Asia” that was called for by the Obama administration as soon as 2011, but already implicit in the Global Posture Review carried out by Donald Rumsfeld in 2002. As a response to the shift to the world’s geoeconomic center of gravity, this pivot is, first and foremost, a recognition of the rise of Chinese power and the need for the US to confront it with all the instruments of grand strategy. However, repeated security crises in the Middle East and Europe have systematically frustrated the US security and defense apparatus’s attempts to reorient itself toward the Indo-Pacific.

This permanent dilemma between the long term of grand strategy and the urgency of international politics is now a feature of the framework documents of US foreign policy, notably the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), the most recent versions of which were published in fall 2022. The NSS clearly identifies China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective”.²³⁸ Russia, meanwhile, is defined as “an immediate threat” or “an acute threat” ahead of, but in the same category as, Iran, North Korea, and international terrorism.

- **“Pacing challenge”**

The NDS, edited by the Department of Defense, is even more explicit, describing China as a “pacing challenge”,²³⁹ the strategic standard against which the US military organization, operations and capabilities should be sized. In other words, the development of new weapons systems, force structures, and even new doctrinal frameworks, must now respond primarily to the challenge posed by the strategic threat from China.

The meaning of “pacing challenge” is still poorly understood in Europe, where it is generally rephrased and simplified as a “long-term threat” concept, leading to underestimation of its consequences. If China represents the long term, then the European theater may still come first, if any “short-term” crisis should arise. In that respect, the passing in April 2024 of a defense supplemental bill providing \$95 billion in bilateral military aid, the lion’s share of which (\$61 billion) was for Ukraine, while just \$8 billion was for the US’s Indo-Pacific partners, may have presented a false picture of the Pentagon’s priorities.

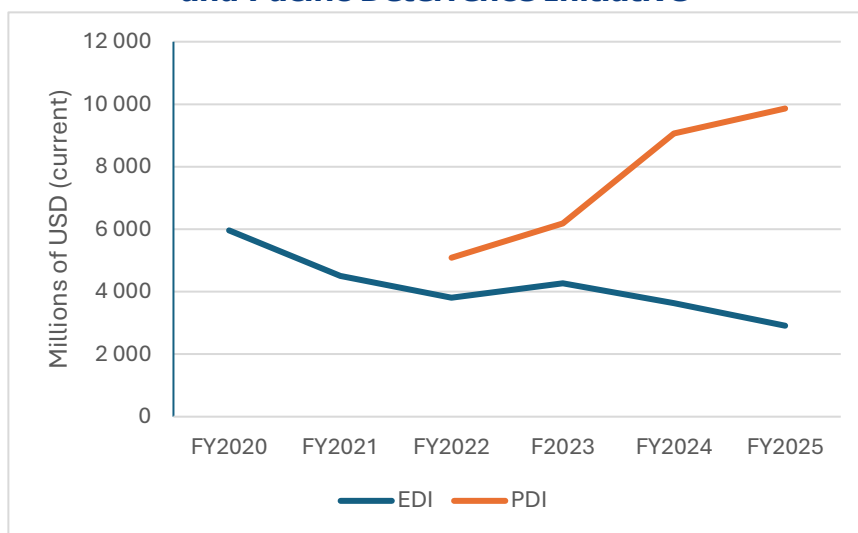
In contrast to these decisions, which were indeed born of urgency and political pressure, the Pentagon’s long-term investments tell a different story. A telling example is the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), a budget aggregate created in 2021 on the model of the EDI (see above) and designed

238. *National Security Strategy*, The White House, Washington, October 2022, p. 8.

239. *National Defense Strategy of the United States*, Department of Defense, Washington, 2022, pp. 4-5.

to structurally reinforce the US military posture in the Indo-Pacific region. Like the EDI, it provides funds for the rotational deployments, but also for the build-up or improvement of defense infrastructures, and support for partner nations. A comparison between the EDI and PDI fundings clearly shows the growing gap between the US's strategic priorities.

Figure IV-2: Fundings for European Deterrence Initiative and Pacific Deterrence Initiative



Source: Department of Defense budget, 2021-2024.

- **"One major war construct"**

Beyond its impact on force structure, the key challenge for US commitments to the defense of Europe's eastern flank rests on its ability to fight two conflicts at the same time, or a single global-scale conflict with two or more fronts.²⁴⁰ Inherited from the Second World War experience of fighting in the Pacific and Europe simultaneously, the "Two-War Construct"²⁴¹ was based on the idea that the US needed to be able to wage war on two fronts in parallel. This goal was maintained throughout the Cold War, although the Nixon administration preferred the idea of a "1-1/2 war",²⁴² that is one large-scale conventional war and one major counterinsurgency operation.

During the 1990s and 2000s, despite the lack of state competitors, the Quadrennial Defense Review continued to talk about the ability to "fight and win two major regional conflicts in overlapping time frames".²⁴³ At the same time, however, the shift to Asia as the global economic and technological center of gravity was increasingly affecting the military sphere. As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) underwent rapid modernization, Russia updated its strategy, and revisionist states such as Iran and North Korea

240. R. S. Cohen, "Ukraine and the New Two War Construct", *War on the Rocks*, January 5, 2023.

241. J. Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct", *The Washington Quarterly* 41, No. 4, 2018, pp. 7-30.

242. E. V. Larson, "Force Planning Scenarios, 1945-2016: Their Origins and Use in Defense Strategic Planning", RAND Corporation, 2019, p. 68.

243. *Quadrennial Defense Review*, Report, February 2010.

consolidated their military programs. The NDS published by the Trump administration in 2018 was the first to significantly modify the “Two-War Construct”, describing the army’s mission as “defeating aggression by a major power [while] deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere”.²⁴⁴ Similar wording was used in the 2022 NDS, which implicitly recognizes the US’s inability to maintain a military apparatus large enough to take the lead in two, let alone three, major regional conflicts.

Recent indications of a growing rapprochement between the US’s various global competitors (Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea) with regard to the war in Ukraine have cast the new “One Major War Construct”²⁴⁵ in a more somber light. The interconnectedness of theaters makes “spillover effects”²⁴⁶ seem increasingly likely: in a hypothetical large-scale conflict with China, how would Russia (or Iran) respond in their respective regions? The possibility of one of these actors seeking to capitalize on the US being tied up in the Pacific is all the more likely now that the US armed forces are no longer large enough to deal with such a threat.

- ***The end of US political consensus on Europe***

In this context, it seems clear that the US national security’s “pivot to Asia” goes well beyond the mere political appetite to engage, or not, alongside Europe to protect the eastern flank. With concerns growing about the future of transatlantic solidarity, the possibility of a new Trump administration in 2025 should be understood as an accelerator of US disengagement, which seems to be already underway, rather than a potential change of direction.

There is no need to revisit the well-known controversies provoked by the former president and current candidate for the White House. Trump has long considered NATO to be “a protection racket” by European countries, from which the US derives no benefits. On top of provocative statements in which Trump “encouraged [the Russians] to do whatever they want”²⁴⁷ to NATO members that do not pay their dues to the US, the intellectuals associated with his platform have put forward even more extreme ideas. In a policy brief for the Center for Renewing America, the conservative analyst Sumantra Maitra proposed a “dormant NATO” that would only be “activated in the case of a major war”.²⁴⁸ The stated goal would be to “force” Europeans to take responsibility for all conventional defense missions on the continent while leaving extended nuclear deterrence in place. Less radical views have been expressed in the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, which recommends “transform[ing] NATO so that US allies are capable of fielding the great

244. National Defense Strategy, 2018.

245. America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, Institute for Defense Analyses, October 2024, p. 7, 90.

246. T. Gomart, *L’Accélération du monde*, Paris: Tallandier, 2024.

247. P. Smolar, “Donald Trump suscite l’effroi parmi les alliés en mettant en cause le principe de solidarité au sein de l’OTAN”, *Le Monde*, February 12, 2024.

248. S. Maitra, “Policy Brief: Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO”, Center for Renewing America, February 16, 2023.

majority of the conventional forces required to deter Russia while relying on the United States primarily for our nuclear deterrent and select[ing] other capabilities while reducing the US force posture in Europe”.²⁴⁹

Even in the case of Democratic victory, the bipartisan consensus around sustained commitment to Europe's defense at the current level is now weakened among the American ruling class. Trump's ideas have spread throughout the Republican party, as shown by the positions of young senators such as Josh Hawley and J.D. Vance, who are openly hostile the principle of a long-term engagement to protect European security.²⁵⁰ Likewise, the left wing of the Democratic party has gradually turned its back on the Atlanticist tradition that took root after the Second World War. At the very least, the congressional landscape is liable to lead to more frequent episodes of political paralysis. These may be moderate – although with a real impact – along the lines of the blockage of the supplemental funding bill for several months in 2023-2024, but they also have the potential to be much more radical, given the likelihood of internal unrest caused by the increasing polarization of US society.²⁵¹

This evaporation of US political consensus around support for the defense of Europe in general, and its eastern flank in particular, has already prompted NATO members to try to secure their bilateral relationships with the US. The series of defense cooperation agreements signed during 2024 by Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, but also the contractual approaches in terms of defense procurement as seen in Romania, Poland, and elsewhere, reflect these countries' expectation that Washington might demand a more transactional relationship in future in exchange for security guarantees.

Various scenarios for 2030

From the two major strategic variables shaping Europe's Eastern Flank in the coming years – Russian military power and US commitment to European security – stems a matrix of foresight scenarios.

The Russia variable: what victory means

The outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine is undoubtedly the most important factor determining the strategic environment of the eastern flank. As long as the conflict drags on at the scale seen since 2022, Russia's margins for military action will remain limited. For this reason, our hypothetical

249. Cited in M. Bergmann, “How European Transatlanticists Might Approach an Isolationist U.S. Administration”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2024.

250. M. Bergmann, “A More European NATO: Defense Spending Alone Cannot Fix the Alliance's Overdependence on the United States”, *Foreign Affairs*, March 2024.

251. R. Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 5, 2023.

scenarios are built around the different ways in which the conflict could end. There are three broad potential situations:

- ***Russian victory in Ukraine:*** this hypothesis would see the materialization of all or most of the conditions put forward by Russian intermediaries, including recognition by Kyiv and the international community of the annexation of occupied areas; the ceding of Kharkiv and potentially Odessa, or at least the establishment of a buffer zone around them; a guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO; and finally, the establishment of a government deemed acceptable by Russia. The only significant concession would be allowing what remains of Ukraine to join the EU.²⁵²
- ***Continuous stalemate in Ukraine:*** this hypothesis assumes continuation of the current trend, with a war of attrition with no chance of victory. Beyond 2026, the fundamentals of the Russian economy will begin to affect the country's internal capacity to conduct a long-term, large-scale war. These difficulties could compel Moscow to try to develop strategies for circumventing or overcoming them, whether horizontal (negotiation, hybrid actions, or actions in other conflict domains) or vertical (escalation to nuclear coercion).
- ***Russian defeat in Ukraine:*** this final hypothesis involves a substantial renouncement by Russia of its stated war goals and certainly of areas occupied since 2022, possibly since 2014. Given Putin's major political commitment to the conflict, this prospect would inevitably provoke a serious political crisis, leading to significant uncertainty and a range of different scenarios, from a democratic transition through to civil war.

The US variable: what pivoting means

- ***Enduring large US footprint in Europe:*** this scenario implies that, whether as a result of strategic reorientation or an increase in the US armed forces' resources allowing a return to the "Two-War Construct", the US manages to maintain its presence at the levels of 2022-2023, that is over 100,000 troops.
- ***Reduced US footprint in Europe:*** in this scenario, the US would begin to significantly reduce its combat-capable forces in Europe. In contrast, Washington would maintain its contribution in terms of strategic enablers for C2, ISR, anti-missile defense, and long-range strike capabilities, as well as its extended nuclear deterrence. In some versions of the scenario, the US contribution to the NATO command structure could also be reduced.

252. J. Watling and N. Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024", Royal United Services Institute, February 13, 2024.

- Major US disengagement from Europe:** in this scenario, whether for political reasons leading it to implement a “dormant NATO”, or in the context of a major conflict with China, the US would withdraw most of its combat capable forces from Europe, including strategic enablers. The most radical option would go as far as challenging extended nuclear deterrence.

A final scenario consisting of a combination of the last two is also possible: a “selective reduction” that would see the US disengage from NATO and multilateral structures (“dormant NATO”) while maintaining forces in certain countries on a bilateral, transactional basis.

Table IV-1: Foresight analysis of eastern flank scenarios

Variables	A Russian defeat in Ukraine	B Deadlock in Ukraine/temporary settlement	C Russian victory in Ukraine
1 Enduring large US presence in Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: EU and NATO membership for Ukraine; eventual reduction of DDA posture - Russia: cultural isolationism; regime crisis in Moscow (and Minsk?); democratic transition, civil breakdown/war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: consolidation of the current DDA system; - Russia: limited military threat; horizontal escalation - French contribution: maintenance of current posture and gradual reinforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: major doubts about NATO (and the EU); attempt to massively reinforce the flank; risk of hedging - Russia: limited adventurism on new fronts (Moldova) and increased destabilization activity - French contribution: significant reinforcement of posture (permanent brigade, air and naval reinforcement)
2 Reduced US footprint in Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - French contribution: participation to reassurance and training and/or stabilization missions in new areas (Ukraine, Moldova); non-proliferation/arms control missions (Russia) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: tensions within NATO; new requests for reassurance from eastern flank countries - Russia: structural weakening and increased dependence on China; attempts to overcome difficulties horizontally (hybrid) or vertically (escalation) - French contribution: moderate reinforcement of posture; increased support for Ukraine’s bid to join the EU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: major NATO (and EU) crisis; possible hedging by some eastern-flank countries - Russia: unrestrained adventurism on new fronts - French contribution: major reinforcement of the DDA posture (brigade-division)
3 Major US disengagement from Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: EU membership for Ukraine, scramble for strategic primacy within NATO - Russia: cultural isolationism; regime crisis in Moscow (and Minsk?); democratic transition, civil breakdown/war - French contribution: leading role in reassurance, stabilization, and non-proliferation missions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: major NATO crisis; hedging attempts by some countries (Hungary, Balkans) - Russia: structural weakening; attempt to escalate vertically in response to US disengagement - French contribution: substantial reinforcement of the DDA posture (brigade-division) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eastern flank: NATO (and EU) breakdown, probable hedging by some countries - Russia: unrestrained adventurism on new fronts - French contribution: major reinforcement of the DDA posture (brigade-division); nuclear posture adaptation;

France: what ambitions, by what means?

What strategic effect is France seeking to achieve with its presence and activities in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe? Political-military statements point at various answers. First, France wants to secure its immediate strategic environment by containing and eventually pushing back the threat represented by a revanchist, imperialist Russian power.

A second goal is to send a message of solidarity to NATO's eastern Allies, France's partner countries, EU member states, or "members of the European family" as embodied by the new European Political Community. Sending a message is not an end in itself, but the way to increase its influence in Europe and to see European allies and partners adopt aligned strategic orientations.

Fulfilling France's objectives on the eastern flank—security and influence—now depends heavily on how it responds to two key challenges: the credibility of its support for Ukraine in the war against Russia, and consolidation of its contribution to Europe's deterrence and defense posture, primarily via NATO, which for most allies remains the principal framework for European defense.

Aid to Ukraine: a financial challenge

In his speech on Europe at the Sorbonne in April 2024, Emmanuel Macron described the war in Ukraine as the "main danger to European security", adding that the "sine qua non-condition for our security is that Russia does not win the war of aggression it is waging on Ukraine".²⁵³ France has committed to support Kyiv in the long term by signing a ten-year cooperation agreement that establishes the framework and outlines various avenues for structuring its aid.²⁵⁴

Numerous questions remain, however, around France's ability to follow through on this plan at the stated level of ambition. The first pitfall is financial. While the agreement sets out an amount of military aid that could reach "up to €3 billion in 2024", the scope and details of such funding remain unclear, especially at a time of tension around the public finances. The Special Fund, created in 2022 and endowed with €400 million, is ineffective because it relies on advance payments by the Ukrainian government. It is also grossly insufficient to cover the annual expenses envisaged in the agreement. Finally, the principle of paying for military aid out of the Ministry of Armed Forces' budget conflicts with the 2024-2030 military programming law, which stipulates a rise in defense spending to around €3 billion per year:

253. E. Macron, "Europe Speech", Paris, April 25, 2024.

254. Agreement on security cooperation between France and Ukraine, February 16, 2024.

exactly the sum that is supposed to be allocated to Ukraine. Certain steps could be taken to resolve these issues:

- The first step would be to create a new Extraordinary Ukraine Defense Fund worth €30 billion over ten years, the equivalent of €3 billion per year for the duration of the bilateral agreement. Like the German *Sondervermögen* created in 2022, the money for this fund would not come from regular government expenditure, but from a dedicated loan, guaranteed or even directly issued by the EU, similar to the mechanism used during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Extraordinary Ukraine Defense Fund would enable the development of a multi-year procurement plan, in close coordination with the UDCG and any other bodies used to coordinate capability aid (such as the newly created NSATU). This plan would allow the various DIB actors to better anticipate future orders and adjust their production facilities accordingly.
- Finally, uncertainty about the scope of military aid, and recurring media controversies around the methods used to calculate its amount, should prompt clarification from the French government. Various options exist, first among them the establishment of a parliamentary oversight procedure modeled on the one set up to monitor the state of emergency between 2015 and 2017.

A second category of action would involve support for capability and training assistance provided to Ukraine by the French armed forces and actors from the French DIB. With aid to Ukraine increasingly structured around capability coalitions, France could emphasize three capability niches:

- The first point concerns the artillery coalition, which is led by France with the support of the US (see above). The focus here is the ability to deliver CAESAR howitzers to the Ukrainian forces. Although France has announced the delivery of seventy-eight systems worth just over €330 million in total, Paris was only able to fund twelve of them. To secure its leadership of the coalition, France must prioritize delivery of the stipulated quantities, all for a total value well below the ceiling of €3 billion set out in the cooperation agreement.
- A second point concerns the development of a dedicated air munitions coalition around the delivery of SCALP-EG missiles, and AASM guided bombs, but also MICA-EM and MICA-IR air-to-air missiles, following directly from the recent announcement of the supply of *Mirage 2000-5* aircraft. Again, a credible position for France would consist of establishing a production line specifically for Ukraine in order to provide these effectors in sufficient quantities. In parallel, the French Air and Space Force could boost the *Mirage 2000* conversion mission by mobilizing instructors and additional dedicated resources, if necessary, by calling on the reserves. The training of Ukrainian pilots, which Macron

wants to happen rapidly, must fit in alongside that of French pilots, already very restricted by a shortage of instructors, mechanics, and conversion aircraft.

- The emphasis on artillery and strike capability could lead France to become more involved in another capability niche, involving the production and use of drones. Although a capability coalition in this area does exist, led by Lithuania, the Ministry of Armed Forces' order of 2000 drones from the French company Delair, some of which were destined for Ukraine, demonstrates the investment opportunity presented by this sector, which complements the two discussed above. Beyond the delivery systems themselves, a key focus is the on-board ISR systems, particularly reconnaissance capabilities using artificial intelligence algorithms. A second focus is the security of on-board connectivity, an area in which the French industry has recognized skills.

Finally, the last category of aid measures consists of reinforcing actions carried out by France and its European partners within Ukraine itself. In the wake of Macron's statements on February 26, 2024, and his second speech at the Sorbonne, it is important to show that there are no red lines limiting the ways and means of military aid. Various gradual options could be considered depending on the evolution of the conflict and the level of political ambition:

- The first necessity is to create a more direct relationship between the shifting reality of the Ukrainian battlefield and the training provided, particularly as part of the EUMAM mission. One solution would be to create a EUMAM detachment in Ukraine devoted solely to military observation of the conflict. Its staff – limited to a few dozen personnel – would visit all areas of the front in order to collect, analyze, draw lessons, and adapt training activities at short notice. In the French Army, the Future Combat Command (CCF) has been following the war in Ukraine for two years and could legitimately pilot this observation and feedback process alongside the Joint Center for Concepts, Doctrine, and Experimentation (CICDE).
- A second category of action would be training and maintenance missions within Ukraine. This would be a logical continuation of the conference on February 26. Although as of June 7, 2024 it has not been announced by Macron, it seems essential in the medium term to support the expansion of the *Mirage 2000-5* unit that is set to be delivered to Ukraine, as well as the brigade trained and equipped by France. From the brigade's perspective, this mission would allow a focus on training for big unit maneuvers, which are beyond the reach of Ukrainian forces.
- Due to the strong reluctance of several European countries, the EUMAM arrangement does not seem suited to this sort of development. In contrast, a dedicated European framework could be envisaged between like-minded countries. Although this option does not legally constitute a

belligerent act (as a sovereign nation, Ukraine can receive aid in its territory under its cooperation policy), Moscow's threats of potential strikes on instructors make it essential to start thinking about possible responses from the outset.²⁵⁵

- A third, even more radical category of measures would be the deployment of support missions for the monitoring and protection of Ukrainian territory. These could include demining operations in liberated areas with a view to rebuilding and resettlement of civilians. However, given the current shape of the conflict, the principal focus could be a paradigm shift in terms of air defense. The enforcement, in support of the Ukrainian air force, of a no-fly zone over selected areas – particularly those hosting training missions (see above) – could be one option, simultaneously defensive and assertive, and benefiting both the civilian population and military missions. This kind of action, necessarily carried out as part of a coalition, would nevertheless represent a major challenge for the French armed forces, which, if they remain at their current size, would undoubtedly have to give up other operational engagements.

Reinforcing France's strategic presence on Europe's eastern flank

Beyond the specific question of aid to Ukraine, France's influence on Europe's eastern flank will depend on its actual contribution to deterrence and defense missions within NATO's geographical area, and on what it can offer cooperative security missions, whether through the Partnership for Peace, EU missions, or a bilateral framework. From this perspective, France must continue to capitalize on its current strengths.

France's military credibility on the eastern flank is recognized by all of its NATO allies. Years of external operations have shaped its operational readiness and toughened up its forces. While French soldiers' "battle-hardened reputation" should persist for many years, the dormancy of its major counterterrorism operations in Africa and the Middle East means the French armed forces must preserve their fighting spirit while making the most of having more resources for training and the forward presence.

As a result, responsiveness is essential to the credibility of a forward presence that is relatively light but which, as France regularly demonstrates, can be reinforced rapidly when needed. The national emergency force (ENU) is a proven system that is the envy of many NATO allies. Nevertheless, it is important not to over-promise regarding France's contributions to the systems put in place by SHAPE as part of the NATO Force Model, the new alert system, and the redesigned architecture of the DDA plans.

255. "Vladimir Poutine menace de livrer des armes à des pays tiers afin de frapper des intérêts occidentaux", *Le Monde*, June 6, 2024.

Third, possession of nuclear weapons sets France apart within Europe. Macron has reiterated the “European dimension”²⁵⁶ of French nuclear deterrence several times since 2020, and even described it in April 2024 as “a critical element of defense of the European continent”.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the concrete consequences of these statements remain vague for most of France’s partners, who are unsure of the precise nature of these overtures.

Certain member states, highlighting France’s refusal to join NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), remain unconvinced by the contribution of France’s (and the UK’s) independent deterrence to the Alliance’s overall deterrence, although it has been recognized since the 1974 Ottawa Declaration. The NPG is a political body that in no way involves the harmonization of doctrines or postures. Assuming the status of observer state, or even joining the NPG, with marginal adjustments such as renaming it, could be a way to boost France’s influence among its allies without jeopardizing the sovereignty of the French deterrence.

One may also consider operational cooperations. As researcher Héloïse Fayet has suggested, French Air Force participation in the Conventional Support for Nuclear Operations, or in SHAPE’s annual nuclear exercise Steadfast Noon, could help to dispel the idea of France as being separate from NATO’s deterrence.²⁵⁸ Conversely, participation by NATO’s eastern flank members in the Poker exercises, as an Italian tanker aircraft did in 2022, would also help to boost understanding of the French contribution.

Finally, a fourth strength of France’s strategic presence is its leading role in the EU, particularly in the Common Security and Defense Policy. The EU has demonstrated its usefulness by rapidly providing aid to Ukraine via the European Peace Facility and the EUMAM mechanism and is actively continuing to equip itself with budget- and capability-strengthening instruments, as shown by the recent Defense Industrial Strategy (EDIS), published in March 2024. France must not neglect defense efforts within the EU under the pretext of reinvesting in NATO. In fact, it has a fundamental role to play in pushing both organizations to work more closely with each other and to coordinate on key missions such as military mobility, but also defense planning.²⁵⁹

Alongside these assets to enhance and consolidate, France also has several weaknesses and shortcomings – partly inherited from its former stance on NATO – that must now be remedied to optimize its contribution.

256. E. Macron, “Discours du président Emmanuel macron sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion devant les stagiaires de la 27^e promotion de l’École de guerre”, February 7, 2020.

257. E. Macron, “Europe Speech”, Paris, April 25, 2024.

258. H. Fayet, “Pourquoi la France ne proposera pas de ‘parapluie nucléaire’ à l’Europe”, *Le Rubicon*, March 6, 2024.

259. G. Garnier, “La France dans l’OTAN : de l’allié difficile au contributeur essentiel”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 115, Ifri, June 2023.

The first concerns France's political stance within the Alliance. De Gaulle's legacy remains very influential in French diplomacy, and years spent outside the integrated command structure have left a lasting impression, leading to political reflexes that continue to provoke surprise abroad. A change of attitude has undeniably been underway since 2022 but must be further supported. France's acceptance of the idea of Ukraine joining NATO is one of the shifts that have improved its reputation among eastern flank countries. Paris could go further by changing its position on the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which continues to restrict permanent deployments on the eastern flank. In view of Russia's total violation of the agreement and the effective suspension of the Act's mechanisms since 2014, France should acknowledge it as being obsolete.

A second area requiring attention is human resources, specifically France's ability to fill roles within NATO. A report published by the Cour des Comptes (the country's public auditor) in 2023 noted that France had only filled 75 percent of the military positions allocated to it within the organization, a rate deemed "low in comparison to the other European Allies (93% for the UK, 91% for Italy, and 86% for Germany)".²⁶⁰ This underachievement is particularly noticeable in the ACO chain, despite the latter being the most important for the DDA mission, and is reflected in France having less influence than it should, especially in terms of senior roles. Permanent diplomatic and military representatives are in a similar situation: the French team at NATO headquarters is similar in size to that of Romania, and much smaller than the British, German, or Italian delegations.

One possible way to resolve this problem would be for Paris to make NATO posts more appealing, both in terms of remuneration (bonuses) and career progression. Too often, NATO jobs are seen as "unpromising", and struggle to attract applicants. The human resource directors of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry for Armed Forces could increase the visibility and priority of these roles. Finally, officers could be recruited under contract for International Military Staff (IMS) or military and defense representation posts, and civilian contractors could be recruited for International Staff posts.

A third area for improvement is France's participation in, and organization of, Allied exercises and training activities, again specifically within the NATO framework, where its contribution has long been marginal. The level of French participation has improved considerably in the last two years, admittedly aided by a relative reduction in external operations. This trend should be maintained by effective pre-planning for joint events and by the careful selection of exercises not just for their operational added value,

260. "La participation de la France à l'OTAN : une contribution croissante", Cour des Comptes report, Paris, July 2023.

but also for their political and strategic value in terms of influence and signaling.

As well as participating in exercises, France must also be able to host them and display its organizational prowess. A lack of familiarity with the NATO exercise approval process has been noted on occasion, preventing French exercises from being fully integrated into an Alliance-validated process. Although exercises such as Polaris or Orion are appreciated by NATO members for their ambitious, high-intensity approach, their inclusion in a NATO reference catalog could still be improved. To that end, involvement with the Joint Warfare Center in Stavanger is essential.

A final area in which there is work to be done concerns industrial cooperation agreements on the eastern flank. The French DIB, long accustomed to “major exports” to the countries of the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, has tended to neglect Central and Eastern Europe, which are seen as the preserve of the US. Although critical of the transactional nature of the US’s strategy regarding Europe, France has too often taken a similar approach, with its interest in the eastern flank countries fluctuating opportunistically.

The national structure of the French DIB has also sometimes meant it has failed to make the most of offsets by helping to build local industrial capabilities in partner countries. Weak relations with local industrial fabrics can hamper market penetration.

Regional approach: dispersion or concentration?

As an Atlantic and Mediterranean nation, at the crossroads of Northern and Latin Europe, France has always sat “at the handle of the fan”, and still seeks to have influence over all four corners of the continent, despite its limited conventional means and its major engagements outside Europe. As discussed above, France needs to reconcile its ambitions with its means (short of a drastic increase in the latter). A selective approach regarding its involvement in different sub-regions of the eastern flank is necessary.

The aim is to avoid dispersing its efforts without going too far the other way toward excessive concentration, which would reduce the added value of the unique 360° projection capacity underpinning its status of “operational reserve” that is so appreciated by planners. Conventionally, the region is divided into three geographical groupings with distinct characteristics: the Far North, East-Central, and Southeast.

The Far North: developing a stronger presence

Of these three areas, the Far North (from the North Atlantic to Finland) is currently the one in which France currently has the smallest presence, for geographical as well as historical reasons. Although it will never become the

principal zone of deployment for the French armed forces, a number of actions could be carried out there with a view to exploiting it more fully and strengthening relations with allied nations.

As of 2024, numerous opportunities are presenting themselves. First, the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO has reconfigured the region's defense plans and opened the door to devising new forms of response. Second, JFC Norfolk has reached full capacity and joined the integrated command structure, creating a new institutional space in the ACO chain that should be strategically valuable for securing logistical connections between North America and Europe.

With regard to Norway, there is already mutual understanding and a good level of interoperability in the naval domain thanks to surveillance and protection operations carried out in the vicinity of Russia's Arctic bastion. Although things must be handled sensitively because of the proximity of the Kola Peninsula and the Russian nuclear device, meaning caution must be exercised when suggesting cooperations in the Norwegian Far North, rapid strategic developments call for increased coordination, for example via the dispatch of liaison officers to the French Atlantic Command (CECLANT).

In the land domain, one avenue to explore is how to boost France's extreme cold-weather combat skills. This is the core domain of the Norwegian and Finnish armies, with which there is currently little cooperation other than France's regular participation in the Nordic Response exercise and "extreme cold" training courses. Beyond the availability of unique terrain for maneuver training, it may be worthwhile to develop fully fledged cooperations with these two partners. Designing joint exercises (to be held alternatively in the two countries) would be the best way to sustain cooperation and promote knowledge exchange. More ambitiously, a structural partnership, to include an officer exchange program, could be signed between France's 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade (the land component's "extreme cold" experts) and the Norwegian Army's Brigade Nord and/or the Finnish Army's Jaeger Brigade.

Beyond training in a specific environment, Finland also faces a significant challenge in securing its long border with Russia, which stretches over more than 1,300 km. Making the most of a selective conscription system and numerous well-maintained reserves (285,000 troops), the Finnish armed forces are robust and have a strong tradition of independence, making an FLF-type deployment unnecessary in the first instance. Exercises or even limited deployments integrated into the Finnish forces would, however, help to strengthen its relationship with France, which currently remains weak. Finland's participation in Operation Daman in Lebanon, in the form of an infantry company, represents a good starting point for developing mutual understanding and could be enhanced and extended. Likewise, in the air and naval domains, occasional deployments for the purpose of strategic signaling could demonstrate France's strategic solidarity and provide opportunities.

With regard to Sweden, relations have intensified considerably over recent years, particularly in the defense sphere, as shown by Macron's state visit in January 2024. As a supporter of Barkhane from the outset and a founding member of the short-lived Takuba Task Force, Sweden already shares operational experience with France, which must now be continued in the Baltic region.

There is also an industrial and capability partnership in the offing thanks to the signing of agreements between Saab and MBDA on the Akeron (MMP) anti-tank missile, which could herald even more pivotal partnerships in future. Saab's innovative solutions in the AEW sector, for example, offer interesting alternatives for the replacement of the French AWACS E-3F fleet.

East-Central: finding the right balance

The East-Central zone stretches from Estonia to Slovakia and is currently the main focus of Allied military efforts, particularly focused around Poland, the new military power in the region, and Germany, which is continuing to increase its presence in Lithuania and form new partnerships in Central Europe.²⁶¹ At first sight, therefore, the region does not seem conducive to major investment by France. Nevertheless, it demands attention because of its pivotal position in NATO's deterrence and defense posture. Two aspects are especially worthy of mention: consolidation of France's relationship with Estonia, and support for a Franco-Polish dynamic, potentially linked with Germany.

France's excellent relationship with Estonia is an asset that must be consolidated. It should be sustained by keeping the Lynx SGTIA in the FLF-BG at a good level, and fully exploiting the potential of the LIC's partnership with the Estonian Defense League. Among the possible options for solidifying the arrangement, the deployment of a French Army Light Aviation detachment, even if only on an occasional basis, would help to demonstrate France's interest in Estonia, and offer creative training opportunities.

Beyond the land domain, Estonia has substantial assets in the fields of intelligence and cyber-defense. Although some good exchanges are already in place in this area, it would benefit from closer bilateral cooperation than at present, particularly via the creation of liaison posts and/or bilateral cyber exercises (such as hackathons). In the field of analysis and forecasting, the imminent creation of a permanent French position at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) think tank should help to strengthen links around strategic thinking, and ensure France is well represented among Estonia's experts.

Another aspect of France's presence in Estonia is the triangular relationship with the UK, which acts as the framework nation of the FLF-BG under its Operation Cabrit. Although the defense section was one of the most

261. L. Péria-Peigné and É. Tenenbaum, "Zeitenwende", *op. cit.*

comprehensive at the UK-France summit in March 2023, progress has since been limited. Estonia would be the ideal arena for demonstrating that the old Entente remains alive and well. Although the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) concept developed in the Lancaster House Treaties reached “full operational capacity” in 2020, it has never been used.²⁶² Holding a large CJEF exercise in Estonia would undoubtedly send a welcome message and make it possible to engage in a properly joint framework.

Finally, the other main priority for the French defense community should be on relations with Poland.²⁶³ The rise to power of a new, pro-European, liberal majority is already opening up prospects for increased collaboration, as shown by Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s visit to Paris in February 2024 to discuss the possibility of reviving the existing framework for bilateral defense cooperation.²⁶⁴ At a time when Poland is gradually emerging as one of the most powerful land forces in Europe (if not the most powerful), with an procurement list that is spectacular to say the least, France cannot afford to ignore this important partner.²⁶⁵

Several approaches might be considered. The first of these is active French participation in large Polish exercises, as was the case with Dragon 24. Second, forms of capability and industrial cooperation would, after numerous missed opportunities in recent years, consolidate the defense relationship on robust economic foundations. And finally, the reinvigoration of the “Weimar format” raises the question of Germany’s inclusion in the defense cooperation agreement with Warsaw. Due to its major presence in Lithuania and its central position in Europe, Germany is now a key player on the eastern flank, and one with which France still struggles to coordinate. The launch of tripartite initiatives, whether operational – such as increased French participation in the Multinational Corps Northeast, which is currently dominated by Poland and Germany – or capability-based – in the field of anti-air defense, for example – would give the cooperation fresh impetus.

Southeast: constructing a coalition

The Southeast zone borders the Black Sea and stretches to the Eastern Mediterranean and is currently the area in which France is currently most engaged, with deterrence and defense missions as well as cooperative security missions. It could be the region in which French influence turns out

262. A. Billon-Galland and É. Tenenbaum, “Rebooting the Entente: An Agenda for Renewed UK-France Defense Cooperation”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, Ifri, February 22, 2023.

263. P. Haroche, “L’avenir de la défense européenne passe par le couple franco-polonais”, *Le Monde*, March 16, 2023.

264. Joint declaration by President Emmanuel Macron and the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, February 12, 2024.

265. A. Zima, “La Pologne, nouvelle superpuissance militaire”, interview by Alexandre Jubelin, *Le Collimateur*, May 23, 2023.

to be decisive, giving the country an opportunity to showcase its command capabilities at the operational and strategic levels.

Due to the strong presence of the French Army and Air and Space Force, Romania is now emerging as the country with which France has the most advanced bilateral military cooperation. As a framework nation of the FLF-BG (see above), France must ensure it meets expectations at the major Dacian Spring 25 exercise. Key projects include the possible deployment of an ALAT detachment with Tigre attack helicopters, which would strengthen the range of capabilities available to the MND-SE. High-visibility activities displaying French expertise, such as airborne operations or LRU firing exercises, also represent assets that should be used to diversify and solidify the partnership. In the naval domain, Romania's maritime security needs are set to increase as offshore hydrocarbon projects progress. France could increase its participation in such missions, which are currently limited by the Montreux Convention, by finding ways to circumvent the Straits via terrestrial or riverine routes to transport shallow-draft carriers (see below).

Despite its newly established position in Romania, France is still only the latter's second security partner, far behind the US, which has a full brigade stationed in the country along with strategic footholds, particularly in ballistic missile defense, with an Aegis Ashore battery. This US primacy is reflected in the field of defense procurement: the French DIB has suffered a series of setbacks in naval procurement, such as the cancellation of Gowind corvettes contract and the freeze on the of Scorpène submarines deal, while US, Israeli, or Turkish options have systematically been selected in the land and air domains (F-35 aircraft, Patriot missiles, Abrams tanks, Javelin missiles, Atmos howitzers, Bayraktar drones, etc.).

Current obstacles include the Romanian procurement mechanism, which remains complex and often rigid, with proposals sometimes subject to extremely demanding conditions. To take one example, only one bidder (the Turkish manufacturer Otokar) submitted a compliant offer to a call for tenders for a range of light armored vehicles, with the French company Arquus and the US Oshkosh Corporation eventually deciding to pull out.²⁶⁶ One approach often suggested for overcoming these difficulties is to develop a state-to-state sales capability modeled on the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. In the European context, developing the EDIRPA mechanism to encourage joint procurement – as seen in the French *Mistral* 3 initiative – would be an initial way to deal with the hurdles encountered in this area.

Another major development in recent years has been the acceleration of bilateral relations between France and Moldova, which has come at the right time to continue the reinforcement of France's position in Romania. The signing in 2024 of an initial defense agreement between the two countries,

266. I. Ernst, "Turkish Otokar is Sole Bidder for Romania's EUR 920 mln Light Armored Vehicle Contract", *Romania Insider*, March 22, 2024.

and the creation of a defense *attaché* post in Chişinău, should provide opportunities for cooperation (see above). With Moldova facing an ongoing destabilization campaign from certain regions, such as Gagauzia, French support is very welcome.

The intentions set out in the Franco-Moldovan defense agreement – the details of which have not been made public – must now be followed up with concrete actions. There are several priorities here: first, surface-to-air defense, with the sale of a GM 200 radar and probably the procurement of a batch of *Mistral* 3 missiles, through which France could help to secure airspace in the region closest to Ukraine. Next, training could be provided by military operational partnership detachments modeled on the existing setup in Armenia, with a view to strengthening Moldova's land capabilities. Finally, in the longer term, the possibility should be considered of developments in the conflict in Transnistria leading to territorial reintegration. France, either under the EU framework or in an ad hoc format like the EI2, could support that process – which would be selected and planned by Chişinău – by assisting the Moldovan forces with stabilization, peacekeeping, and the necessary disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) that would follow.

Finally, French investment in the Southeast zone should make it possible to build connections with allied nations in the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans. Greece is emerging as an essential strategic partner in this area, and France would do well to convince it to engage more on the eastern flank, whether in the land domain (where it is already active in the Bulgarian FLF-BG and the headquarters of the MND-SE) or in the air and sea domains. It would also be useful to integrate the Western Balkans into a broad “Southeast” pattern, with partnerships to consolidate there as well. Croatia, which, like Greece, is currently a member of the Rafale community, could serve as the basis for a Balkan initiative for the Air and Space Force, which might take the form of tripartite exercises and shared support infrastructure, in line with the ACE/MORANE concept.

Still, with bridge-building in mind, the Southeast zone could eventually become an important arena for the Franco-Italian strategic rapprochement that began with the signing of the Quirinal Treaty in 2021. With Italy and France acting as the two framework nations for the forward land forces in the region, concerted investment in division and corps-level structures would be desirable, potentially with a view to participation in the Carpathian Arc 24 exercise. In the naval domain, also, increased cooperation with the Italian Navy, as exemplified by France's participation in the Mare Aperto 24 exercise, is opening up new prospects that must be structured and systematized, either within the NATO framework or on a bilateral basis.

Finally, despite all of these potential opportunities, it is important to remember that France will only be able to acquire significant influence in the Southeast zone if it improves its relations with Turkey. These deteriorated

considerably during the 2010s due to the positions of the two countries on opposing sides of the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. Although tensions have eased since 2022, a *modus vivendi* with Ankara now seems essential for developing new projects in the region.

Operational and capability recommendations

The armed forces will have to develop a range of different operational and capability options based on the responses to political and strategic questions. Whatever trajectory is envisaged, expectations of France from its NATO allies will remain high, if only in terms of the needs imposed by the NATO Defense Planning Process, with minimum capability requirements (see above) having been substantially revised upwards to bring them into line with the defense plans.

Implications for the French Army

The land forces are now the most visible component of French military engagement on the eastern flank, as well as the one with the most significant political weight. This component has also been identified by NATO as the one needing the most work to make it meet the requirements of the DDA family of plans (see above). From France's perspective, three major challenges stand out: interoperability, combat service support, and big unit warfare.

The constant struggle for interoperability

Interoperability is a daily challenge for the French units deployed on the eastern flank, whether during exercises or on operational missions for the forward presence. The problems fall into two broad categories: the technical interoperability of systems – particularly command and information systems (CIS) – and human or operational interoperability in terms of doctrine, practices, and procedures.

Technical interoperability is a rabbit hole subject that has already been dealt with at length elsewhere.²⁶⁷ The incompatibility between Allied CIS due to software architecture, but also to data structures and, of course, to different encryption keys, is currently a major obstacle that the Federated Mission Networking initiative, launched in 2015 by Allied Command Transformation (ACT), aims to mitigate rather than overcome. In practical terms, the heterogeneity of OICS limits multinational units to coordination practices that are a long way off from achieving tactical integration.

267. P. Gros, "L'interopérabilité des systèmes d'information et de communication futurs : enjeux et défi", Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 2023.

It is clear that the lower down the tactical chain we look, the more difficult it becomes to resolve the interoperability issue: while two brigades are able to communicate and exchange information effectively, incompatible OICS make it impossible to coordinate two companies or sections, despite the FLF framework prioritizing Allied integration at these low tactical levels. Of course, the current “peacetime” structure integrating companies (or sections) from different countries would cease to apply in the event of a crisis or a war, because all units would have to move up to the next level.

Nevertheless, interoperability remains a daily problem for deployments. Familiar solutions include the installation of liaison detachments with French CIS in neighboring units, which is a drain on human resources and equipment. The search for technical solutions must not be abandoned. The Technical Section of the French Army has developed a prototype known as “Hydre” that consists of a civilian vehicle containing terminals for each deployed CIS, so that a single operator can transfer information between them. This approach merits further development and, if appropriate, industrial development with a software platform capable of acting as a dedicated gateway for the CIS of key armed forces (France-UK for Mission Lynx, and France/Belgium-Spain for Mission Aigle).

The second type of interoperability concerns the human and operational dimension. The areas for improvement have already been discussed, particularly in the case Romania: France must be careful not to “overload” its partner, in a country it plans to maintain a long-term presence. The French forces’ motivation levels and desire to maximize activity were well suited to the “OPEX” rhythm they became used to in other theaters, but they must be sure to respect the timeframes and limitations of their host nation.

At a more micro level, the question of deployment timeframes and the synchronization of cycles with other Allied nations needs to be discussed. In Estonia, for example, British forces are mostly deployed for a rotation of six months, compared to four months for the French. The result is that the Lynx SGTIA troops do not always go through the integration process that helps the British troops settle in on arrival. Finally, and at a more structural level, there is still, as ever, a need to improve the military language proficiency of officers and NCOs, which is a prerequisite for troops to work well together.

Preparing for a war of support

The second major challenge facing the French Army on the eastern flank concerns logistics and support.

The first issue, discussed above, relates to the transportation of forces. There is work to do here on standardizing land operational logistics in line with the increasing role of the new Theater Support and Logistics Command (CALT), which will unite all logistics sub-functions under one roof: human support, stationing, maintenance, supplies, and transportation in the area of operations, as well as roads and railroads. Rail travel, which was rarely used

in the last two decades, is set to become more important in the European theater. Strengthening this area would undoubtedly allow greater flexibility for movements toward the eastern flank.

More generally, the deployment of heavy units on the eastern flank and the preparations for high-intensity engagement have revealed the current weaknesses of the support ecosystem. This is particularly important in the case of the Leclerc tank squadron deployed in Romania, which faces major challenges in terms of maintenance, refueling (with a small and aging fleet of CCP10 trucks), munitions (initial stocks are still insufficient), and intra-theater mobility and crossings. All these aspects must be considered as prerequisites for the successful implementation of a credible decision segment on the eastern flank.

These diverse support-related problems are exacerbated by the legal framework for the deployment of the Aigle and Lynx missions and for participation in most exercises, which are classed as “operational missions” rather than external operations. This categorization affects the budget of the French Army, which must cover the cost via its organic appropriations, but also has consequences for maintenance – hours spent are not counted in the same way – and human resource development – there is a bonus for deployment, but not for medals awarded.

Toward the deployment of large units

Finally, the third major challenge comes from the need to enhance large units at the operational and strategic levels. The division and the corps have once again become the benchmark for ensuring the land forces can integrate partners and exert influence at the Allied level. The necessary conditions for this role are command capability, on the one hand, and the possession of key capabilities, on the other. Although the French Army has undeniable assets to exploit, it also suffers from shortcomings that need to be remedied in the medium term.

The assets to be emphasized include, first, French command systems, which have demonstrated their ability to manage complex battlefields. Whether in terms of information and communication systems at a high tactical level, or human expertise, high-level command capability remains rare within NATO, and is only within reach of a few nations. In this respect, the headquarters of the Rapid Reaction Force – France (RRF-Fr) is a tool that must be fully exploited on the eastern flank, for example by working to establish partnerships with forward structures such as the US V Corps or the MNC-NE and MNC-SE.

When it comes to field operational capabilities, the French Army has a major asset in its 4th Airmobile Brigade. Although the value of attack helicopters was called into question in the early days of the Russian offensive in Ukraine because of the heavy losses suffered, adaptations in the second year of the war have demonstrated their usefulness, particularly in a

defensive role. Combat helicopters could revive their original anti-tank mission and contribute to the defense-in-depth role for which they were intended during the Cold War.

Alongside these assets, attention should also be paid to the insufficient density of resources in many of the organic division units (EODIV) and organic corps units (EOCA). This particularly affects strikes at operational depth (150 to 300 km) using cruise or ballistic missiles, which the French Army currently lacks and for which the LPM makes no provision. Although French manufacturers are already working on this type of system, support for the (ideally joint) procurement of long-range land-based ballistic systems would, at the very least, send a message that the need has been acknowledged.

Directly related to this strike capability, means of intelligence and targeting at depth are also needed. The LPM's low target for Patroller systems, combined with delays in the drone sector, are points to bear in mind in relation to the ambition to command a corps. Finally, and in no particular order, electronic warfare, cyber-defense, and surface-to-air support capabilities must all be developed or deepened. The division and corps levels must be able to handle support and mobility support functions, which require capabilities that are also lacking in the French Army, such as tactical transport vehicles and engineering breaching capabilities.

Implications for the Air and Space Force

Airpower constitutes one of NATO's major warfighting advantages in its military competition with Russia. It faces fewer challenges than the land domain on the eastern flank. Nevertheless, the long-term reinforcement of the French contribution and France's ambition to become a major player in the region will inevitably have consequences for the Air and Space Force that should be discussed here. Three main issues stand out: the establishment of sustainable air superiority with the *Rafale* as the only fighter aircraft asset, shortcomings in air defense capabilities, and the swift implementation of the French ACE program.

Air Shielding and the "all *Rafale*" approach

When it comes to Air Shielding, the French Air and Space Force primarily faces a capability challenge. Although the exact number of *Mirage* 2000-5 aircraft to be transferred to Ukraine is confidential, it should be low enough not to force the Air Force to deactivate its only squadron flying the type, which is involved in air policing missions on the Eastern Flank. The decommissioning of the *Mirage* 2000-5F, already slated for 2029, cannot be pushed back any further because the airframes will have reached the end of their service life (9,000 hours). The resulting gap should be filled by the timely delivery of the fifth tranche of *Rafale*. The major problem is now the

uncertainty on that timeline and the already limited capabilities of the *Mirage 2000-5F*, particularly the relevance of its medium-range MICA air-to-air missiles in modern, high-intensity air combat.

Two options are conceivable here. The first option, which is minimalist and unlikely given the type's planned withdrawal within five years, would be a limited upgrade to make the *Mirage 2000-5F* able to carry Meteor long-range air-to-air missiles while awaiting the arrival of the additional *Rafale* airframes. A second, more ambitious option would be to dramatically alter the upgrade process for the *Mirage 2000D* and bring it up to the standard of the *Mirage 2000I* that has been developed for India, which would provide a transition fleet of 48 genuinely multirole aircraft suitable for the tactical environment of the eastern flank. Both these projects would have to be launched by 2025 at the latest to have a chance of being completed by 2029, and avoid the "cliff-edge effect" if the fifth tranche of *Rafale* deliveries is delayed.

More generally, the French Air Force's commitments on the eastern flank have revealed an acute need to adapt combat aviation to cope with the possibility of high-intensity engagement, even with the support of more potent allies. The air-to-air ammunition stockpiles, in particular, are currently barely sufficient to allow the Air Force to fight off a near-peer adversary for a few days. While awaiting the delivery of the future MICA-NG missiles, a new delivery of MICA-IR/EM missiles would boost the Air Force's credibility while helping to supply the future fleet of Ukrainian Mirages.

The immediate challenges include the lack of onboard ISR capabilities, and in particular, the ELINT capability, which is only possible through the ASTAC pod, integrated only on the *Mirage 2000D*. With the replacement of the *Mirage 2000D* by the *Rafale* planned in the medium term, it is crucial that work begins now on a sustainable solution for giving tactical carriers ELINT capabilities. Beyond tactical carrier aircraft, electronic intelligence resources remain a concern. Delays in the Archange program – which has been pushed back to 2028 or potentially 2030 – have forced France to lease an off-the-shelf Saab 340 airliner from CAE Aviation in order to operate intelligence equipment.²⁶⁸ This temporary solution needs to be assessed with a view to either extending it or finding alternatives.

In the longer term, tactical considerations need to be tuned to the nature of the theater and the doctrine of the potential enemy, Russia. Far from treating air superiority as an initial objective, the Russian doctrine favors interdiction and defensive combat for air superiority centered on a strong integrated air defense system (IADS). As a result, the French Air Force needs to develop are those capabilities related to SEAD, through hard-kill, as well as electronic and cyber effects.

268. L. Lagneau, "L'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace a reçu un nouvel avion de guerre électronique", *Zone militaire*, May 10, 2024.

Although long identified as critical, SEAD has suffered massive capability gaps in recent years. The future cruise/anti-ship weapon (FC/ASW, or FMAN/FMC in French) being developed in cooperation with the British could include a SEAD version to deal with long-range threats such as the S-400. For more reactive engagements of short and medium-range mobile systems, solutions involving saturating salvos of swarming Smart Glider/Smart Cruiser drones, as proposed by MBDA at the Salon du Bourget in 2023, or a SEAD version of Safran's AASM, deserve investigation as regards their potential for counter access-denial, which would be decisive in a hypothetical engagement in the Kaliningrad region, for example.

The procurement horizon is linked to the advent of Rafale Block F5 and remains distant, with an initial capability delivered at the earliest in 2033. In the interim, two options are possible. The first would be to develop a multirole version of the Meteor, whose speed and range make it suitable for SEAD, and which already has a radar antenna that could be reconfigured in flight in passive mode. A second option would be to purchase off-the-shelf SEAD weapons already available on the market. Only two such weapons are available in the West, with radically different designs: the AGM-88E AARGM and its successor the AGM-88G AARGM-ER, which prioritizes speed and performance, or MBDA-UK's SPEAR-3 subsonic saturation weapon. The speed with which the AGM-88 was integrated into the MiG-29 in Ukraine suggests that a similar adaptation to the Rafale could be possible in the very short term, and that any obstacles would consist in questions of sovereignty and protection of the French DIB rather than technical constraints.

"Soft kill" options, particularly electronic attack, are another avenue that deserve to be explored in the light of the French industrial expertise in electronic warfare. The SPECTRA suite has demonstrated its abilities and would provide solid ground for extending these capabilities, which are not currently calibrated to optimize collaborative penetration of complex, multi-layer defense systems.

Reinforcing IAMD

The second priority identified by NATO in terms of capability development is to close the gap in air and missile defense. In this respect, France is a textbook case of a Western air force that is heavily oriented toward the projection of power. The threat continues to grow, however, less because of progress made by enemy combat aircraft than of rapid developments in drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic and hypersonic systems.

Lower altitude air defense, which is currently the responsibility of the French Army, is undergoing significant changes. The Air Force must continue to follow its evolution as the service responsible for 3D coordination. The joint procurement of *Mistral 3* missiles is a crucial first step toward this regard. The war in Ukraine has, however, highlighted the renewed importance of anti-aircraft artillery against inexpensive systems

that could be used in saturation tactics to implement a logic of salvo competitions. Off-the-shelf systems are already available on the market and could be considered.

For short- to medium-range air defense, the planned replacement of Crotale NG systems by the new VL-MICA provides a solid starting point. However, the number of systems on order – around twelve – seems insufficient to honor both the protection of deployed ground forces while also protecting French national territory and its shores, whether on the mainland or in overseas territories. The procedural development of combined orders, potentially with Croatia and Romania, would be a useful way to increase quantities while reducing unit costs. Finally, as made clear by the Ukrainian conflict, one of the key factors in ground-based air defense is the number of low-cost interceptors available simultaneously to deal with saturating salvos. The creation of mixed force structures should be considered, through the purchase of low-cost interceptors that would make the salvo competition sustainable against saturating systems.

Finally, moving to upper-layer defense, the mid-life upgrade of the SAMP system, long delayed because of disagreements between France and Italy, was finally started in February 2023 through a consortium under the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR). The project now seems to be a priority for the French Ministry of Armed Forces, and Mr. Macron's speech at the Sorbonne ranked air and missile defense first among all the major European defense projects.²⁶⁹ But although the upgrade will enhance the system's performance (adding a limited capability to intercept hypersonic missiles), there is no intention to increase the number of SAMP/NG systems, which is set to remain at eight until 2030 if the provisions of the LPM are followed. It might be useful to think about acquiring mass by splitting some systems in order to keep the first-generation ASTER 30 missiles for lower-end missions. Finally, similarly to the case of the VL-MICA, the unit cost of interceptors and the volume of the missile stockpile must be carefully balanced.

French ACE: a strategic withdrawal?

As discussed above, the Air Force is now rolling out an innovative deployment approach via its reactive air power implementation concept (MORANE). This project, which is still in the development stage, needs to be supported on a long-term basis with dedicated resources.

Beyond the logistical approach based on the “Extended Airbase” concept (E-AB, see above), the implementation of Agile Combat Employment also has hard-to-access implications in terms of required human resources and skills. The USAF's response to this question is the “multi-capable airmen” concept, which aims to boost personnel versatility in order to operate outside

269. L. Lagneau, “Défense aérienne : M. Lecornu évoque un ‘travail accéléré’ pour le programme SAMP/T NG”, *Zone militaire*, April 29, 2024.

of their core specialist skills so they can be deployed in “contested, degraded, and operationally limited” (CDO) environments.²⁷⁰

The ACE concept also implies the adoption by the Air Force of a “mission command” culture oriented more toward delegation and autonomy, allowing the lowest ranks to take decisions and carry out decisive actions at their level so that opportunities can be seized even in the face of communications denial or degradation by enemy action.

Implications for the French Navy

As regards the French Navy, the implications follow naturally from our analysis of the missions carried out to support the posture on the eastern flank since 2022. These fall into three broad categories: consolidation and exploitation of expertise in anti-submarine warfare and seabed warfare, reinforcement of mine warfare resources, and maximization of the carrier strike group's contribution to the deterrence and defense posture.

Exploiting expertise in underwater warfare

As discussed above, the French Navy is now recognized for its anti-submarine warfare skills. One way to fully exploit French expertise in this area could be to develop Standing NATO Maritime Groups into a capability hub specifically focused on anti-submarine warfare. Using its skills and sophisticated technologies, France could position itself as a framework nation dedicated to this function. France could pilot this transformation in collaboration with Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) and JFC Norfolk, which will reach full operational capacity in 2025.

By taking the reins of this initiative, France would showcase its destroyers (FREMM) and its submarine detection and neutralization capabilities. This strategic orientation would strengthen not just NATO's naval posture in the face of growing threats, particularly from Russia, but also France's position as a leader in the underwater warfare domain. The creation of this specialized hub within the SNMG1 would ensure better preparation and a more effective response to underwater challenges, boosting the Alliance's collective maritime security.

Finally, this French expertise could be exploited via the establishment of a training course within the Alliance, for example through the creation of the first NATO center of excellence in anti-submarine warfare. This center, located in Brest or Toulon, would capitalize on French knowledge as well as existing infrastructure. It would serve as a platform for sharing best practices, research, and the development of new anti-submarine technologies.

270. “Agile Combat Employment”, Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21, August 23, 2022.

Strengthening mine warfare missions

The second key point concerns France's contribution in closed seas (the Baltic and Black Seas), with increased needs in terms of mine warfare. In this respect, it would be useful to combine this area with the rapid progress made in the French Navy's future anti-mine system (SLAM-F). The latter is centered on the Maritime Mine Counter Measures (MMCM) project, launched in 2015 in collaboration with the UK and being developed by Thales.

The fully unmanned MMCM is set to be able to detect and neutralize mines at a depth of up to 300 m using a robot and three underwater drones launched from a surface drone, all integrated with the M-Cube mission system. A center of operations (e-POC) has also been developed to facilitate mission management from any theater of operations. Following successful tests, the first prototypes were delivered at the end of 2021 and are undergoing operational evaluation. A recent demonstration proved the effectiveness of the underwater robot in real conditions, paving the way for the delivery of six MMCM systems in 2024.

It could be opportune to exploit these specific skills by deploying SLAM-F components on a trial basis in the Baltic Sea. An initial program component, the A27 drone developed by Exail, was tested in the Romanian Black Sea in late May 2024 as part of the Dacia national exercise.²⁷¹ More broadly, this deployment demonstrates the possibility of using small vessels in the Black Sea despite Turkey's blockade of the Straits. More systematic circumvention of the blockade using river transportation via the Danube or land transportation could be investigated with a view to increasing the agility of France's contribution to maritime security in the area.

Finally, France could increase its activities at the NATO Naval Mine Warfare Center of Excellence in Ostend, Belgium. More active participation would boost international cooperation, and position France as a leader in maritime security and the fight against underwater threats.

Actions involving the carrier battle group

The recent deployment of the *Charles de Gaulle* Carrier Strike Group under NATO operational control is a significant demonstration of France's commitment to the Alliance's collective defense and deterrence posture. Regular repetition of this exercise would send a signal of France's determination to use its most advanced military capabilities to increase European and transatlantic security. Such an initiative would strengthen operational ties with our NATO allies while ensuring our armed forces are prepared for contemporary challenges. By continuing the exercises, France would confirm its position as a central pillar in NATO's defense architecture and its unfailing dedication to regional and global stability.

271. J.-M. Tanguy, "Le drone de guerre des mines A27 d'Exail bientôt testé en Roumanie", *Le Marin*, May 23, 2024.

Other than these regular exercises, it would be wise to make the most of the French CSG by hosting more allied aircraft on board the *Charles de Gaulle* during Polaris, a now regular exercise in high-intensity naval combat. This increased integration would improve interoperability between allied navies, and boost NATO's operational cohesion. Welcoming allied ships would also provide a platform for exchange and training, optimizing the collective response to threats.

Finally, more frequent deployments of the CSG in the North Atlantic would increase the visibility of the French Navy in the far north. These missions would provide opportunities to demonstrate France's crucial role in Atlantic maritime security while favoring the formation of strategic partnerships with the countries in this area.

Joint forces implications

To conclude, it is worth briefly discussing certain joint forces measures that merit consideration with regard to the eastern flank. These fall into three main areas: special operations, cyber, and information warfare.

Regarding special operations, it would appear sensible to strengthen ties between the French Special Operations Command (COS) and its counterparts in partner countries on NATO's eastern flank. This would enable better coordination of joint operations and the exchange of best practices. Although increased collaboration with NATO's Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM) would provide a platform for joint exercises and the standardization of doctrines, the sensitive nature of the issues involved makes bilateral relations preferable. In this respect, a framework convention between the COS and some of its counterparts in Estonia, Poland, Finland, or Romania, should be explored as a way to improve understanding, enhance familiarity with the terrain, and reflect on forms of action suitable for gray zones or high-intensity combat, which require different forms of expertise to the counterterrorism activities that have been the mainstay of the COS during the last two decades.²⁷²

The various organs of defensive and offensive information warfare, another essential capability in modern warfare, are already in high demand as part of the permanent cyber posture (PPC) implemented at the national level. Again, the sensitivity of the subject makes multilateral cooperation difficult, but not impossible. France participates in the Sovereign Cyber Effects Provided Voluntarily by Allies (SCPEVA) framework coordinated by NATO's Cyber Operations Center (CyOC). Although, as the name indicates, the emphasis is on the sovereign dimension (and implementation) of such effects, the project at least aims to integrate the mechanism better into

272. L. Bansept, "Les opérations spéciales françaises: quelle place dans la compétition de puissance?", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, January 27, 2022.

current operational plans, and thus deserves to be continued and probably strengthened.

Again, a bilateral framework is undoubtedly more suited to deep cooperation via the sharing of intelligence and best practices. Countries with particular expertise in cyber issues, such as Estonia, would be a natural choice for increased exchange and joint projects with France. Close collaboration, in the form of joint exercises and active surveillance of networks to detect and counter cyberattacks, would help to boost the resilience of IT systems against growing cyber threats.

Finally, in the domain of influence actions, it is essential to strengthen ties between the thinking of the armed forces and that of NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. Collaboration with the ACT's Strategic Communications departments would also be beneficial for a coherent and effective approach. By combining efforts and sharing information, an integrated and effective influence strategy could be developed to promote French and NATO interests on the eastern flank.

Conclusion

In the space of two years, France's strategic posture on Europe's eastern flank has radically transformed. Following decades marked by leniency towards Moscow despite its repeated violations of international law, Paris seems to have put its hesitations to bed and joined the camp of European powers determined to stop Russian expansionism. This pivot can be seen in its Ukraine policy – both bilateral and through various European instruments – but also in its increased engagement in support of the Western allies' deterrence and defense strategy, particularly within the NATO framework.

This French return was long-awaited by its European Allies. First, France still struggles with the disappointment and the bitter memory it left when it failed to live up to the security commitments it took to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe in the interwar period, after the Second World War, and then again after the end of the Cold War. Next, France must act on and accept the prerogatives and constraints that come with its status as a major military power on the European continent. Finally, the transformation of the transatlantic relationship, with the US shifting its focus toward the Indo-Pacific, means France should assume a European leadership role alongside other states to defend the Old Continent. To do so, major investment in the defense industry will be indispensable, but also and above all, France must make its commitments to nuclear deterrence clear to its European allies. These are also the prerequisites for the emergence of the “strategic intimacy” called for by President Macron in his speech in Bratislava in June 2023.

France's “return to the east” must come with some serious adjustment, without which, it could lead to new misunderstandings, tensions, and the kind of estrangement seen in the past.

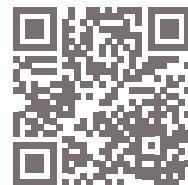
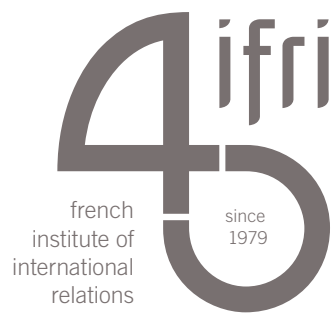
With this renewed cooperation taking place in the context of the war in Ukraine, there is a need to adopt a shared, or at least analogous, vision regarding the kind of assistance to offer Kyiv. While the countries of Central Europe, first among them Poland and the Baltic states, have provided their Ukrainian partner with substantial material aid – even putting their own security at risk – Paris has yet to honor all its promises. The probable dispatch of French instructors to Ukraine is an initial sign of France's desire to share the risks with Ukraine and the region's most engaged countries. But this kind of support will only be credible and effective if it forms part of a long-term aid plan, with adequate financing that does not jeopardize the rebuilding of the French armed forces as envisaged by the current military programming law.

There is also a need for a long-term perspective on the evolution and adaptation of France's presence on the eastern flank. At the military and strategic level, France must be able to capitalize more effectively on its assets (combat experience, responsiveness, nuclear deterrence, and central role in EU defense policy) and remedy its weaknesses or gaps (a frustrating political legacy, chronic underinvestment in human resources, integration with other allies in major exercises, and industrial cooperation). It must work to bring its resources up to the standard of its ambitions, particularly in geographic terms. As a mid-level power with a global presence, France is active all over the world but cannot have a decisive impact everywhere. As part of its reinvestment in the eastern flank, it must make choices between important but selective contributions in the Far North and the Central zone, and a decisive, integrative role in the Southeast.

Finally, all the armed forces and their associated services must reflect on the operational and capability needs for a potential engagement in the region, both in the context of permanent strategic competition with Russia and in the likely phases of contestation or even confrontation. The ability to convince Russia not to go down this path depends in large part on France's military credibility to conduct high-intensity combat, and on rethinking escalation models to increase the role of nuclear deterrence.

The latest publications of *Focus stratégiques*

- Jérémy Bachelier and Méli­ssa Levaillant, “[L’Inde, un partenaire incontournable pour la France dans l’Indo-Pacifique ?](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 120, Ifri, July 2024.
- Guillaume Garnier and Pierre Néron-Bancel, “[At the Other Side of the Hill”: The Benefits and False Promises of Battlefield Transparency](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 118, Ifri, May 2024.
- Léo Péria-Peigné, “[Stocks militaires : une assurance-vie en haute intensité ?](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 113, Ifri, December 2022.
- Héloïse Fayet, “[Quelle posture stratégique pour la France au Moyen-Orient ?](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 112, Ifri, November 2022.
- Laurent Bansept, “[Le retour de la haute intensité en Ukraine : quels enseignements pour les forces terrestres ?](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 111, Ifri, July 2022.
- Laure de Roucy-Rochegonde, “[Deus ex machina : les enjeux de l’autonomisation des systèmes d’armes](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 110, Ifri, May 2022.
- Laurent Bansept and Élie Tenenbaum, “[Après Barkhane : repenser la posture stratégique française en Afrique de l’Ouest](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 109, Ifri, May 2022.
- Amélie Férey, “[Towards a War of Norms? From Lawfare to Legal Operations](#)”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 108, Ifri, April 2022.



27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

Ifri.org