Journal of Transatlantic Studies
https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-025-00147-5

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Squaring the circle? France, the war in Ukraine, and the delicate balance between security and "autonomy"

Michel Fortmann[1] · David G. Haglund[2] · Jeffrey Rice[3]

Accepted: 12 August 2025

Abstract

The war in Ukraine has thrown into high relief a question that has hovered over transatlantic relations for many years: Is it possible for the European members of NATO to develop a more "autonomous" defence posture without at the same time jeopardizing their security bonds with the United States? The Ukraine war has exposed a gap in threat perceptions held by both Washington and (most of) the European allies, which has given the old debate about autonomy a piquancy that it never quite possessed before. The perception gap can be traced to several factors, but by far the most relevant is the growing pressure emanating from the US for greater "burden sharing" in the provision of European security. No matter their partisan affiliations, most Americans have difficulty understanding why the European allies, with a combined population of more than 500 million and a collective GDP only slightly less than that of the US itself, cannot do more to assure their own security against a Russia with barely 140 million people and an economy roughly the size of Canada's. France is, correctly, known to be the one European ally to have been consistently promoting, if only rhetorically, the goal of an enhanced European security and defence autonomy over the past quarter-century. The authors argue that the Ukraine war has led to a shift in French thinking about the meaning of autonomy, and they conclude that should the goal ever be attained, it can only be within and not against the Atlantic alliance.

✉ David G. Haglund
david.haglund@queensu.ca

[1] Département de Science Politique, Université de Montréal, Montréal, Canada

[2] Department of Political Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

[3] Department of Anthropology, Economics & Political Science, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada

Published online: 02 September 2025

Keywords Ukraine war · NATO · France · European security · Emmanuel Macron · Donald Trump

Introduction: from one interview to another

France's president, Emmanuel Macron, has had a penchant for relying upon Britain's venerable *Economist* whenever he wished to make a provocative point about NATO to a wide readership. Who can forget the dramatic treatment given by this journal to the famous (or infamous) "brain death" diagnosis Macron rendered back in November 2019, at a time—three years into the first presidency of Donald J. Trump—when it appeared as if the USA was about to self-distance itself from its traditional transatlantic allies, the doing of which, suggested Macron, would result in NATO's effective disappearance. In light of the ominous prospect of being abandoned by the Americans, Europeans were urged to become much more serious than heretofore about *autonomously* building their own security and defence structures, because, as he put it to his interlocutor, Europe was sitting "on the edge of a precipice,"[1] and needed above all to "reassess the reality of what NATO is in light of the commitment of the United States."[2]

Many of France's European allies, otherwise in general accord with Macron's limning of the potential consequences of Donald Trump's first presidency, nevertheless blanched at his blunt manner of characterizing NATO. Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, was particularly unsettled by what she took to be a gratuitously cruel description of NATO's geo-neurological health, since more than one German defence analyst at the time was insisting that the alliance remained the "indispensable guarantor of German, European, and transatlantic security."[3] Thus, it was scarcely surprising to find it reported in the *New York Times* that the chancellor had become "uncharacteristically furious" with her French counterpart, a reaction that a few commentators alarmingly (if prematurely) took as heralding an unstoppable deterioration in the level of Franco-German cooperation.[4] Elsewhere in the alliance

[1] This expression may not constitute fighting words, but it certainly conjures up frightening ones; this exact figure of speech, "on the edge of a precipice," had been invoked ominously by a writer for *Le Petit Parisien* on 28 July 1914, to express the grave danger facing France and all of Europe in the wake of the previous month's assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Franz Ferdinand. Quoted in Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 1.

[2] Quoted in "A Continent in Peril," *Economist*, 9 November 2019, p. 9.

[3] Peter Schmidt, "La conception allemande de la défense européenne," *Défense & Stratégie*, no. 44 (Winter 2019): 1–18, quote at p. 17. Also see, on Franco-German differences over transatlantic and European security, Michael Meimeth and Peter Schmidt, "France, Germany and European Security: 'Building Castles in the Sky'?" in *Beyond Unification: Germany's Liberal Democracy Thirty Years Hence*, ed. John D. Robertson and Michael Oswald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and Hajnalka Vincze, "Germany's Transatlantic Ambiguities," Foreign Policy Research Institute, Center for the Study of America and the West, 5 March 2021, available at https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/germanys-transatlantic-ambiguities/?utm_source.

[4] Steven Erlanger, "NATO Differences Stoke a Franco-German Feud," *New York Times*, 24 November 2019, p. 8.

others were grumbling about Macron's choice of imagery. Even President Trump, who had himself earlier in that first mandate never shied away from heaping dispraise upon an alliance he liked to claim was "obsolete," saw fit to use Macron's word choice as an opportunity to *defend* NATO! Not only had the alliance ceased being obsolete—thanks, as the president saw it, to his own enlightened leadership—but it now "serves a great purpose," and thus, it was unfairly being targeted with the "very, very nasty" term of opprobrium Macron had hurled in its direction.[5]

Four and half years later, Macron was again receiving NATO-related cover-page treatment from his favorite British publication.[6] This time, however, there was an even greater urgency in his remarks, coming as they did more than two years after Vladimir Putin launched his war of aggression against Ukraine, and a month or so before elections for the European Parliament that, if polls were to be believed (and they should have been), augured poorly for Macron's vision of a France strongly anchored in a more integrated Europe.[7] Macron's message was bleak. Europe was placed in mortal peril by Russia's aggression, which served as a shocking reminder that "[a] civilisation can die…. Things can happen much more quickly than we think."[8] However, unlike with the earlier interview, there could be no question now of shunting NATO off to a hospice to await its necessary demise; instead, Macron indicated that the alliance would have to be central to any successful resolution to the fighting in Ukraine. In a word, the long-mooted European "pillar" of defence was going to have to be developed inside of, and cooperatively with, NATO rather than apart from and perhaps rivalrous with it. No longer could the fiction be entertained that this pillar, what the French often liked to refer to as the "Europe of defence," was to be constructed on a bilateral, Franco-German, basis, as had once seemed to be the obvious solution as imagined in Paris (though much less so in Germany).[9]

[5] Quoted in Patrick Wintour and Dan Sabbagh, "Trump Blasts Macron over 'Brain Dead' Nato Remarks," *Guardian*, 3 December 2019, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/03/trump-macron-brain-dead-nato-remarks.

[6] "Europe in Mortal Danger: France's President Issues a Dark and Prophetic Warning," *Economist*, 4 May 2024, p. 9.

[7] The polls turned out to be accurate in the case of France's voters, who gave the right-wing National Rally of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella a huge margin of victory over Macron's party, prompting him to dissolve the French parliament and call a snap election; see Philippe Ricard, "Après l'annonce de la dissolution, Emmanuel Macron arrive affaibli à une série de rendez-vous internationaux," *Le Monde*, 11 June 2024, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/06/11/macron-affaibli-a-l-aube-d-une-serie-de-rendez-vous-internationaux_6238633_3210.html?lmd_medium=pushweb&lmd_campaign=pushweb&lmd_titre=apres_l_annonce_de_la_dissolution_emmanuel_macron_arrive_affaibli_a_une_serie_de_rendez_vous_internationaux&lmd_ID=6238718; and Roger Cohen and Aurelien Breeden, "Battered by Far Right in E.U. Vote, Macron Calls for New Elections in France," *New York Times*, 10 June 2024, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/09/world/europe/france-european-elections.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20240610&instance_id=125827&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=169164&te=1&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0.

[8] Quoted in "How to Rescue Europe: An Interview with Emmanuel Macron," *Economist*, 4 May 2024, pp. 42–43.

[9] See Oliver Thränert, "Es gibt kein 'karolingisches' Europa," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 October 1991, p. 38. For the rise and demise of Franco-German pillar talk during and shortly after the Cold War, see David G. Haglund, *Alliance Within the Alliance? Franco-German Military Cooperation and the Euro-*

Subsequently, Macron started to drop broad hints that NATO might even need to put boots on the ground in parts of that embattled country, at first only in a training capacity, but by early 2025 possibly as part of a European peacekeeping force being contemplated in the event of a negotiated end to the fighting in Ukraine.[10] So too, he added, must a more "autonomous" European security and defence capability be developed—and quickly. And therein lay a potential problem, since many on both sides of the Atlantic were sensing there could be something contradictory in the twinned objectives enunciated by the French president, of strengthening NATO while at the same time promoting European strategic autonomy.

Of course, sensing a potential contradiction between NATO and a more autonomous European security and defence entity is nothing new,[11] but the Ukraine War has given it a particular piquancy that it never quite had before, not even during the long years of the Cold War. On the one hand, there is the patently obvious and ongoing need of the Europeans for an alliance, NATO, whose very existence had so often been called into question throughout its seventy-six-year lifespan and yet can today be said to possess greater importance than at any time since its earliest decades. On the other hand, there looms, because of the second Trump administration, just as patently obvious a need for the Europeans to convert much more of their formidable economic capability into military capability that can be tapped to backstop their own security, for as two American observers noted in the aftermath of a particularly divisive Munich Security Conference in February 2025, "one thing was clear: An epochal breach appears to be opening in the Western alliance."[12]

The looming breach, no doubt, has many sources, but one of the most relevant is the growing pressure emanating from the USA for greater "burden sharing" in the provision of European security. Most Americans, whether they love or hate Donald Trump, simply cannot understand why with a European Union population of 450 million people (over a hundred million more than that of the US itself), to say nothing of a further 70 million Europeans in the UK, the Old Continent remains

Footnote 9 (Continued)

pean Pillar of Defense (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991). Yet, despite all the frustrations over the decades since the 1963 Elysée Treaty presumably committed the two countries to construct a solid European defence and security pillar, the dream continues to live on, more so in France than in Germany. See Elsa Conesa and Philippe Ricard, "Avec Friedrich Merz, l'espoir d'un renouveau pour le couple franco-allemand," *Le Monde*, 7 May 2025, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/05/07/avec-friedrich-merz-l-espoir-d-une-relance-franco-allemande_6603735_3210.html?lmd_medium=pushweb&lmd_campaign=pushweb&lmd_titre=avec_friedrich_merz_l_espoir_d_un_renouveau_pour_le_couple_franco_allemand&lmd_ID.

[10] David O'Sullivan and Sophia Khatsenkova, "French President Macron Announces Plan for 'Reassurance Force' in Ukraine," *Euro News*, 27 March 2025, available at https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/27/coalition-of-the-willing-meets-in-paris-to-strengthen-support-for-ukraine.

[11] For instance, see Jolyon Howorth and John T. S. Keeler, eds., *Defending Europe: The EU, NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West* (New York: Random House, 2004).

[12] David E. Sanger and Steven Erlanger, "Trump Team Leaves Behind an Alliance in Crisis," *New York Times*, 16 February 2025, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/16/us/politics/trump-europe-alliance-crisis.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20250217&instance_id=147719&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=191196&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0

incapable of generating enough military capability to protect itself from a Russia with a population of slightly more than 140 million (and shrinking) and an economy the size of Canada's.

In this article, we query whether and how the Ukraine war has complicated the task of squaring the geostrategic circle. We might label this the "Macron challenge," of figuring out some way whereby the Europeans might gain greater capability and autonomy without at the same time diminishing the traditional preeminence of NATO in organizing the continent's collective defence.

Since France is, correctly, known to be the one European ally to have been consistently promoting, if only rhetorically, the goal of an enhanced European security and defence autonomy for more than three decades,[13] we naturally concentrate upon it in these pages. But before we turn our focus upon France, we address the somewhat surprising resurrection of NATO as *first and foremost a collective defence organization*, for it is that resurrection that serves as necessary backdrop for our analysis of France's policy toward the Ukraine War. There had once been a time, following the ending of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, when NATO's very future seemed to depend upon its "re-inventing" itself as a different sort of security entity—some even imagined it as having become, in the 1990s, a "cooperative security" one[14]—endowed with new tasks to supplement or, to a few analysts, replace altogether collective defence. Whatever else Putin had managed to accomplish with his war, he succeeded in returning NATO unambiguously to its initial rationale of protecting its membership from Moscow-orchestrated aggression. At least he did so for a while, prior to Trump's return to the White House. One month into his second term, the American president began sending strong signals, witness the abovementioned Munich conference, that he might even be regarding the allies as ideological adversaries rather than as security and defence partners.[15] Even more worrisomely annoying for (most of) those allies was Trump's reopening of negotiations directly with Russia shortly after the Munich conference—with both the Ukrainians and the European allies being excluded from the preliminary talks held in Saudi Arabia between Marco Rubio and Sergey Lavrov.[16]

[13] On that French-inflected quest, see Jolyon Howorth, "Britain, France and the European Defence Initiative," *Survival* 42, 2 (2000): 33–55; and Frédéric Bozo, *A History of the Iraq Crisis: France, the United States, and Iraq, 1991–2003*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Washington and New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press, 2017). Also see, for a more recent iteration, Tara Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe," *Washington Quarterly* 47, 1 (2024): 65–83.

[14] See David G. Haglund, "The Nato of Its Dreams? Canada and the Co-Operative Security Alliance," *International Journal* 52, 3 (1997): 464–82.

[15] Elsa Conesa and Sylvie Kauffman, "A Munich, un parfum de guerre idéologique," *Le Monde*, 16–17 February 2025, p. 2.

[16] Piotr Smolar, "Trump engage un dialogue cordial avec la Russie," *Le Monde*, 20 February 2025, p. 2; Catherine Porter and Andrew Higgins, "Meeting Again in Paris, European Leaders Try to Recalibrate After Trump Sides With Russia," *New York Times*, 19 February 2025, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/19/world/europe/europe-trump-russia-ukraine.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_ypgu_20250219&instance_id=147938&nl=your-places:-global-update&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=191413&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0.

Following section two's discussion of the "return" of NATO to its original mandate, come two further sections, addressing French policy developments set in train by the fighting in Ukraine. In our conclusion, we suggest that should Europe manage to attain greater autonomy in defence policy, it can only be within not outside of NATO, for the very good reason that any serious fortifying of continental capability must involve as a central player the UK, which of course is a *European* country, part of NATO but not of the EU. For this reason, Macron's 2024 *Economist* interview seems a far more reliable guide for understanding French thinking regarding the Western alliance today than his 2019 ("brain-dead") interview in that same outlet: European autonomy in security and defence will be within a NATO framework or it will not be at all.

Putin and NATO's rediscovery of collective defence

At a restricted defence seminar held at the University of British Columbia in 1962, a NATO representative observed that the "honour of inventing NATO has been claimed for a number of people, including [Canada's prime minister in 1949, Louis] St-Laurent. But of course, the real father of NATO is Joe Stalin, just as in recent years the most effective support of NATO has been Mr. Khrushchev. It is perhaps not too much to say that Mr. Khrushchev is the only world statesmen who has consistently fulfilled all reasonable expectations in this respect."[17] If Josef Stalin can be credited with the "creation" of NATO, and Nikita Khrushchev with having kept it in the pink, then Vladimir Putin can certainly stand among the pantheon of Russian leaders who have helped reaffirm the purpose of the alliance. Although the unnamed author of this seminar witticism was clearly speaking tongue-in-cheek, the sentiment underlying the words rang with truth. While NATO in the 2000s and 2010s was not facing as acute an existential crisis as the one it had encountered during the first half of the 1990s,[18] questions nevertheless swirled about the alliance's purpose once its foray into Afghanistan ended. Within a few short years, however—even before the last NATO troops departed Afghanistan in December 2014—Putin began to supply an answer to the all-important question, "what need is there for NATO"? He did this by seizing Crimea. Not for the first time, a revisionist-minded government in Moscow would bring NATO back to more familiar, even if not necessarily firm, ground.

The immediate effect of Putin's invasion of Ukraine eight years later was to provide the members of the alliance with a much clearer understanding of their vital interests. Putin gave NATO the opportunity, as Timothy Sayle has expressed it, to

[17] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The Military Problems of NATO," CSC 2195-4-A (JS/DSS), University of British Columbia, 26 October 1962, para 30, p. 7.

[18] See for instance Ronald Asmus, Robert D. Blackwill, and Stephen Larrabee, "Can NATO Survive?" *Washington Quarterly* 19, 2 (1996): 79–101; Anthony Forster and William Wallace, "What Is NATO for?" *Survival* 43, 4 (2001): 107–9; and Hugh De Santis, "The Graying of NATO," *Washington Quarterly* 14, 4 (1991): 51–65.

return to its lowest-common-denominator purpose: collective defence.[19] Over the previous thirty years, such a clearly identifiable purpose had largely been missing, as the alliance quested after a continuing and compelling raison d'être. During the 1990s—that celebrated "post-Cold War decade" that so many heralded as spelling finis to the era of great-power competition—the "new" NATO even experimented with approaches at times resembling collective security (even if not under that label), in the absence of any existential threat on the horizon.[20]

True, the 11 September 2001 terror attacks did for a time endow the alliance with a renewed purpose, albeit not the kind of purpose that had first brought the allies together back in April 1949. Largely because of the efforts of NATO's secretary-general, Lord Robinson,[21] the focus shifted to counter-terrorism and nation-building, but just as had been the case with the previous decade's stress on cooperative security, the new twinned aims resisted easy operationalization.[22] To the contrary, the strategic waters became ever muddier for the alliance, given the variety and novelty of the spectrum of challenges to which it was expected to fashion some credible responses.[23] All this is to say that disputes about what NATO could or *should* be doing dominated discussions for nearly a quarter-century, following the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

No one wanted the alliance to die, else the member-states would have exercised their option (under article 13 of the Washington treaty) to exit the alliance. But until Putin turned Russia nasty again, no one could quite figure out what NATO was supposed to be *for*. Even though neither of them had any intention of decamping from the alliance, it had always been easier for the two North American allies, the USA and Canada, to imagine life without NATO than it was for the Europeans to do so. The latter, after all, knew fully well what life *before* NATO had looked like, and naturally they were averse to having to imagine life *after* NATO.

Now, thanks to Putin, the geostrategic waters became clarified. So too was NATO's reason for existing clarified. But if the threat to which NATO must respond has again become apparent, less obvious is how to devise the best response to the threat, all the more so in light of the uncertainty regarding the commitment of the Trump administration to safeguarding European security. Internal discussions persist over how collective defence is to be maximally effected in an age of hybrid and below-threshold warfare, as well as how far, in what ways, and to whom it extends. While the 2022 Strategic Concept reaffirmed collective defence as the alliance's

[19] Timothy Sayle, "Patterns of Continuity in NATO's Long History," in *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: from Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Shifrinson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), pp. 47-72, citing at pp. 48-49.

[20] David Yost, "The New NATO and Collective Security," *Survival* 40, 2 (1998): 107-122, quoting from pp. 136-37.

[21] Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Diplomacy and War at NATO: The Secretary General and Military Action after the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

[22] For a critique of NATO as having lost focus, see Mark Webber, James Sperling, and Martin A. Smith, *What's Wrong with NATO and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

[23] Stéfanie von Hlatky and Michel Fortmann, "NATO Enlargement and the Failure of the Cooperative Security Mindset," in Goldgeier and Shifrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, pp. 531-61, citing at pp. 533-35.

primary purpose, disentangling collective defence from some of the earlier cooperative security accoutrements has proven difficult. Vestiges of the post-Cold War era, such as the promotion of human rights and the injunction to maintain respect for international law, continue to figure among the mandated objectives of the alliance, joining the protection of sovereignty and territory in the preface of that 2022 document.[24]

Mainly, however, the document's points of discord center not upon the vestiges of cooperative security, but rather on the most effective means of promoting collective defence, with the war in Ukraine supplying the immediate focus. One bone of contention concerned not just funding and supplying weaponry to Ukraine but deciding what limits should be imposed upon the weapons' use. Here NATO sought to balance concerns about collective defence with broader considerations of regional security, with its need to ensure that a non-NATO member state, Ukraine, could withstand the Russian assault, without at the same time embroiling the allies in hot war against Russia. And it was concern about the all-important question of NATO's future relationship with Russia that permeated the policy of France and other member-states of the alliance as they repositioned their defence policies to adjust to the Ukraine War.

The relationship between Russia and NATO has always been characterized by moments of greater or lesser antagonism and mutual suspicion.[25] While ups and downs are a characteristic of any relationship, they are especially prominent in the NATO-Russia one. There are numerous reasons for this, but they can mostly be boiled down to two core issues: territory and influence. Whereas NATO had historically focused on territorial integrity, Russia especially after the Cold War has become primarily fixated upon an ontological security category we might call "influence integrity" (or what others might label "status anxiety").[26] The two foci of territory and status are connected, of course, but they do represent different coigns of vantage for assessing the "security dilemma" in international relations. In the Russian case, for example, the concern with status is shaped by a perceived loss of "Russian-belonging" territory following the end of the Cold War.[27] Issues of territory were *the* central concern at the start of the Cold War, but due in part to Mutual Assured Destruction with its ever-present promise of nuclear annihilation, issues of territoriality in Europe pretty much got put on the back burner, as neither side saw much merit in acquiring territory at the cost of suicide. Thus collective defence

[24] Patricia Daehnhardt, "NATO's New Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass Face Reality: Euro-Atlantic Security and Defense in the Context of the War in Ukraine," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 46, 4 (2022): 6–11.

[25] Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 93-94.

[26] See, especially, Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Michelle K. Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Tudor A. Onea, "Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry," *Review of International Studies* 40, 1 (2014): 125–52.

[27] Ronald Asmus and Robert Nurick, "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States," *Survival* 38, 2 (1996): 121-42, citing at p. 124.

guarantees of territory remained credible; deterrence "worked," at least as much as any arrangement in international security can be said to have worked. This left the competition between the blocs to concentrate upon influence and status, both within Europe and beyond.

In 2014, following the Euromaidan and Ukraine's revolution of dignity, and in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia perceived itself to be losing literal and metaphorical ground to NATO in terms of both territory *and* influence, but especially the latter. After all, NATO had been expanding into territory previously controlled by the Soviet empire, and perhaps even more ominously for Moscow, states like Ukraine and Moldova were persistently and annoyingly demonstrating a clear preference for aligning their economic and political goals with those of the European Union, highlighting the challenge to Russian ontological security. This is why NATO's repeated (and, in our view, credible) assurances that as it was a *defensive* alliance only, it could have no interest in starting a war of aggression against Russia, failed to be of much comfort to Moscow. If influence and status, more than territory, had now become the primary sites of contestation between Russia and the West (thus NATO), it mattered little that the alliance was never going to "invade" Russia; it was still a problem from the Russian perspective.

In retrospect, it seems hard to discount the predictions many were making in the 1990s, to the effect that NATO expansion was bound to put the West and Russia on a collision course. Among those predictions was one contained in a letter of June 26, 1997, addressed to America's president, Bill Clinton. In this letter, an assemblage of fifty renowned foreign policy analysts stated in no uncertain terms that "NATO expansion will decrease allied security and unsettle European stability."[28] The reasons were numerous, but the central issue, said the experts, was a deep concern that NATO expansion would be interpreted by Russia as an overt threat because of concerns about the balance of influence—ontological security concerns, rather than physical security ones.

The ontological question is primordial and testifies to why NATO and Western states were unable to head off what they earnestly thought they could prevent: Russian disaffection. But if the allies failed to appreciate the meaning of Russia's lost influence upon the quality of Russia-NATO relations, they also came up short in trying to design a comprehensive and effective response to the kind of challenges Russia was to present them with. Conventional theories of deterrence have failed adequately to account for the consequences of non-territorial expansion. This is because collective defence responses had been predicated upon the deterrence of territorial threats and therefore were unable to keep pace with changes in Russian strategy over the past decade. Thus, NATO failed to articulate clearly not only what it was trying to deter; it was also failing to understand what Russia was attempting to deter the allies from doing.

To understand the significance of all this for France's policy toward the Ukraine War, it is important to recognize that a core element of Russian strategic thinking revolves around an idea that in the West is more than heterodox—the idea

[28] Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 285.

that insecurity can breed security.[29] This strategy has been at play in numerous post-Soviet spaces since the end of the Cold War and often revolves around either reclaiming former Soviet space or postulating the supposed systemic mistreatment of ethnic minority Russians in the territories in question.[30] The effects of this strategy have come to characterize a central feature of Russia's approach to the West and to NATO, through hybrid and cyber operations that do not historically meet the threshold of conflict.[31] In most cases, this stems from a tit for tat defensive strategy: to feel secure, Russia must keep its neighbors insecure.[32] Encouraging insecurity in nearby states enables Russia to undermine a state's ability to pursue policies inimical to Russia.

In this context, Ukraine emerged as the crux of both NATO's "Russia problem" and Russia's "NATO problem." For Ukraine had been left in limbo by NATO's successive rounds of post-Cold War enlargement. This became obvious with the second post-Cold War expansion tranche in 2004, bringing in seven new allies, including three—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—that had been former Soviet Republics. Four years later, at its Bucharest summit, NATO officials made vague promises about two further ex-Soviet republics—Georgia and Ukraine—eventually acceding to membership, but few in the alliance took these seriously. Instead, eyes turned toward possible membership of either, or both, in the European Union.

But potential membership of Ukraine in the EU rather than in NATO was hardly going to solve the Russian leadership's ontological problems; if anything, a Ukraine in the EU might even become more nettlesome for Russia than a Ukraine in NATO, for should an enhancement of Ukrainian prosperity and democratic institutions follow from the country's membership in the EU, the happy example it represented would not, presumably, be lost on Russians themselves who were growing restive under the thumb of the Putin regime. At least, that is how the latter came to interpret the stakes of Ukraine's westward drift. While the incorporation of the Baltic states into NATO had been contentious, Russian sensitivities toward the Baltics were always less pronounced than they were in relation to Ukraine. A degree of acceptance over the supposed "loss" of the Baltics that seems to have permeated the Russian leadership was not extended to Ukraine.[33]

As a result, uncertainty became the only certainty in the evolution of the NATO-Ukraine relationship.[34] At least in the early days following the end of the Cold War, the driving concern—of both Washington and Moscow—was repatriating Ukraine's nuclear arsenal back to Russia. In Budapest in 1994, Kyiv agreed to this

[29] Justin Magula et al., "NATO and Russia: Defense and Deterrence in a Time of Conflict," *Defense Studies* 22, 3 (2022): 502-509.

[30] Stephen Blank, "Russia, NATO Enlargement, and the Baltic States," *World Affairs* 160, 3 (1998): 115-25, citing at pp. 116-17.

[31] Ondřej Ditrych and Martin Laryš, "What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?" *European Security*, online ed., 2024.

[32] Magula et al., "NATO and Russia," p. 3.

[33] Asmus and Nurick, "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States," p. 124.

[34] Yaroslav Bilinsky, *Endgame in NATO's Enlargement: The Baltic States and Ukraine* (New York: Praeger, 1999).

abandonment of the nuclear assets it had inherited at the time of the dissolution of the USSR, with the agreement being buttressed by solemn American, British, and Russian "guarantees" of Ukraine's security. This is another development that, in retrospect, appears to have been a blunder, but at the time, officials in the Clinton administration were making it apparent that had Ukraine not rid itself of nuclear weapons, it could count on American enmity rather than amity.[35]

There is a bitter irony in the tangled history of independent Ukraine's relationship with the West and with NATO. Curiously, the path to the West began much earlier for Ukraine than for many other post-Soviet states, as it was the first member of the Commonwealth of Independent States to pursue closer relations with NATO, in June 1994—relations that were deepened with the signing of its "Charter on Distinctive Partnership" with the alliance in 1997. But if Ukraine's efforts to shed its Soviet shell began quite early on, its westward journey has been far from smooth. There were many reasons for this, but at least a large part of the problem has been the inability in the West of policymakers—not excluding those in France—to comprehend Ukrainian realities. There had been a failure to understand what Ukraine was, who the Ukrainians were, and most importantly whether the state "belonged" in the East or the West.[36]

This conceptual ambiguity regarding where Ukraine lies may, however, be coming to an end, at least in the eyes of the Macron government in France, for after initially attempting somehow to "mediate" Russia's disputes with Ukraine and thus head off a war that many in Washington but few in Paris saw coming in 2022, France has now shifted to adopting a Ukraine policy that envisions the country becoming a full NATO ally. Why this radical shift in French policy occurred, we explore in the following two sections.

The "Macron Doctrine" and French strategic tradition

While the comparison may initially seem a stretch, Emmanuel Macron and his former and future fellow president, Donald Trump, share a common trait. We have grown accustomed to witnessing how Trump's texting can ignite media frenzies and public controversies. So, too, does Macron exhibit a propensity, almost out of the blue, to toss rhetorical grenades. We saw above what his "brain-death" interview could do. Hardly less controversial was another statement of his made not quite three years later, urging the West not to "humiliate" Moscow—even though the Russians were at that time busily laying waste to swathes of Ukrainian territory![37] And what

[35] Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, p. 160.

[36] Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), pp. 337-39.

[37] Dominique Moïsi, "Ne pas humilier la Russie: le péché d'orgueil de la France," *Institut Montaigne,* 13 June 2022, available at https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/ne-pas-humilier-poutine-le-peche-dorgueil-de-la-france.

are we to make of yet another headline-grabbing assertion of Macron's, in February 2024, that he "did not rule out" sending troops to Ukraine?[38]

Much like Trump, Macron has become the subject of severe criticism for his attention-seeking behavior, with accusations ranging from hubris and lack of seriousness to empty grandstanding, ineptitude, and chaotic leadership.[39] But is the French president really a compulsive "disruptor," suffering according to some critics, from an unshakeable "Napoleon complex"?[40] Are his rhetorical sallies simply "a mile wide and an inch deep"?[41] Or do Macron's statements contain more substance than meets the eye? To get at the answers, we address in this section the background of Macron's ideas, measured against the broad sweep of French diplomatic tradition. For if it can often seem that innovation is the watchword when it comes to Macron's diplomatic initiatives, the reality is that the president is really carrying on a long-established French tradition of foreign policymaking.[42]

What we refer to in these pages as the "Macron doctrine" is built around four axes.[43] The first and most important of these is the country's long-standing "defensive-realist" orientation that stretches back to the time of Richelieu.[44] With rare (and disastrous) interruptions, this orientation has put a premium upon France's serving as the guardian of a stable European balance of power, while at the same time avoiding becoming the vassal of any other state.

The second axis is Europe, considered to be France's geopolitical home as well as its civilizational lodestar. As Macron sees it, Europe is the only geographical entity that has "put human with a capital H at the heart of its project [and is] one of the last havens where we collectively continue to harbor a certain idea of humanity, law,

[38] Théo Bourgery-Gonse, "Emmanuel Macron n'exclut pas l'envoi de troupes en Ukraine," *Euractiv,* 27 February 2024, available at https://www.euractiv.fr/section/ukraine/news/emmanuel-macron-nexclut-pas-lenvoi-de-troupes-en-ukraine/.

[39] Ivo Daalder, "Macron: The Grand Master of Grandstanding," *Politico,* 4 March 2024, available at https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-the-grand-master-of-grandstanding/.

[40] See Anne-Elizabeth Moutet, "Don't Believe Macron's Grandstanding," *Telegraph,* 28 February 2024, available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/02/28/dont-believe-macrons-grandstanding-the-french-still-chicken/; and Ralph Schoelhammer, "Macron is no Napoleon and no Talleyrand," *Brussels Signal,* 1 March 2024, available at https://brusselssignal.eu/2024/03/macron-is-no-napoleon-and-no-talleyrand-floating-his-proposal-of-sending-troops-to-ukraine-was-a-work-of-stunning-political-ineptness-that-only-boosted-putin/.

[41] A phrase said to have originated with the 19th-century American humorist, Edgar Wilson ("Bill") Nye, whose description of Nebraska's shallow Platte River, and of the state's leading political figure, William Jennings Bryan, has been used ever since as a metaphorical put-down of countless individuals said to be lacking in depth.

[42] Michel Duclos, "Tracing French Diplomacy: A Brief History of Macron's Foreign Policy," *Institut Montaigne*, 2021, available at https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/tracing-french-diplomacy-brief-history-macrons-foreign-policy.

[43] Maxime Lefebvre, "Emmanuel Macron et les quatre traditions de la politique étrangère française," *Telos*, 19 December 2019, available at https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/politique-francaise-et-internationale/emmanuel-macron-et-les-quatre-traditions-de-la-pol.html); and Bruno Tertrais et al., "Diplomatie: la politique étrangère de la France n'est pas 'néoconservatrice'," *Le Monde*, July 3, 2017, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/07/03/diplomatie-la-politique-etrangere-de-la-france-n-est-pas-neoconservatrice_5154914_3232.html.

[44] Iskander Rehman, "'Raison d'Etat': Richelieu's Grand Strategy During the Thirty Years War," *Texas National Security Review* 2, 3 (2019): 38–75.

freedom and justice."[45] France's diplomats traditionally perceive their country as the master of this particular home, which they hope will become stronger in order to be able to stand up to China and the USA, and to be capable of defending its values and interests in the face of authoritarian regimes. Not surprisingly—and this is a big problem for the "autonomy" aspiration—few if any of the other European states had been prepared to indulge France in its self-ordained leadership conceit, until the return of Trump. For the American president really has put the wind back into the sails of the autonomy project, by sending unmistakable signals that the USA cannot be more concerned about European security and defence than are the Europeans themselves.[46]

A third axis of French diplomatic tradition is universalism, an ideational yardstick dating back to the 1789 revolution that measures France according to how well it serves as a beacon of cosmopolitan humanistic principles. Universalism shows up in the country's predilection for a multilateral and rules-based international order epitomized by such institutions as the United Nations. The fourth and final dimension of French grand strategy is the Atlantic alliance, joining Europe with North America and Great Britain in a regional defence pact. Since de Gaulle's time, this has been the most problematic of the four French axes. It is also the one of greatest centrality to the argument we make in this article.

It is of central concern because while France has been reliant upon the NATO (and American) presence in European security and defence, it has persistently striven to maintain a degree of strategic aloofness from the USA. This striving has never met with much success among the allies, but it regularly continued to animate French policy. Macron, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, has endeavored to foster a vision of "great-power Europe" (*une Europe puissance*) that can at one and the same time remain allied with and (reasonably) amicable toward the USA while maintaining independence in policy formulation and strategic decisions. It seems like something that might, in principle, be easily accomplished, but as we see in the following section, the Ukraine War, in supporting the logic of the autonomy aspiration, has provided precious little clarification as to how it might become realized.

For what remains in this section, however, our aim is to flesh out with a bit more detail how Macron views France's geopolitical setting, for if, as we argued above, he is in many respects carrying on with long-established French diplomatic traditions, he does so with interesting glosses on those traditions. In this light, can there be anything truly new in the Macron doctrine? We think the answer is a qualified "yes," but more because of changes in style than in substance. For starters, there certainly has been a Macronian style of policymaking. Upon reaching the presidency in 2017 at the tender age of thirty-nine, he had already established a reputation as a workaholic

[45] Quoted in Eglantine Staunton, "Macron's European Policy to Rescue 'European Civilisation' and the Liberal International Order," *Third World Quarterly* 43, 1 (2022): 18-34, quote at p. 20; as well as Emmanuel Macron, "Discours à la Pnyx," 7 September 2017, available at https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/11/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-la-pnyx-athenes-le-jeudi-7-septembre-2017.

[46] William Audureau et al., "Derrière les mots de J.D. Vance à Munich," *Le Monde*, 23–24 February 2025, pp. 20–21.

determined to confront problems head on, in striking contrast with his predecessor, François Hollande, who loved nothing so much as a boat that did not rock.[47]

For Macron, rocking boats is accompanied by urgent calls to steer clear of the rocks. He is the first political leader to underscore the gravity of the deep civilizational crisis facing not just Europe, but the entire planet. As he sees it, Europe confronts a triple challenge. First is the obvious military challenge known as Russia.[48] Second is the challenge posed by an economic model of the traditional welfare state becoming more and more unsustainable. Third is the political and cultural challenge subsumed under the heading of the "crisis of liberal democracy." Our concern here is with the first of these, Russia, and it has been on this problem that Macron's foreign policy has demonstrated the greatest degree of fluctuation.

Consider what his stance toward Russia used to be, for the first five years of his presidency. This was a time when Macron believed that Russia would have to be reintegrated into a continental security system as a "normal" friendly European power. Doing this would solve Europe's Russia problem. His initial willingness to follow the path of inclusion regarding Russia was predicated on the theory, almost certainly fallacious, that the country's aggressive turn starting in 2007 had all been based on a "misunderstanding."[49] According to this theory, Russian leaders not only had to look on helplessly as their empire broke apart in 1991, but they had to suffer the indignity of seeing their former allies in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as three former Soviet republics, join NATO. Ergo, even if Russian leaders never did seriously believe their country's physical security was menaced by all of this, they certainly felt the lash of ontological security woes.

France was sensitive to those latter woes, which explains the pains taken by various of its leaders not to "humiliate" Russia. To avoid inflicting ontological pain on Russia, to those who thought this way, it was necessary to reassure and placate Moscow, inter alia by accepting that it could legitimately claim a security or "buffer" zone on its periphery. Who could say, maybe Europeans might even need to be called upon to provide "security guarantees" to *Moscow*? Ideas such as these strike us today as rather heterodox (to put it mildly), but for many years they represented a kind of orthodoxy in French approaches to Russia. Hence, Macron did not deviate very much from the policies of many of his predecessors, and the group of experts he listened to at the start of his presidency (including Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, and Hubert Védrine) reinforced the "wisdom" of this orthodoxy. For so many in the country's Russophile elite—to take just one example, Védrine—"American hegemony" was a great reason for France to seek, in the easternmost reaches of Europe, a reliable partner who could come in handy as a balance

[47] Isabelle Lasserre, *Macron, le disrupteur: la politique étrangère d'un président antisystème* (Paris: Ed. l'Observatoire, 2022), chap. 2.

[48] Jean-Baptiste Chastand et al., "Retour de l'ancien glacis soviétique," *Le Monde*, 23–24 February 2025, pp. 16–17.

[49] For an insightful criticism of the fallacies attending this theory, see Isabelle Lasserre, *Macron-Poutine: les liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Ed. l'Observatoire, 2023), chap. 7.

to the US.[50] Védrine was hardly alone in dreaming this dream,[51] and nor was it only Socialists like him who entertained these visions; conservatives Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy had also demonstrated, during their presidencies, accommodative positions vis-à-vis Moscow.

Thus Macron's initial approach to Russia was hardly a departure from the established French tradition of trying to be "inclusive." Geostrategically, when it came to Russia, Macron was showing himself to be very much a "me, too" leader, echoing what his predecessors in the Elysée had sought to do. In truth, the country's elites have always had a problem understanding Russian politics and society. They have wanted to believe it was a normal European country like France, one that shared the heritage of enlightenment and progress. They imagined it was and would forever remain the country of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Pushkin. This led to their desire to romanticize and fantasize what is, after all, a highly complex society, one very far from being simply an eastern and Slavonic version of France. This fantasizing persisted even though France's diplomatic flirts with Russia had never ended particularly well for it in the past. Against the cult of the romanticizers there had been, albeit rarely, countervailing voices echoing intermittently down through the years. One such had been that of Talleyrand, probably the first French diplomat ever to proclaim the Russians to be "barbarians" who could never be trusted.[52] But for the most part, Talleyrand's skepticism remained a decidedly minoritarian perspective and does so today.

For most of his time in office, Macron was no exception to the rule. Once installed in the Elysée, Macron—who had no foreign policy background prior to being elected—was determined to make the "reset" of Franco-Russian relations a top priority, attempting to do for France what Barack Obama had failed so spectacularly to do for the US eight years earlier, to say nothing of what Donald Trump looks to be seeking to do today. Nevertheless, Macron very much sought his own reset, from his earliest days until even after the Ukraine War began. But nothing seemed to work for him. Then he had his own Damascene conversion, triggered by Putin's invasion of Russia.

Not without much psychological and political discomfort, Macron's conversion began in 2022, and was completed by the end of the year, as a result of the Ukraine war. Below, we discuss how and why this happened.

The president and the war: Macron's Annus Horribilis—and after

For those who were following the events immediately preceding Putin's invasion on February 24, 2022, one image sticks out in recollection: that ridiculously long white table where just a few weeks earlier the French president had sat with his Russian counterpart, in a vain attempt to convince him not to invade. This was the moment

[50] Védrine, cited in Lasserre, *Macron-Poutine,* p. 138.

[51] For one such intrepid advocacy, worthy of Astérix himself, see Henri de Grossouvre, *Paris-Berlin-Moscou: la voie de l'indépendance et de la paix* (Lausanne: L'Age d' Homme, 2002).

[52] See Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *Talleyrand: le prince immobile* (Paris: Tallandier, 2019), chap. 23.

when the scales apparently began to fall from Macron's eyes, for following the meeting he remarked that his Russian counterpart seemed to have "changed" and that his speech had become "rigid and paranoid."[53] Yet even the onslaught on Ukraine did not bring to an immediate end Macron's application of sweet reason on Putin. It took the discovery of Russian war crimes around Bucha, near Kyiv, at the end of March, to bring his fruitless personal diplomacy to a halt.

Macron should not really be reproached for having sought to talk Putin out of launching his invasion. But he does bears full responsibility for a number of major blunders, most of them avoidable, committed later in 2022. The first of these was a short but ill-advised remark during an interview with the *Dépêche du Midi* on June 3, 2022, when he intoned, "il ne faut pas humilier la Russie," adding the hopeful note that the West would be able to produce a diplomatic off-ramp to the fighting.[54] As we saw earlier, urging that Russia not be humiliated had become pretty standard presidential fare in Paris, but while in France and other western countries it might have elicited no great shock in response, the remark's impact on NATO's new allies to the east was otherwise, for those countries had experienced subjugation and humiliation *caused* by Russia for much of their recent history. Macron's timing could not have been worse.

Another revealing moment occurred in October 2022 when Macron, interviewed on the *France 2* TV channel, was asked about the potential use by Russian forces of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Attempting to sound reassuring, he stated that Paris would "evidently" not use nuclear weapons in response to a Russian nuclear attack on Ukraine and added that France "has a nuclear doctrine that is based on the vital interests of the country. These would not be at stake if there was a nuclear ballistic attack in Ukraine or in the region."[55] In saying this, Macron was breaking one of the golden rules of France's deterrence—"never say never!" In other words, respect the logic of "strategic ambiguity," particularly if one claims to be the ringleader of a more "autonomous" European security and defence entity.[56] As with his remark about humiliation, so too did Macron's apparent dismissal of any French nuclear riposte send a distressing signal to EU and NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe, above all those sharing a border with Russia.[57]

[53] Dimitri Minic, "La politique russe d'Emmanuel Macron: étapes et racines d'une nouvelle approche, 2017–2024," Institut français de relations internationales (IFRI), *Eurasie Visions*, no. 133 (April 2024), p. 5, available at https://libmod.de/wp-content/uploads/LibMod_RussiaAndTheWest_PP_Minic.pdf.

[54] "Emmanuel Macron sur Vladimir Poutine: 'Je pense qu'il s'est isolé' et 'qu'il a fait une erreur historique et fondamentale'," *La Dépêche,* 3 June 2022, available at https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/06/03/emmanuel-macron-sur-vladimir-poutine-je-pense-quil-sest-isole-et-quil-a-fait-une-erreur-historique-et-fondamentale-10337002.php.

[55] Clea Caulcutt, "Macron under Fire for Saying France Wouldn't Respond in Kind if Russia Launched Nuclear Attack on Ukraine," *Politico,* 13 October 2022, available at https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-nuclear-attack-russia-ukraine/.

[56] For France's nuclear doctrine as it was fashioned during the Cold War and remained relatively intact until recently, see David G. Haglund, "France's Nuclear Posture: Adjusting to the Post-Cold War Era," *Contemporary Security Policy* 16, 2 (1995): 140–62.

[57] Liviu Horovitz and Martha Stolz, "Nuclear Rhetoric and Escalation Management in Russia's War against Ukraine: A Chronology," *SWP Working Paper* no. 2 (August 2023), p. 136.

More self-inflicted harm occurred on December 3, 2022, in an interview with French TV station *TF1* recorded during Macron's state visit to the USA. Addressing the growing need of the Europeans to prepare their future security architecture, Macron appeared to support the idea of the Western allies providing "security guarantees" to Russia upon its return to the negotiating table. Needless to say, the remark went down poorly with leaders of EU and NATO countries in Central and Eastern Europe, who were rather inclined to believe that the purpose of the Western alliance was to give security guarantees to *them* rather than to their historical oppressor.[58]

Ever since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the president had been seeking to give the impression that France stood ready to serve as a mediator, willing, and perhaps even able to broker a deal between the Kremlin and Kyiv. This aspiration, cropping up regularly in Macron's speeches, reflects nothing so much as the traditional French ambition to be seen as a *puissance d'équilibre*. At the same time, it also raised some touchy ethical issues. What could it mean to be such a *puissance* when dealing with an aggressor who invaded a non-threatening, sovereign neighbor and committed war crimes on a large scale? Macron's obsession with playing the peacemaker became a major irritant for many NATO members who suspected France of duplicity, appeasing the Kremlin while pretending to show support for Ukraine. Pascal Bruckner said it best: "try as hard as you may, you can't be Chamberlain and Churchill at the same time."[59]

Judging by Macron's missteps during his terrible year, a neutral observer could have been forgiven for drawing some harsh, but nevertheless fair, conclusions. First, Macron had grossly overestimated his charisma and his ability to charm his Russian counterpart through personal diplomacy.[60] Second, he persisted far too long in believing Vladimir Putin to be a pragmatic and sensible leader, who was capable of compromise and with whom a relationship of trust was possible to establish, failing to understand that the former KGB agent in the Kremlin was a disciple of Clausewitz and Bismarck, eminently disposed to use diplomacy as a tool of war, and to employ personal relationships as manipulative tools. In a word, Macron allowed himself to be played by his Russian counterpart.[61]

Third, Macron also allowed himself to be constrained and even imprisoned by some entrenched beliefs—dogma, really—of French foreign policy. Like presidents before him, he has overestimated both the stature of his nation and its sway on the global stage. France, comprising a mere one percent of the world's population and holding a modest two percent of global GDP, is objectively a middle power in

[58] Euronews, "Macron Blasted for Saying Moscow Needs 'Security Guarantees' to End the Ukraine War," 4 December 2022, available at https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/12/04/russia-needs-security-guarantees-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine-says-macron.

[59] Pascal Bruckner, "Pascal Bruckner sur la guerre en Ukraine: 'un nouveau 9 novembre 1989 est possible'," *Tribune Juive,* 14 January 2023, available at https://www.tribunejuive.info/2023/01/14/pascal-bruckner-sur-la-guerre-en-ukraine-un-nouveau-9-novembre-1989-est-possible/.

[60] Lasserre, *Macron-Poutine,* pp. 16, 41; and Elsa Vidal, *La Fascination russe* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2024), p. 29.

[61] Serge Enderlin, "La Russie a cessé d'être un pays que l'on peut traiter normalement," *Le Monde,* July 6, 2022, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/07/06/la-russie-a-cesse-d-etre-un-pays-que-l-on-peut-traiter-normalement_6133586_3210.html.

rapid decline—albeit a middle power with a nuclear arsenal. Hindered by an overwhelming public debt, a flagging economy, an antiquated and financially burdensome social system, and burgeoning domestic strife, its government struggles to enact meaningful reforms. While French diplomacy remains vigorous, proficient, and brimming with many innovative (as well as some not so innovative) concepts, it simply lacks the means of realizing its ambitious aspirations. Other NATO allies sense this, even if Macron does not. And as for *Russia's* leaders, they openly despise France and its president.[62]

While it is tempting to conclude that Macron's Ukraine policy proved itself to be a complete failure in 2022, the verdict for 2023 and 2024 would have to be much different, as the French president made a remarkable U-turn and began to sound every bit as harsh toward Russia as was any Central and Eastern European leader not named Viktor Orban, who through it all has remained Putin's principal fanboy in NATO. Not so Macron: by 2023, the worsening of the situation in Ukraine set the pace for a worsening of the French president's own views on Russia. For five years, he had been trying to defend what he perceived as the EU core values while at the same time showing that he understood Russia's feelings of humiliation and insecurity. It had not worked.

Then he took a new tack, shifting on several fronts starting in 2023, the most significant being a willingness to see Ukraine become a member of both the EU and NATO.[63] Within a year, some were even beginning to speak of Macron as a hawk among hawks.[64] Importantly, France and Britain availed themselves of the 120th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale in 2024 to signal their joint resolve to offer "unwavering support for Ukraine," highlighting that they "are both absolutely clear: Ukraine must win this war. If Ukraine loses, we all lose. The costs of failing to support Ukraine now will be far greater than the costs of repelling a victorious Putin."[65] One crucial point that cannot be emphasized enough is France's evolving nuclear response to the invasion of Ukraine: a notable increase in the frequency of

[62] Alexandre Bozio, "Guerre en Ukraine: 'Poutine méprise Macron il ne le prend pas au sérieux', assure sur RTL Sergueï Jirnov," RTL, 2 September 2022, available at https://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/guerre-en-ukraine-poutine-meprise-macron-il-ne-prend-pas-au-serieux-assure-sur-rtl-serguei-jirnov-7900181068.

[63] See Cédric Pietralunga and Philippe Ricard, "La France se résout à soutenir l'adhésion de l'Ukraine à l'OTAN," *Le Monde*, 20 June 2023, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/06/20/la-france-se-resout-a-soutenir-l-adhesion-de-l-ukraine-a-l-otan_6178374_3210.html; and Clea Caulcutt, "Macron's Slow but Bold U-Turn on Ukraine," *Politico*, 12 September 2023, available at https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-ukraine-war-russia-uturn-vladimir-putin/.

[64] Claire Gatinois, Cédric Pietralunga, Philippe Ricard, and Nathalie Segaunes, "Guerre en Ukraine: la métamorphose d'Emmanuel Macron, colombe devenue faucon," *Le Monde*, 14 March 2024, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/03/14/guerre-en-ukraine-la-metamorphose-d-emmanuel-macron-colombe-devenue-faucon6221911823448.html. Also see Celia Belin, "Macron the Hawk," *Foreign Affairs,* 5 April 2024, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/macron-hawk.

[65] David Cameron and Stephane Sejourne, "The World Is Safer for a Renewed Entente," *Telegraph* (London)*,* 7 April 2024*,* available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/07/world-is-safer-for-a-renewed-entente/; and Amelia Hadfield, "Britain and France Are Forging a New Alliance over Backing for Ukraine – and Aim to Bring Nato Partners with Them," *The Conversation,* 29 April 2024, available at https://theconversation.com/britain-and-france-are-forging-a-new-alliance-over-backing-for-ukraine-and-aim-to-bring-nato-partners-with-them-228644.

its nuclear submarine patrols, a maneuver unprecedented in three decades. France has deployed three out of its four ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) simultaneously, a departure from the norm where typically only one *Triomphant*-class SSBN, capable of carrying up to sixteen submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with multiple warheads, is on patrol at any given time. This significant escalation in French nuclear deterrence activity appears to be a clear message to Russia that its actions in Ukraine could lead to catastrophic consequences. Nothing underscores France's seriousness in this crisis more than this bold signal to the Kremlin.[66]

Conclusion: geostrategic oxymoron?

So how should we assess France's policy in respect of the Ukraine War? Obviously, after a shaky start, Macron has shown that he understands the importance of standing up to Russia, his most recent *Economist* interview making it clear that he assesses the stakes for Europe as being nothing short of "existential."[67] This assessment has become more deeply rooted than ever with Trump's return to power, and it is also becoming more diffused than ever, with numerous other European countries demonstrating a similar resolve, if only verbally, to strive for "independence" from an America they are sure has become "indifferent" to their security (in the words of the new German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, uttered in the wake of his election victory on February 23, 2025).[68] Macron realized that someone in Europe had to sound the alarm, and this is precisely what he was doing with his U-turn, which now comes close to representing a Europe-wide consensus.

Keeping in mind the puzzle introduced earlier, of how to reconcile European strategic "autonomy" with a strong NATO, we end this essay with two assertions. The first concerns France's contributions to the Ukrainian cause, for if strategic autonomy is not to remain a nice-sounding but vacuous notion, real resources will have to be mustered by those who desire to bring it about. Has France been walking the autonomy talk, as glimpsed by its efforts to aid Ukraine?

It is hardly late-breaking news that political leaders often make grand declarations but fall short when it comes to tangible actions. France, in this context, has faced criticism for not fulfilling its commitments and failing to match its rhetoric with substantive support. As the third largest European economy, it has been said to be punching very much below its weight. For instance, according to Germany's Kiel Institute for the World Economy, it ranks twelfth among those states who have been delivering weaponry to Kyiv. Its standing is even lower, at fifteenth place, when it

[66] Polina Sinovets and Adérito Vicente, "'Nuclear Spring Is Coming': Examining French Nuclear Deterrence in Response to Russia's Actions in Ukraine," *Note de la Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, no. 8 (2024).

[67] See n6, above.

[68] Quoted in Jim Tankersley, "Friedrich Merz, a Conservative, Is Poised to Be Germany's Next Chancellor," *New York Times*, 24 February 2025, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/world/europe/friedrich-merz-germany-chancellor-election.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20250224&instance_id=148291&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=191765&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0

comes to total bilateral aid commitments made to Ukraine between January 2022 and January 2023.[69]

At first glance, those rankings do reflect poorly on France. But they fail to tell us the whole story. A closer look at what France has done militarily for Ukraine gives us a more granular perspective. According to a study conducted by the French Senate at the end of 2023, several key points deserve highlighting.[70] To begin with, between 2014 and 2020—that is, after the Russian seizure of Crimea but before its invasion of the rest of Ukraine—France had been the primary arms supplier to Ukraine, furnishing weaponry valued at over €1.6 billion.[71] Among this matériel were helicopters, reconnaissance drones, navy-related weapons and equipment, targeting systems, ammunition of various calibers, and fire-control systems.

After the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, France began to transfer large quantities of military equipment and ammunition to Kyiv's forces, including thirty Caesar cannons, 250 armoured personnel carriers, thirty-eight AMX-10 RC armoured reconnaissance vehicles, fifteen 155-mm TRF1 howitzers, two-hundred or so Mistral surface-to-air missiles, a pair of Crotale anti-aircraft missile batteries, several dozen Storm Shadow air-surface missiles, several hundred Milan anti-tank missiles, SAMP/T anti-aircraft missile systems, and forty air-surface Scalp missiles. The total value of this kit came to around €1.7 billion. In addition, training provided by the French army for Ukrainian troops has been valued at €300 million, a sum that includes the land-combat training programs provided by the French military in Poland and on French territory, from which 14,000 Ukrainian soldiers benefited in 2023–2024.

Paris has also been contributing €1 billion (€2 billion in 2024) to the European Peace Facility, a mechanism set up to finance certain transfers from European countries to Ukraine. Only Germany contributes more to this fund, each EU member's contribution being calculated according to the weight of its economy. Finally, France has also allocated €200 million to a fund designed to finance purchases made directly by Ukraine from French arms manufacturers. Some of the Caesar guns, Ground Master 200 radars, motorized floating bridges, and 155-mm shells were purchased by Kyiv with this fund.[72]

In all, France's military aid to Ukraine as of 2024 came to some €3.8 billion. This amount placed it third in Europe, behind only Germany (€5.2 billion) and the UK

[69] Christoph Trebesch et al., "The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which Countries Help Ukraine and How?", *Kiel Working Paper* no. 2218, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, February 2023, available at https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/87bb7b0f-ed26-4240-8979-5e6601aea9e8-KWP_2218_Trebesch_et_al_Ukraine_Support_Tracker.pdf.

[70] *Rapport d'information 1840 du 23 novembre 2023 déposé en application de l'article 145 du règlement, par la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur le bilan du soutien militaire à l'Ukraine*, available at https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/rapports/cion_def/l16b1840_rapport-information#.

[71] Julia Monn, "Was der Westen an Kriegsmaterial in die Ukraine geliefert hat," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung,* 9 February 2022.

[72] See Cédric Pietralunga, "L'aide militaire de la France à l'Ukraine estimée à 3,2 milliards d'euros," *Le Monde*, 9 November 2023, available at https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/11/09/l-aide-militaire-de-la-france-a-l-ukraine-estimee-a-3-2-milliards-d-euros_6199153_3210.html?lmd_medium=al&lmd_campaign=envoye-par-appli&lmd_creation=ios&lmd_source=mail.

(€4.6 billion). It is estimated that a further €3 billion in military aid was disbursed in 2024.[73] As well, France's defence budget has doubled since 2019, even reaching the NATO target of 2 percent of in 2024, a year earlier than planned.

So yes, Macron has begun walking the talk, providing real assets and not simply rhetoric in response to Russian aggression. Yet there can be no question that France's military endeavors are, and will continue to be, severely limited by the country's economic and fiscal challenges.[74] This means that Macron's ambitions will inevitably collide with economic and financial constraints.

And this leads us to our concluding assertion, regarding the possibility of any squaring of the geostrategic circle during the next few years. Can European autonomy and NATO capability each be enhanced, at the same time? Three comments are in order regarding that query, all advanced with varying degrees of trepidation and tentativeness. First, much depends upon the current Trump administration. Whether it is intent upon, as so many in Europe fear, significantly diminishing the part America has played for more than eight decades in European defence remains, of course, impossible to say. However, it has certainly given its European allies reason to think that it might just "abandon" Europe, and—even worse from their perspective—attempt to sidle up to Russia in a bid to use it against China. The former country may be the one that most worries the Europeans, but it is the latter, after all, upon which America's strategic concerns are focused.

Second, only slightly less significant than was the American balloting of November 2024 will be the French presidential election in 2027. For should the RN gain the Elysée, it remains to be seen whether France will end up having a NATO-agnostic right-wing government such as Hungary's or a NATO-friendly right-wing government such as Italy's. Third, the future of transatlantic relations in the wake of Ukraine will increasingly be driven by a trio of capitals: Washington, Paris, and *London*. Simply put, nothing can or will be done regarding "European" enhanced autonomy in the absence of the kind of closer Franco-British security cooperation being touted of late by policymakers in both Paris and London, for instance, on the occasion of the abovementioned birthday bash for the Entente Cordiale.[75] It is hardly surprising that both Emmanuel Macron and Britain's prime minister, Keir Starmer voyaged to Washington in February 2025 (though not together), to deal directly with President Trump on the future course of the transatlantic alliance.[76] Until such time

[73] "Les huit points clés de l'assistance militaire de la France à l'Ukraine," *La Tribune,* 11 March 2024, available at https://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx?page_driver=searchBuilder_Search#./!?&_suid=171660055581202887069263632226.

[74] Nicole Barotte, "La Cour des comptes dresse un bilan 'insatisfaisant' de la France dans l'Otan," *Le Figaro*, 5 October 2023, available at https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/la-cour-des-comptes-dresse-un-bilan-insatisfaisant-de-la-france-dans-l-otan-20231005; Idem, "Défense: l'ambition française et ses limites budgétaires," *Le Figaro*, 5 January 2024, available at https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/l-ambition-francaise-et-ses-limites-budgetaires-20240501.

[75] See n65.

[76] Mark Landler, "Macron and Starmer Have Played Trump's Game Before, but the Rules Are Changing," New York Times, 23 February 2025, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/world/europe/france-uk-trump-macron-starmer.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_ypgu_20250223&instance_id=148260&nl=your-places:-global-update&regi_id=62171838&segment_id=191733&user_id=23a0e0df85dc5b50fc649eea833dabd0

(likely never) that Britain re-enters the EU, the "Europe of defence" cannot possibly be constructed by the EU alone; without Britain, an autonomous European security and defence capability must forever remain a geostrategic oxymoron.

The UK is clearly in Europe. Just as clearly, it is not in the EU. And it *is* in NATO. Putting these three statements together, it is difficult not to conclude that should the holy grail of European defence autonomy ever be grasped, it can only be within and not against the Atlantic alliance. This would hold even, a fortiori *especially*, in the event—which we judge so unlikely as to be effectively impossible—of a second Trump administration exercising article 13 of the Washington treaty of 1949 and withdrawing the USA itself from the alliance.

Michel Fortmann is professor emeritus in the Département de science politique at the Université de Montréal.

David G. Haglund is professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University.

Jeffrey Rice is assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at MacEwan University.