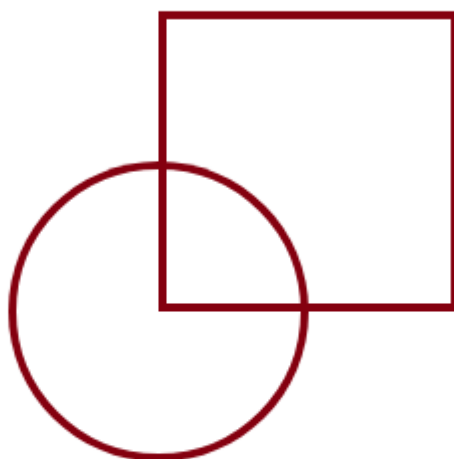




# The Strategic Line



LA LIGNE FINE

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*Institut*

## Evolution of the French perception of the Russian threat in the 2022 and 2025 National Strategic Reviews

Thematic Cluster: RIDS – International Relations, Defence and Security

Authors: Alek UMONT and Claire CHABREYRIE

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## Summary

From 2022, France shifted into an optic of long-term confrontation with Russia, which is now designated as the 'main threat' to European security. The 2022 and 2025 National Strategic Reviews (NSR) record this turning point: the return of high intensity confrontation in Europe and the explicit hypothesis of a major conflict by 2030. The French response combines rearmament, military support for Ukraine, reinforcement of the eastern flank, cyber build-up and the fight against interference. But the strategic pedagogy remains incomplete: the diagnosis is clear at the doctrinal level, much less so for French citizens. At the same time, the European framework is being recomposed around a post-Europeanism of voluntary coalitions, centred on states ready to take on strategic risk.

French deterrence remains strictly national, under the authority of the President, while becoming the implicit foundation of a collective European shield based on capabilities and resilience.

The note shows how, after a long period of underestimating Moscow and ambivalence between dialogue and firmness, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is forcing a change of matrix. Russia is no longer thought of as a difficult partner or a rival among others and has become the central adversary of European security. The 2022 NSR already qualifies Russia as a revisionist power and acknowledges the return of high intensity confrontation in Europe but remains cautious about the hypothesis of a direct NATO-Russia conflict. The NSR 2025 crosses a threshold by designating Moscow as the 'main threat' to France and its allies, by describing a multidimensional threat – military, nuclear, cyber, informational, economic, energy – and by explicitly mentioning the possibility of a major war in Europe by 2030.

This doctrinal change is reflected in concrete decisions: the role of framework nation in Romania, reinforced rotations in Estonia, an increased presence on the eastern flank, substantial military aid to Ukraine (CAESAR artillery, armoured vehicles, ground-to-air systems, training), the 2024–2030 LPM at €413 billion, the rise of ComCyber and the ANSSI, and the institutionalisation of the fight against interference via Viginum and European sanctions regimes. France's nuclear deterrent is reaffirmed as a strictly national pillar, under the exclusive authority of the President, while contributing de facto to the stability of the continent and the credibility of a collective shield combining conventional means, air/missile defence and resilience.

The note underlines a gap between doctrinal sophistication and strategic pedagogy. The official discourse names Russian cyberattacks and the logic of the 'war economy' more clearly, but the French population remains largely uninformed about plausible scenarios, hybrid vulnerabilities and expected efforts. In a context of permanent information warfare, this grey area threatens democratic cohesion.

To analyse this context, the note uses the concept of post-Europeanism: not a break with the EU, but an end to the illusion of linear and uniform integration. States are taking back control of



defence, coalitions of the willing and variable geometrical formats are becoming the norm, and the Europe of security is being built around countries ready to assume the strategic cost and risk.

The main recommendations are:

- To protect the defence effort and build an interparty consensus on deterrence, heavy capabilities and the eastern flank.
- Transform support for Ukraine into a sustainable security partnership, structuring for post-war Europe.
- Clarify the role of French deterrence as the national foundation of a collective European shield, without sharing nuclear decision-making.
- Strengthen structuring partnerships (Germany, the United Kingdom, the Eastern Flank States) in a logic of voluntary coalitions.
- Move to permanent European defence architectures (Eurogrid Defence, credible rapid reaction force).
- Strengthen the response to hybrid interference, in particular via a public directory of Russian operations with daily focus, and increase domestic resilience (defence/cyber SNUs, hybrid exercises, strategic stocks).
- Maintain a channel with Russian civil societies to prepare for the 'day after'. Support for the Russian free media in exile, hosting programmes for students/researchers/artists, maintenance of certain targeted academic exchanges, discreet diplomatic reflection on the actors with whom a dialogue can be opened when Russia evolves.
- Institutionalize strategic democratic security communication for the French population.



## **Presentation of the authors**

### **Alek UMONT**

Founder and President of La Ligne Fine – Institute Graduated in International Relations, specialized in Defense and Security issues (HEIP Paris) and in Political Science (University of Lille / Alexandru Ioan Cuza University – Iași, Romania), Alek UMONT has worked in the private sector, in Public Affairs, Crises, Consultation and as an ESG consultant for public actors. Passionate about issues of sovereignty, geopolitics and influence, he founded La Ligne Fine – Institut to offer a free, demanding and sovereign space for thought.

### **Claire CHABREYRIE**

An active member of La Ligne Fine, Claire holds an LLB degree in Law and French from Cardiff University (United Kingdom) as well as an MA degree in International Relations and an Outstanding Academic Achievement Award from the University of Nottingham Trent (United Kingdom). With a background in teaching, she also speaks Spanish. Her areas of interest are communication and international diplomacy and nuclear weapons.



# Introduction

On February 24, 2022, war returned to Europe. By launching a massive invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's Russia caused a geopolitical earthquake with major consequences for the continent's security. For France – a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a nuclear power and a pillar of the European Union – this event was a real strategic tipping point. Never since the end of the Cold War has the hypothesis of a direct confrontation with Russia seemed so plausible. Admittedly, Paris had indeed participated, alongside its allies, in NATO's reassurance measures in Eastern Europe after 2014. But its commitment remained measured, and its relatively conciliatory rhetoric towards Moscow during the 2010s reflected a persistent hope for cooperation with Russia. The shockwave of 2022 has forced France into an accelerated strategic realignment: the National Strategic Review (NSR) 2022, unveiled a few months after the start of the conflict in Ukraine, explicitly enacts this paradigm shift by designating Russia as a *revisionist* power threatening European security, and by anticipating the return of a high-intensity war in Europe<sup>1</sup>. Three years later, the National Strategic Review 2025 drives the point home: it ingrains the permanence of an unparalleled Russian threat to France and its allies and even envisages the hypothesis of a major conflict involving Russia by 2030, combined with massive hybrid attacks on the national territory<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the political communication of the French state has changed significantly. The leaders – first and foremost the President of the Republic – are now using increasingly direct and firm language with regard to Moscow, assuming a threat pedagogy aimed at preparing public opinion for a permanently degraded security context. Finally, the rise of hybrid strategies (cyberattacks, disinformation, energy blackmail, sabotage, nuclear threats) attributed to Russia has forced France to adapt its response by strengthening the protection of its critical infrastructure, its cybersecurity, its cognitive defence and its digital sovereignty.

This strategic note purports to analyse, from an academic and critical perspective, the way in which France perceives, integrates and communicates the Russian threat since 2022, adopting the following structure: (1) the path of French awareness, from a long term underestimation of Moscow to the recognition of a central adversary for European security; (2) the doctrinal evolution formalized in the 2022 and 2025 National Strategic Reviews, with the reconfiguration of strategic objectives – in particular objectives 2 and 3 – and the assumed emergence of an economy prepared for war; (3) the new frontier of confrontation in cyber, informational and democratic spaces, and the French response in terms of cyber defence, information warfare, counter-intelligence, infrastructure protection, cognitive defence and digital sovereignty, illustrated in particular by speeches such as Foreign Minister Barrot's speech at Harvard; (4) the political communication of the State – from presidential speeches to ministerial declarations – marked by a hardening of the lexical, a pedagogical desire to expose the threat and the construction of democratic resilience in the face of danger; (5) finally, the tensions and dilemmas between this strategic trajectory (rearmament, firmness, war economy), the preservation of social cohesion and national resilience, and the requirement of democratic legitimacy, whether it is a question of obtaining the support of

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<sup>1</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2022, November 28). *National Strategic Review 2022*. English version <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>

<sup>2</sup> French Government. (2025, July 14). *Publication of the National Strategic Review*. [info.gouv.fr. https://www.info.gouv.fr/communique/publication-de-la-revue-nationale-strategique](https://www.info.gouv.fr/communique/publication-de-la-revue-nationale-strategique)



citizens, ensuring the pedagogy of effort or redefining the social contract in a context of strategic endurance.

The subject is intended to be both descriptive and analytical. It is based on official documents (NSR 2022 and 2025, military programming laws, public speeches, declarations) and on available data, in order to identify the continuities, ruptures and lessons learned from this pivotal period. The approach is intended to be neutral and rigorous, in line with a high-level academic dissertation, while assuming an informed interpretation of the facts. The aim is to put into perspective the 'late but decisive turn' made by France in the face of the Russian threat, to assess its scope and limits, and to ultimately formulate recommendations to make this strategic adaptation sustainable. The thesis defended is that France, after belatedly becoming aware of the danger posed by Russia, has been able to quickly reorient its doctrine and its communication to face a lasting and multifaceted adversary. However, the credibility of this strategic response will depend on its sustainability in the long term – beyond the war in Ukraine – and on the state's ability to maintain national unity around the security effort, without renouncing the democratic values that underpin the nation's resilience.



# **I. From the post-Cold War period to 2022: the beginning of a belated awareness**

## **1. Russia relegated to the background in French strategy (1991-2014)**

In the aftermath of the Cold War, France no longer identified Russia as a priority threat. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the end of East-West bipolarity gave rise to the hope of a whole and free Europe including Russia. During the 1990s, Paris saw Moscow as a potential strategic partner, particularly on European security issues. Defence priorities shifted to other threats considered more immediate: the proliferation of local conflicts, international terrorism, or instability in crisis areas (Balkans, Middle East, Africa). In this context, the Russian threat was widely seen as residual or at least contained by the nascent partnership between Russia and NATO (NATO-Russia Council established in 2002) and by Russia's integration into the G8 at the same time.

During the two decades that followed the Cold War, France remained focused on other issues. Its Defence White Papers (2008, 2013) give Russia a limited place. For example, the 2008 White Paper, written shortly after the first war in Georgia, certainly evokes a return of power for Russia, but above all insists on the importance of not renewing the logic of bloc against bloc confrontation<sup>3</sup>. Jihadist terrorism, on the other hand, is clearly designated as France's main enemy

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<sup>3</sup> de Sardis, G. (2020, January 29). *Franco-Russian relations: towards a realistic approach*. Hermann Editions.  
[https://www.editions-hermann.fr/tribune/les-relations-francorusses-pour-une-approche-realiste\\_ZQyBALFYWhJy4Ahkp](https://www.editions-hermann.fr/tribune/les-relations-francorusses-pour-une-approche-realiste_ZQyBALFYWhJy4Ahkp)



after the attacks of 11 September, 2001 and those perpetrated on French soil in the mid-2000s. A Gaullo-Mitterrandian strategic thinking persists, which sees Russia as a *classic* actor with whom to deal, as opposed to the transnational ideological threat of Islamist terrorism. This vision was reinforced by the experience of the 2015 attacks: France cooperated directly with Russia in Syria to fight Daesh, temporarily erasing differences over the status of the Syrian regime.

The crises of 2008-2014 – the war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the conflict in the Donbass – did raise some alarms but did not bring about an immediate reversal of French doctrine. In August 2008, during the Russian-Georgian blitzkrieg, President Nicolas Sarkozy, the then president of the EU, got involved in negotiating a ceasefire and avoiding an escalation. France condemned the Russian action but quickly advocated a return to dialogue with Moscow. Similarly, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine led to the implementation of European sanctions against Russia and the suspension of the NATO-Russia strategic partnership. However, France remained ambivalent: it participated in the Normandy format (alongside Germany, Russia and Ukraine) to find a diplomatic solution, while trying to preserve channels of discussion with the Kremlin. The Russian intervention in Ukraine was perceived as a serious breach of the European order, but the dominant French analysis still saw it as a regional crisis that could be controlled through negotiation, not a sign of Russia's irreducible systemic hostility towards Europe.

In short, until 2014, the French posture oscillated between occasional firmness and hope for renewed cooperation. A certain gap widened with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, for whom the Russian threat had long been a tangible reality. While Poland, the Baltic States and Romania were investing massively in their defence and warning of Moscow's dangerousness, France remained more focused on expeditionary operations (Sahel, Levant) and the fight against terrorism. This gap in perception is illustrated, for example, in the budgets. In 2013, France reduced its military spending (the 2014-2019 military planning law (MPL), which provides the financial planning for French defence, was decreased), while Poland was already committed to reaching 2% of GDP in defence spending. The French priority remained the terrorist enemy within, as evidenced by the concentration of intelligence resources on the domestic jihadist threat during the years 2015-2019, much more than on the activities of Russian services in Europe.

## **2. Dialogue or deterrence? French ambiguities vis-à-vis Moscow before 2022**

The years leading up to the invasion of Ukraine were marked by contradictory signals in French policy towards Russia. On the one hand, France had been fully involved in NATO measures of deterrence and presence in the East since 2015. It regularly deployed troops in Estonia and Lithuania as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence, and it strengthened its nuclear deterrence posture by reaffirming its contribution to Europe's security in the face of any hostile <sup>4</sup>power. On the other

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent, É. (2025, July 14). *The new priorities of the 2025 National Strategic Review, this doctrine document on defence and diplomacy*. Le Monde. [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/07/14/climat-relations-avec-les-etats-unis-defense-du-territoire-national-les-nouvelles-priorites-de-la-revue-nationale-strategique-2025\\_6621156\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/07/14/climat-relations-avec-les-etats-unis-defense-du-territoire-national-les-nouvelles-priorites-de-la-revue-nationale-strategique-2025_6621156_3210.html)





hand, Paris maintained a stated desire for strategic dialogue with Moscow. The election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017 is a good illustration of this dual approach.

President Macron initially adopted a line of critical openness towards Russia. In May 2017, he invited Vladimir Putin to Versailles to start a dialogue again despite contentions concerning Syria and Ukraine. He did not minimize the differences (he openly criticized the Russian state media for their anti-French propaganda during the presidential campaign in the joint press conference) but insisted on the need to work with Russia on major international issues. In August 2019, during the Ambassadors' Conference, Emmanuel Macron uttered words that have become famous: "*I think that pushing Russia away from Europe is a profound strategic mistake*".<sup>5</sup> He warned against a policy that would isolate Moscow and throw it into the arms of China, stressing that it is better *to tie* Russia to Europe in the long term, while lucidly addressing the problems of Russian behaviour. This statement – described as lucid by some or naïve by others – sums up France's hope of avoiding an irreversible frontal confrontation with Russia, by relying on interdependence and diplomacy<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, the security context was deteriorating: Western intelligence services were increasingly documenting Russian interference in democracies (cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, support for extreme parties). France itself had been targeted, for example during the computer attack on the TV5 Monde channel in 2015 (sabotage later claimed by actors linked to Russian intelligence) or by the attempted espionage of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) foiled in The Hague in 2018. Despite these signals, the French leadership remained cautious in its public communication, avoiding overly personalising the antagonism with the Kremlin. The priority of the time (2018-2019) was to reinvent a European security architecture that included Russia, as was put forward by Emmanuel Macron in his speech at the Sorbonne (September 2017) and then in a more concrete way in 2019 when he launched the idea of an EU-Russia rapprochement to counterbalance the Sino-American rivalry.

The result, until the dawn of 2022, was a gap in pace between the real and growing threat posed by Russia – acutely perceived by its neighbouring countries – and the French strategic response, which was measured and marked by long-term bets. Emmanuel Macron's entourage was still pleading at the end of 2021 for a resumption of a security dialogue with Moscow, in the hope of preventing a conflagration in Ukraine. At that stage, French doctrine was still ambivalent: Russia was considered a difficult, potentially dangerous partner, but not an irreconcilable enemy. France's conceptual shift had not yet taken place.

### 3. 2022: the strategic leap in the face of Russian aggression

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<sup>5</sup> Macron, E. (2019, August 27). *Speech by the President of the Republic at the Ambassadors' Conference*. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>

<sup>6</sup> France 24. (2019, August 27). *Live: Emmanuel Macron's speech at the ambassadors' conference*. France 24. <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190827-direct-macron-live-conference-ambassadeurs>



Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was the catalyst that put an end to any ambiguities. The aggression, on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945, was perceived in Paris as a 'strategic earthquake' that brutally disrupted the European security order. From the very first days, France strongly condemned the attack, activated sanctions mechanisms within the EU and the UN, and decided on the delivery of military equipment to Ukraine. Emmanuel Macron, who had again tried last-ditch mediation by visiting Moscow in mid-February 2022, noted the failure of his diplomatic deterrence efforts. He publicly warned war has returned to Europe and that our own security was at stake alongside that of the Ukrainians<sup>7</sup>. The rhetoric changed in tone: the French President spoke of the "*entry into a new era of strategic dangers [where] remaining spectators would be madness*"<sup>8</sup>.

Awareness was therefore urgently raised. A jolt was manifested on several levels:

- On the doctrinal and capability level, France decided to accelerate its rearmament. Emmanuel Macron announced, from March 2022, an increase in the defence effort. This was to be realised through the early development of a new Military Planning Law (LPM 2024-2030), breaking with the previous LPM which initially ran until 2025<sup>9</sup>. The new project, unveiled in 2023, provided for a record budget of €413 billion for defence over 2024-2030, an increase of nearly 40% compared to the previous programme. This budgetary shift was directly justified by the war in Ukraine. The new situation created by Russia's aggression against Ukraine required an increase in military resources in order to face threats and "*maintain [France] among the world's leading military powers*"<sup>10</sup>. France intended to catch up in certain areas (ammunition, ground-to-air defence, cyber defence, etc.) highlighted by the Ukrainian conflict.
- On the diplomatic and allied level, Paris unambiguously rallied for Western unity against Moscow. NATO, which France still saw as "brain dead" at the end of 2019 in the words of Emmanuel Macron (The Economist), was regaining a central relevance in the eyes of Paris. France was deploying additional forces to Romania as part of a multinational NATO battalion and was supporting the acceleration of Finland and Sweden's integration into the Alliance. At the European level, the Elysée Palace was pushing for unprecedented measures, such as the European Peace Facility (which finances arms deliveries to Ukraine) or joint purchases of ammunition, which were initiatives that would have been considered inconceivable without the new situation of 2022. In doing so, France saw the need for the European strategic autonomy it had advocated being confirmed in retrospect: the crisis

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<sup>7</sup> Macron, E. (2025, March 5). *Address to the French*. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/05/adresse-aux-francais-6>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of the Armed Forces. (2023, April 4). *Military programming law 2024-2030: the main orientations*. <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/ministere/politique-defense/loi-programmation-militaire-2024-2030/loi-programmation-militaire-2024-2030-grandes>

<sup>10</sup> Macron, E. (2022, June 13). *Statement by Mr Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the French and European arms industries, in Villepinte on 13 June 2022*. Public life. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/285399-emmanuel-macron-13062022-industrie-darmement>



showed that Europe had to defend and organize itself, even if American assistance remained vital in the immediate future. In a sense, Europe had 'learned by walking' in 2022: it had broken its critical dependencies (for example the purchase of Russian gas was reduced dramatically in a few months), drastically increased its military spending, and strengthened its strategic coordination. However, France realised that this momentum would have to be sustained once the emergency had passed, otherwise 'autonomy' would have remained on the theoretical horizon rather than a real achievement.

- Internally and conceptually, 2022 saw France fully embracing the idea that the confrontation with Russia could be lasting and multidimensional. The war in Ukraine was no longer seen as a one-off crisis to be resolved diplomatically, but as a symptom of structural hostility. The lexicon was changing: the highest French authorities no longer designated Russia as a simply difficult partner, but as an adversary in the international order. Thus, as early as the summer of 2022, the Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu spoke of the need for a war economy to support the defence effort in the face of present and future threats. Additionally, Emmanuel Macron himself declared at the Eurosatory military exhibition in June 2022: *"we are entering a war economy in which [...] we will have to organize ourselves in the long term."*<sup>11</sup> This phrasing, articulated in front of the defence industry, formalises the idea that the entire country must mobilise as in times of conflict, because peace is no longer the norm. The emphasis is on the temporal emergency: we have to go faster, produce more, replenish stocks and capacities, because the competition for safety had suddenly intensified. The notion of *comprehensive national defence* was resurfacing, involving the whole nation. In short, France was undergoing a kind of 'strategic awakening' in 2022 where it admitted to having underestimated the Russian threat and was engaging an appropriate response, even if that meant breaking with certain paradigms of the past.

The NSR 2022, published in November of this pivotal year, was precisely the document that synthesized this doctrinal realignment. It is necessary to examine its content in detail, as well as that of its 2025 update, to determine the extent of the evolution of the French perception of the Russian threat between the beginning and the end of the period under consideration.

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<sup>11</sup> Macron, E. (2022, June 13). *Statement by Mr Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the French and European arms industries, in Villepinte on 13 June 2022*. Public life. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/285399-emmanuel-macron-13062022-industrie-darmement>



## II. From the 2022 to the 2025 NSR: Doctrinal modification - War Economy and a Lasting Adversary

### 1. The NSR 2022: recognition of a military and hybrid threat - the first adjustments

The 2022 National Strategic Review, published on 9 November 2022, made clear the strategic shift imposed by the war in Ukraine. The document began by listing the upheavals that had occurred in 2022: the invasion of Ukraine, the hardening of strategic competition, the explicit return of the nuclear element to strategic competition and an increased use of non-military modes of action. Each of these elements referred directly to Russia. It was indeed Moscow that had revived the threat of a major conventional war in Europe, Moscow that was regularly brandishing nuclear threats in its speeches, and Moscow that had multiplied hostile actions below the threshold of armed conflict (cyberattacks, electoral interference, instrumentalization of energy, etc.). The NSR 2022 noted that these factors led to a revision of France's national strategic posture, which, in other words, made it necessary to urgently adapt the French strategy.

Further on, the NSR 2022 clearly pointed to Russia as the main agent of the deterioration of the security environment. It noted the transition from *"latent competition to open confrontation on the part of Russia"*<sup>12</sup>. It analysed that Moscow was now pursuing an *integral strategy* of confrontation, combining conventional war (against Ukraine) and hybrid war (political-informational interference), all based on a posture of nuclear blackmail. The conclusion drawn was unequivocal: *"the split caused by the war and the irreversibility of Russia's strategy choices makes it necessary to anticipate confrontation with Moscow"*<sup>13</sup>. This sentence, taken from the NSR 2022, marked a major conceptual turning point. France had decided that it must prepare for the possibility of a direct confrontation with Russia – an eventuality that had so far been largely ruled out. The NSR 2022 was in line with the analyses of many Eastern European strategists: Russian aggressiveness was no longer cyclical but structural as long as the current regime continued its ambitions.

In detail, the NSR 2022 broke down this new assessment of the threat into several salient points:

- It underlined the return of nuclear power as a parameter of strategic competition, due to Moscow's constant reminders of its nuclear strike force and the weakening of the arms control regime (Russian withdrawal from the INF Treaty in 2019, violations of the Open Skies Treaty, etc.). This return of the *nuclear element* was seen as a factor in destabilizing strategic balances and risked promoting proliferation. For France, a nuclear power committed to its doctrine of strictly defensive deterrence, the trivialization of Russian

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<sup>12</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2022, November 28). *National Strategic Review 2022*. English version. P.9 <https://www.sgsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid P.10



nuclear threats justified perpetuating and modernizing its own deterrence<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the NSR 2022 reaffirmed that French deterrence contributed to the security of the Alliance and Europe in the face of powers such as Russia that multiply intimidating postures.

- The 2022 NSR focused on the Russian hybrid threat. It recalled that these modes of action (cyberattacks, disinformation, economic coercion, clandestine sabotage) *"have shown their impact on multiple theatres"*<sup>15</sup> and exploited the difficulties of Western states of responding effectively without going beyond their legal framework. It explicitly cites Russia's *"desire to engage in direct military confrontation"* combined with *"information warfare and political interference."*<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the NSR 2022 employed the message that Russia was now attacking on all fronts, and that we must therefore strengthen our resilience on all these interlocking fronts. This consideration of the *integral* nature of the threat (kinetic and non-kinetic) is a significant development compared to previous strategic documents, which compartmentalised these domains more clearly.
- As a result, the NSR 2022 redefined France's strategic objectives to take into account this multifaceted threat. It presented *ten strategic objectives* for 2030, in line with the redefined strategic functions (knowledge/anticipation, deterrence, protection-resilience, prevention, intervention, influence). Without describing each objective in detail, the document placed particular emphasis on those related to the protection of the territory and the population, and to national resilience. Strategic Objective No. 2 (SO2) in 2022 is formulated to ensure the resilience of the population, society and the functioning of the State in the face of crises and threats. Objective 3 (SO3) concerns the mobilisation of the economy and technology in the service of defence. These two areas (societal resilience and the defence economy) appear to be salient novelties, reflecting the desire to involve the whole country in the security effort – which, once again, echoes the perception of a diffuse threat that could affect civil society directly. We will come back to the evolution of these objectives in more detail in the NSR 2025, later.

In short, the NSR 2022 enshrined the official recognition of Russia as the main threat to France and Europe. It acknowledged that the confrontation was already underway (if only indirectly via Ukraine and in hybrid spaces), and that it could worsen. However, the tone of the 2022 document remained measured compared to what it would later become in 2025: the NSR 2022 did not go as far as qualifying Russia a declared enemy, nor did it explicitly speak of a 'lasting adversary' in these terms, but it did describe Russia as a hostile power whose aggressive actions must be anticipated. Although the document remained within the conceptual framework of European strategic autonomy. It also revealed that France, in 2022, was counting on a strengthened Euro-Atlantic collective response. Clearly, the NSR 2022 brought the French defence doctrine up to speed - it aligned French strategic thinking with what the facts imposed and broke with certain taboos by

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<sup>14</sup> Finaud, M. (2022, November 24). *The 2022 National Strategic Review: a perilous balancing act or the reign of "at the same time"*. Nuclear Disarmament Initiatives (IDN). <https://www.idn-france.org/nos-publications/la-revue-nationale-strategique-2022-un-perilleux-exercice-dequilibre-ou-le-regne-du-en-meme-temps-dupliquer-13514/>

<sup>15</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2022, November 28). *National Strategic Review 2022*. English version P.12 <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, P.9



anticipating a high-intensity war in Europe and by considering a confrontational relationship with Moscow for a long time.

## 2. The NSR 2025: a tone of increased firmness and ‘global defence’ against a long-term adversary

Three years later, the National Strategic Review 2025 – published on 14 July 2025 – updates the diagnosis and specifies the trajectory to be followed until 2030. The context is that of a war in Ukraine that is still ongoing, but also of a series of other crises (tensions in the Middle East, Chinese assertiveness, etc.) that confirm the entry into an era of generalized instability. From its preamble, the NSR 2025 makes a blunt observation: *"In the years to come, and by 2030, the main threat to France and Europeans is the risk of open warfare against the heart of Europe"*<sup>17</sup>, implying a major commitment of the armed forces outside the national territory, accompanied by a massive increase in hybrid attacks on French soil. This sentence, written in an official document, has historical weight. It means that France de facto considers a direct conflict with Russia in Europe to be the number one threat scenario to be planned for. Where the NSR 2022 spoke of anticipating a confrontation with Moscow in general terms, the NSR 2025 specifies the hypothesis: a major war in Europe itself, combining an external military front and internal hybrid aggression.

The NSR 2025 also explains the long-term nature of the Russian threat. It states, for example, that *"Russia in particular poses the most direct threat today and for years to come to the interests of France, those of its partners and allies, and the very stability of the European continent"*<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the text underlines that Russia has positioned itself as a declared enemy of Europe: *"Russia itself describes Europe as an enemy, is stepping up explicit and direct threats against it, and claims to be in a state of quasi-conflict with it."*<sup>19</sup>. This observation is based on official Russian discourse (in 2023-2024, the Kremlin and its propaganda organs adopted an openly anti-Western rhetoric, speaking of the collective West as an adversary to be defeated). For France, this confirms the idea that hostility will be prolonged, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The NSR 2025 clearly envisages the prospect of *living under the Russian threat for years, if not decades*, as long as the regime in power in Moscow remains driven by imperialist objectives. Russia is now perceived not as a temporary problem, but as a lasting adversary structuring France's strategic environment to 2030 and beyond.

As a result, the overall tone of the NSR 2025 is even firmer than that of 2022. Where the 2022 document remained measured in its qualifiers, the 2025 document uses a language of determination and general mobilization. It is a question of global defence and national security, mobilising the French State as a whole and involving the whole nation. The concept of rearmament, including the moral rearmament, of the French nation is put forward, meaning that the response is not only military and material, but also psychological and concerns resilience. The NSR 2025 has the

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<sup>17</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2025, July 13). *National Strategic Review 2025 – Update*. English version. P.12 [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-08/20250713\\_NP\\_SGDSN\\_Actualisation\\_2025\\_NSR\\_FR.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-08/20250713_NP_SGDSN_Actualisation_2025_NSR_FR.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P.8

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, P.10





ambition that France will be materially and morally armed in 2030 to face and win, with its allies, a major high-intensity war. This explicit mention of the moral and psychological dimension indicates that France is preparing not only to produce weapons, but also to harden its population and its forces in the face of the hardships that a conflict of such magnitude would entail.

One of the most notable doctrinal changes between 2022 and 2025 lies in the revision of the Strategic Objectives (SOs), in particular SO2 and SO3 already mentioned:

- Strategic Objective 3 (SO3), relating to the defence economy, has been substantially strengthened in terms of formulation. In 2022, it was entitled *"An economy contributing to a defence mindset."*<sup>20</sup> In 2025, it became *"An economy prepared for war"*<sup>21</sup>. The semantic shift is significant. It is no longer just a question of spreading a culture of defence in France's productive apparatus, but of restructuring the economy so that it can support a prolonged war effort. The NSR 2025 specifies that France is aiming for an economy that allows the country's resources to be mobilised in "war" mode. This evolution reflects the conviction that the threat level now requires a permanent quasi-warlike posture. The implementation of a war-ready *economy* is a considerable challenge: it involves ensuring robust supply chains for armaments, stimulating the defence industrial and technological base, adapting procurement procedures to go faster (reducing production cycles, possibly removing some administrative constraints in the event of a crisis). The NSR 2025 also mentions the notion of economic fog of war and the need to strengthen France's fiscal sustainability and financial sovereignty despite shocks. It should be noted that it claims a reduction in public debt for this purpose, an assertion that has raised questions given that French debt had increased in 2024 – the indicator used probably referring to the developments in the first half of 2025 that were not yet consolidated at the time of writing. In any case, the emphasis on the war economy confirms the preparation for a long-term conflict, in which the country's industrial and financial capacity would be stretched to the maximum.
- Strategic Objective No. 2 (SO2), dedicated to the resilience of the Nation, also takes on an unprecedented dimension. Already present in 2022, it covered resilience in the face of various crises (pandemic, disasters, cyber, terrorism, etc.). In 2025, it explicitly includes the preparation of the population to contribute to a major military effort and the consideration of the *"hybrid actions of our competitors and adversaries on national soil"*<sup>22</sup>. The NSR 2025 thus stipulates the need to prepare the public "to contribute to military efforts in the event of a major engagement beyond the national territory". This is a strong message: it reintroduces the idea that citizens could be called upon to contribute directly if France were to go to war (for example via the operational reserve, civil protection, or various logistical support). We are witnessing here a kind of revival of the concept of the Nation in arms adapted to the twenty-first century, not by generalized conscription as in the past, but by

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<sup>20</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2022, November 28). *National Strategic Review 2022*. English version P.39 <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>

<sup>21</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2025, July 13). *National Strategic Review 2025 – Update*. English version. P.45 [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-08/20250713\\_NP\\_SGDSN\\_Actualisation\\_2025\\_NSR\\_FR.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/2025-08/20250713_NP_SGDSN_Actualisation_2025_NSR_FR.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, P.39



voluntary mobilization and generalized awareness of society to the challenges of defence. In fact, the NSR 2025 puts forward very concrete measures in this direction such as the establishment of an expanded voluntary military service offering young people basic military training (provision no. 201), and generalized education of 13-25 year olds in "*hybrid threats and information manipulation*"<sup>23</sup> (provision no. 200). The guiding idea is to build a culture of resilience among citizens, so that no strategic shock (whether it is a massive cyber-attack, a disinformation campaign, or even strikes on critical infrastructure) takes the country completely by surprise. All of this helps prepare minds for the possibility of a war involving France, by strengthening national cohesion and instilling vigilance reflexes.

In summary, the NSR 2025 enshrines the transformation of the French strategy into a global defence strategy, covering all fields (military, civilian, economic, informational). It also consecrates the designation of Russia as a central and lasting adversary. Without ever sinking into a rhetoric of gratuitous hostility, it uses firm terminology, identifying Russia as a revisionist, imperial and dangerous regime, whose objectives "*remain maximalist and ideological*"<sup>24</sup> and who does not hesitate to use unbridled modus operandi, including in Europe. This characterization reinforces the justification for the extent of the efforts being undertaken by France. It should be noted that the NSR 2025 places these efforts in the broader framework of a Europe that must take greater responsibility for its security. It reiterates commitment to NATO while stressing the need to strengthen the European defence pillar and to increase European investment for collective resilience. At the same time, it points to the increased cooperation between Russia and China, as well as the persistence of other threats (terrorism, proliferation) – but none that equals the Russian threat in the immediate future.

Finally, a notable aspect of the NSR 2025 is the emphasis on the notion of global national defence. The presentation statement confirms that it defines the contours of the country's overall defence including the moral rearmament of the French nation. This echoes the concepts of total defence developed during the Cold War, or recent Scandinavian models of 'societal total defence'. France, through this NSR, seems to embrace the idea that to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russia, it will be necessary to play on all fronts: robust armed forces, a resilient population, a shock-resistant economy, close-knit allies and a clear strategic narrative. In this sense, the NSR 2025 is the culmination of a process that began in 2022. It reflects an assumed radicalization of the French posture in the face of the Russian threat, where the stated objective is nothing less than to be ready for a possible frontal clash, while continuing to manage the permanent confrontation below the threshold of open war.

### **3. Strategic objectives, the 'war economy' and the designated adversary: continuities and ruptures**

Comparing the two National Strategic Reviews of 2022 and 2025, several continuities and developments clearly emerge:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, P.38

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, P.10





- **Continuities:** The Russian threat is at the heart of both documents but gains in descriptive intensity in 2025. The theme of hybrid strategies appears in the two NRS as a major challenge: from 2022, there is an insistence on their increased proliferation and the difficulty of responding to them in compliance with the law; In 2025, this is taken further by talking about massive hybrid attacks on French soil. Similarly, the two NSR affirm the importance of French nuclear deterrence in the face of threats (with the explicit mention in 2025 that deterrence contributes to defending Europe). In terms of alliances, 2022 and 2025 both reaffirm NATO's anchoring and the objective of complementary European autonomy – simply, 2025 is more pressing that Europeans must *take on greater responsibility* for their security, given the uncertainty that hangs over the future American commitment.
- **Ruptures or at least evolutions:** The lexicon has hardened between 2022 and 2025. In 2022, President Macron, in his introduction to the NSR, chose a diplomatic formulation to describe the return of high-intensity warfare on European soil while avoiding explicitly attributing responsibility to Russia. In 2025, on the contrary, his tone is much more direct. He identifies Russia by name as a persistent and lasting threat on Europe's borders, and a constant element of global instability. This difference in tone reflects the increase in France's perception of the threat in the space of three years.

In addition, the scale of the responses envisaged has widened. The NSR 2022, although ambitious, remained focused on the measures to be taken to adapt France's capacities and strengthen French resilience in general. The NSR 2025 proposes more radical actions: it endorses the preparation for a complete war economy and the direct contribution of citizens to the defence effort. It goes beyond the framework of the Ministry of the Armed Forces by engaging the entire Nation. We can thus observe a shift from a posture of reaction (in 2022, catching up, increasing resources) to a posture of proactive anticipation (in 2025, preparing for the worst-case scenario and revolutionising the organisation of the state and the economy accordingly).

Finally, it can be noted that Russia, has gone from being seen as an object of external diplomatic management until 2021, to becoming an issue entangled in internal democratic mobilisation. The NSR 2025, combined with the speeches that accompany it, insists on the need to explain and entice the French population into accepting these efforts. The support of all French people is explicitly set as a condition for the success of the defence ambition. This prefigures the communicational and political aspect that we will examine in the next part: how did the French state *communicate* the Russian threat and the response to be provided, precisely in order to *legitimise* this strategic turning point in the eyes of citizens and to strengthen social resilience? Before coming to this, let us remember that from a pure doctrinal point of view, the period 2022-2025 has seen France belatedly but entirely open its eyes to the dangerousness of Russia, and deeply adapt its strategy accordingly. The Russian threat has moved from being a secondary and avoidable threat to a primary, explicit and lasting threat, justifying accelerated rearmament and general state mobilisation – representing a major paradigm shift for French defence policy at the beginning of the twenty-first century.



### **Citizen perception of the threat: a blind spot in French strategy**

While France is updating its doctrine and recognizing Russia as a priority threat, the government's communication with the population remains insufficiently structured. There is a persistent gap between the clarity of the strategic diagnosis and the confusion felt by part of the French population as to the real level of threat.

This socio-political dimension sheds light on an essential point: a credible strategy also presupposes a national pedagogy, without which collective resilience risks remaining theoretical. This question implicitly underlies our analysis and will reappear in the conclusions of this note.



### III. The State's Strategic Communication: From Diplomatic Restraint to Threat Pedagogy

#### 1. Naming the enemy: the evolution of the official discourse from 2022 to 2025

In parallel to the doctrinal adjustment, France has changed its political discourse in a significant way vis-à-vis Russia. State communication – understood here in a broad sense, encompassing statements by the President, ministers, official speeches and public documents – is an instrument in its own right of the strategy, particularly in a democracy where it is important to explain security issues to citizens. Between 2022 and 2025, there has been a clear *lexical hardening* of this communication, reflecting the increase in intensity of the perception of the threat and aimed at preparing public opinion for potential sacrifices.

At the beginning of the war in Ukraine, in 2022, Emmanuel Macron's tone remained measured in his choice of words, despite the seriousness of the situation. For example, during his televised address on March 2, 2022, addressing the French people on the Ukrainian conflict, he spoke of the return of war to Europe and condemned the Russian invasion, but was still careful to dissociate Putin from the Russian people, and not to close the door to diplomacy. Similarly, in the introduction he authors for the NSR 2022 (dated Autumn 2022), Macron describes the war in Ukraine as *"the return of high-intensity warfare on European soil"*<sup>25</sup> – a phrasing which, it should be noted, avoids explicitly and directly blaming Russia in its formulation. This lexical precaution can be explained by the fact that in 2022, France was still seeking, in parallel to the sanctions, to maintain a channel of dialogue with Moscow (through mediation attempts and frequent Macron-Putin telephone exchanges until the autumn of 2022). The presidential communication therefore remained carefully calibrated by condemning the act of the invasion without falling into personal invective. It is a form of *diplomatic restraint*, signalling that France 'does not close the door' and distinguishes, in its discourse at least, the Russian regime from the Russian people or from Russia as a civilisation.

This posture evolved significantly thereafter. In 2023, and even more so in 2024-2025, faced with the persistence of the conflict and the lack of diplomatic progress, French communication became liberated from certain discursive precautions. Key officials began openly criticising the behaviour of the Russian state and singling out Russia as a direct threat to France and Europe in their public speeches. This turning point can be seen first of all in ministerial remarks: Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, for example, during interviews and conferences in 2023, insists on the brutal and revisionist nature of Russian policy, on the need to stand up to Putin. It is chiefly within the upper echelons of the French state, and the head of state himself, where this linguistic toughening has been most striking.

President Macron's speech of March 5, 2025, a solemn address to the French people at 8 p.m. from the Élysée Palace, is a pivotal point in this communication from the State. In this 13-minute

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<sup>25</sup> General Secretariat for Defence and National Security. (2022, November 28). *National Strategic Review 2022*. English version <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>



televised speech, Emmanuel Macron adopts a tone of frankness and seriousness, which, since the end of the Cold War, can be considered unusual. He said: *"The Russian threat goes beyond Ukraine and affects every country in Europe. It affects us..... Russia has become a threat to France and Europe now and for years to come."*<sup>26</sup> These sentences – articulated directly in front of the French population – mark a break with the discreet language of the past. Russia is explicitly named as a threat to France, which is a linguistic conceptualisation that has never been used by a French president since 1991. Macron also paints a concrete picture of Moscow's hostile actions. Macron is direct in his accusation: *"President Putin's Russia violates our borders to murder his opponents and manipulates elections in Romania and Moldova [and organises] digital attacks against our hospitals to keep them from functioning"*<sup>27</sup> He further accuses Russia of: *"spreading lies on social media. Basically, it is testing our limits in the air, on the seas, in space and behind our screens"*<sup>28</sup> The factual indictment lists the elements of the Russian hybrid war that directly or indirectly affect France: political assassinations (as an implicit reference to the Skripal affair or the Litvinenko elimination), regional electoral interference (Moldova, Balkans), cyberattacks against civilian infrastructure (French hospitals targeted by ransomware attributed to Russian-speaking hackers), massive online disinformation, military provocations (drone overflights or Russian aircraft). The French President no longer employs a soft approach, he exposes these facts clearly, so that no one remains unaware of the reality of Russia's multifaceted aggressiveness. Finally, he draws an indisputable conclusion: *"So how believable is it, then, that today's Russia will stop at Ukraine?"*<sup>29</sup> The threat is thus presented as existential to the European order, requiring a resolute response.

This address of March 5, 2025 has been widely commented on in the press and by analysts, with some seeing it as a turn towards a real *discourse of war*<sup>30</sup> and others, on the contrary, hailing it as a healthy pedagogy towards public opinion<sup>31,32</sup>. It can be noted that the president directly linked the situation in Ukraine and French security, explicitly justifying military aid to Kiev not only out of moral solidarity but out of the well-understood French self-interest. He also called on the French to be vigilant and united, invoking their fortitude to face this new era of insecurity. This theme of moral mobilisation of the French people, rarely enunciated by presidents during the last few decades, echoes the notion of moral rearmament mentioned in the NSR 2025. In this way, political communication is consistent with strategic objectives of informing the French population about the threat and stimulating collective resilience.

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<sup>26</sup> Macron, E. (2025, March 5). Address to the French. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/05/address-to-the-french-people>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Le Monde. (2025, March 6). *Faced with the "Russian threat", Emmanuel Macron is calling on the "fortitude" of the French.* [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2025/03/06/face-a-la-menace-russe-emmanuel-macron-sollicite-la-force-d-ame-des-francais\\_6576648\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2025/03/06/face-a-la-menace-russe-emmanuel-macron-sollicite-la-force-d-ame-des-francais_6576648_823448.html)

<sup>31</sup> Reuters. (2025, March 5). *Macron's address to the French nation on ramping up defence spending.* <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/macrons-address-french-nation-ramping-up-defence-spending-2025-03-05/>

<sup>32</sup> Euronews. (2025, March 5). *Macron: "Russia is a threat to France and to Europe".* <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/05/french-president-emmanuel-macron-says-russia-is-a-threat-to-france-and-to-europe>



In addition to Emmanuel Macron, other voices in the executive are no longer manifesting the same levels of diplomatic restraint as they did previously and are adopting a more direct level of communication. For example, the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, gave a remarkable speech at Harvard University in the United States on 25 September, 2025 on the theme of protecting democracy from authoritarian regimes. In this intervention, Barrot does not hesitate to resort to pictorial and incisive rhetoric. Using Vladimir Putin as an example, with an implicit comparison to the *Darth Sidious* character from Star Wars orchestrating the fall of a democratic republic<sup>33</sup>, Barrot lays out the stages of the Kremlin's strategy to undermine democracies. This includes wars against neighbours who want to freely choose their European destiny (Georgia and Ukraine), separatist fronts set up from scratch, electoral manipulation in Europe (Germany, Romania, Moldova mentioned by name),<sup>34</sup> sabotage and cyberattacks explicitly mentioned against the European Union, disinformation campaigns and support for authoritarian movements throughout the West. Barrot goes as far as declaring: *"Beyond Ukraine, Vladimir Putin is targeting the European Union itself... Why? Because the EU is a genuine democratic project. Perhaps the most democratic project of all times. He hates it, and he hates what it represents"*<sup>35</sup> Barrot shows he is against the illusion that we are safe because according to him, the enemies of democracy are also inside our societies, surfing on populism and manipulated emotions to weaken the democratic edifice from within – a phenomenon encouraged and exploited, he suggests, by Russia via its relays of influence. This speech was striking for its freedom of tone. The French Foreign minister publicly declared: *"Look at Vladimir Putin. The true reason behind his colonial wars—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine since 2014—is simple: democracy. ... He tried to manipulate elections in Germany, Romania, and Moldova.... Has he succeeded? No. Will he? Certainly not"*<sup>36</sup>. This is phrasing which uses a combative register that contrasts with traditional diplomacy.

The hardening of the French state's discourse has a double purpose. It is both educational and dissuasive. It is first and foremost educational, insofar as it is a question of explaining to the French population, indirectly and in the name of the Nation, the nature of the danger they are facing in order to encourage support for measures taken by the French State. These measures could range from an increase in the defence effort, to possible economic consequences or a more general adaptation to a degraded security environment. This pedagogy aims less to dramatize than to make a change in strategic posture intelligible and to inscribe it in a narrative that is understandable to French citizens.

This hardening is also a deterrent. By publicly naming the adversary and explicitly characterising its *modus operandi*, France also seeks to discourage the continuation of certain hostile actions, by showing that they are identified, documented and integrated into its strategic preparation. This logic of *naming and shaming* was illustrated particularly clearly in April 2025,

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<sup>33</sup> Barrot, J.-N. (2025, September 25). *Speech by Jean-Noël Barrot, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, at Harvard Kennedy School*. Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/news/article/speech-by-jean-noel-barrot-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-at-harvard>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid



when France, for the first time, officially attributed a series of cyberattacks against French interests, carried out via the APT28 group to Russian military intelligence (GRU).

Jean-Noël Barrot publicly stated in a message published on X that: “*for several years the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) has been deploying a cyber-attack group called APT28 against France. It has targeted about 10 French entities since 2021. In cyberspace, France is observing, blocking and combating its foes.*”<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned these actions “*in the strongest terms*”<sup>38</sup> specifying that a dozen French entities — public services, companies and organisations linked to the 2024 Olympic Games — had been targeted since 2021. The statement also recalled that this same group had been involved in the sabotage of TV5Monde in 2015 and in attempts to interfere in the 2017 French presidential election. Describing these practices as “*unacceptable and unworthy of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council*”<sup>39</sup>, France affirmed its determination to mobilise “*all the means at its disposal*”<sup>40</sup> to anticipate, discourage and respond to Russian malicious behaviour in cyberspace.

The public visibility of this information thus adheres to a twofold coherent logic - to enlighten national opinion on the reality of the threats and to signal to Moscow that these operations no longer fall within a tolerated grey zone. By exposing these actions to the light of day and aligning itself with its European partners by adopting comparable condemnations, Paris is sending a clear message that impunity is no longer the order of the day.

To conclude this section, we note that French strategic communication has adapted in parallel to the evolution of the threat. The more acute and lasting the threat perception has been, the clearer, more direct and determined the discourse has become. France no longer hesitates to describe Russia as an adversary, a threat, and to accuse it of specific hostile acts. This relative transparency contrasts with the caution of the past, but it is considered necessary to prepare the population (what the NSR 2025 calls the construction of cognitive resilience) and to strengthen the credibility of the French deterrent posture towards Moscow. However, this evolution of the discourse is not without its challenges, in particular that of maintaining the support of public opinion without falling into a war psychosis or an excessively simplistic demonisation that could backfire on the desired objective of outlining the exact threat that Russia poses. The balance to be found is delicate - to tell the truth about the threat, without falling into anxiety-provoking warmongering rhetoric. So far, the government seems to have tried to combine firmness on the diagnosis (the threat exists, it is serious) and reassurance on the ability to face it (France and its allies are strong, united, and will act to protect the population).

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<sup>37</sup> Barrot, J.-N. (2025, April 29). *X post on Russian military intelligence service (GRU) deploying APT28 against France.* X. [https://x.com/francediplo\\_EN/status/1917251609916015011](https://x.com/francediplo_EN/status/1917251609916015011)

<sup>38</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2025, April 29). *Russia – Attribution of cyber attacks on France to the Russian military intelligence service (APT28)* Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/news/2025/article/russia-attribution-of-cyber-attacks-on-france-to-the-russian-military>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid



### **Consequences of the Discursive Hardening: An Unfinished Strategic Pedagogy**

While the NSR 2025 marks a major step forward in the clarity of the strategic discourse on Russia, an area of ambiguity persists: communication with the French public remains less precise than the diagnosis formulated by the State.

The authorities insist on the need to prepare the population for a phase of "increased danger", but without clearly explaining the level of risk or the plausible scenarios.

The result is a diffuse and "vague" perception of the threat: the French know that Russia is hostile but struggle to measure the real seriousness of the situation or the concrete implications for their daily lives (e.g. civil resilience, crisis preparedness, hybrid risks).

This dissonance between doctrinal precision and communicative caution constitutes a vulnerability in a context where Russian information warfare is precisely targeting areas of uncertainty.

## **2. Raising awareness in order to resist: democratic resilience and the pedagogy of effort – rephrase?**

One of the central aspects of recent state communication is the pedagogy of democratic resilience. Aware that reinforced defence measures will only have legitimacy if citizens understand what is at stake, the French government has multiplied initiatives to explain the threat and involve the public in responding to it.

Firstly, the official communication seeks to place the Russian threat within a framework of values. It is not only a question of saying that Russia threatens France's material interests, but also that it attacks our democratic principles. Jean-Noël Barrot's speech at Harvard is a flamboyant illustration of this. By emphasising that Putin is attacking democracy itself, and by recalling Lafayette's common Franco-American heritage in the defence of freedom, Barrot places the conflict in the quasi-existential register of universal values. This narrative aims to mobilise support beyond geopolitical calculations alone. In the same way, Emmanuel Macron, in his address of March 5, 2025, appeals to history and morality. He deeply regrets that Russia has become a threat, affirming that in the long-term peace will be made with an evolved Russia, but that in the meantime it is necessary to stand firm because to give in would be to sacrifice the principles of freedom and law. He recalled that *"we can no longer take Russia's word for it"*<sup>41</sup> by referring to the failure of the 2015 Minsk

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<sup>41</sup> Macron, E. (2025, March 5). Address to the French. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/05/address-to-the-french-people>



agreements, which Moscow did not respect, in order to justify the current firmness. In other words, it deploys a *historical pedagogy* – we have already been deceived, let us not reproduce the error of naivety – and a *normative pedagogy* – we defend a certain international order and humanist values. This approach seeks to cement democratic resilience by giving meaning to the effort required. It is not just a question of raw security; it is the defence of a model of society.

Secondly, the communication takes care to detail the concrete measures to show citizens that the State is acting and protecting them. This aims to avoid the two pitfalls of fatalism (thinking that nothing can be done in the face of the threat) and of indifference (not feeling concerned). For example, by publicly mentioning the creation of a new plan to protect critical infrastructure, or the rise of the National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSSI) to counter cyber threats, the authorities are reassuring that they are *taking the lead*. During the episode of probable sabotage of submarine cables and optical fibre in 2024, which disrupted communications in France and Europe, the government communicated in conjunction with its European partners on the strengthening of maritime surveillance and the protection of underwater infrastructure<sup>42</sup>. A joint statement, co-signed by France, denounced that *"Moscow's escalating hybrid activities against NATO and EU countries are also unprecedented in their variety and scale, creating significant security risks"*<sup>43</sup>. By informing the public of this increased vigilance, France aimed both to *show its determination* that the French state will not tolerate sabotage and to involve public opinion through ensuring that the media and French companies are made aware of the protection of critical cables.

Another field of the pedagogy of effort consists of preparing minds for potential sacrifices. The war in Ukraine has had economic consequences for the French in terms of energy inflation and budgetary cost of military support amongst other things. Rather than obscuring them, the government has sought to contextualise them. For example, the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Economy have both explained, from as early as 2022, that the rise in energy prices was partly the price of our freedom the face of Russian blackmail on gas, employing similar language to several other European countries aimed at making the public accept sanctions. Similarly, Emmanuel Macron, in several interventions, has evoked the end of abundance. This type of message aims to establish an acceptance that a sustained effort in financial, industrial and human terms is necessary to guarantee long-term security. Clearly, France is preparing the population for the idea that it may be necessary to work differently, consume differently and prioritise defence in public spending, otherwise the cost would be even higher through a loss of peace and freedom.

Democratic resilience, a concept mentioned in the ANSSI's strategic plan and by various other French bodies, such as parliamentary missions and the French Ministry of the Interior, is also based on trust between the rulers and the governed. In this respect, public communication plays the card of measured transparency: enough must be said to be credible, without saying too much so as not to

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<sup>42</sup> Sytas, A. (2024, November 19). *Lithuania steps up surveillance at sea following damage to undersea cable*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/lithuania-steps-up-surveillance-sea-following-damage-undersea-cable-2024-11-19/>

<sup>43</sup> Diplomacy (2024, November 19). *Joint Declaration by the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France, Poland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom in Warsaw*. Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2024/article/joint-declaration-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-germany-france-poland-italy-spain>





worry unnecessarily or reveal sensitive information. For example, when France publicly attributed the APT28 cyberattacks to the GRU in 2025, it also published a technical report from the ANSSI warning of the threat, so that professionals and the public knew concretely how to protect themselves. This open approach is quite new: for a long time, cases of cyber espionage or foreign interference were kept quiet or reserved for specialists. From now on, the government is showing it considers that it is better to *enlighten* the population about these risks in order to better counter them together. It is a question of ensuring that each citizen, each company, each community, becomes an actor of resilience (for example by being vigilant against phishing attempts and by checking sources of online information so as not to unintentionally relay false news of Russian origin). This is in line with the objective of training young people in hybrid threats (see the provision on 13-25 year olds mentioned above) to create a societal reflex.

It should also be noted that the state's communication on the Russian threat has been calibrated to remain bipartisan and avoid internal one-upmanship or polemics. As the main governmental parties in France agree on support for Ukraine and firmness in the face of Moscow, the official discourse has sought to bring people together across divisions. During the speech on March 5, 2025, Emmanuel Macron consulted some opposition leaders beforehand to inform them of the upcoming message – a move aimed at creating a common national front (source -proof) This echoes the recommendation made by many experts to institutionalise a foreign policy consensus on Russia, so as not to give way to Russian attempts to divide the Western political class. So far, despite a few dissenting voices (on the far right and the far left critical of sanctions or arms deliveries), all the institutions (government, parliament) have shown notable unity on the Russian subject since 2022, facilitating coherent state communication.

Ultimately, French political communication from 2022 to 2025 has gradually adopted the attributes of a real *protracted crisis communication*. It aims to alert without panicking, to explain to unite, and to motivate in order to act. Behind the words chosen which are harsher towards Moscow and more solemn towards the French, there is a desire that shines through to create a social contract of resilience on the basic terms that the state protects and informs, the citizen understands and supports. This renewed social contract is essential to face a future where, as Macron says, "*no longer will our generation enjoy the peace dividends*"<sup>44</sup>. The successful fulfilment of such a social contract will be measured by the ability of French society to absorb possible shocks (such as massive cyberattacks, economic crisis linked to the defence effort, or even a military incident) while maintaining its composure and unity. Strategic communication is the key tool to forge this capacity for democratic resilience in the face of the Russian threat.

### **3. International influence and narrative: France on the world stage against Moscow**

Finally, it is worth mentioning a specific aspect of French strategic communication: that which is intended for abroad, in particular the 'Global South' and the allies, to counter the Russian narrative on the international scene. Russia, since 2022, has not only been waging a military war, it has also been waging an information war on a global scale, seeking to impose a narrative in which

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<sup>44</sup> Macron, E. (2025, March 5). Address to the French. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/05/address-to-the-french-people>



it poses as a victim of NATO and as a champion of a multipolar order in the face of the West. France, which has assets in diplomacy of influence (for example cultural networks and media such as RFI/France 24 has recognised the need to respond on this narrative ground.

Thus, we have seen an increase in French speeches denouncing Russian propaganda in international forums. For example, at the UN General Assembly in late 2022, President Macron reproached the cynical Russian narrative that claimed that Western sanctions were responsible for the global food crisis, recalling that it was Russian aggression that was causing food insecurity by blocking Ukrainian exports. Similarly, in Africa, where Russian influence via Wagner and anti-French media campaigns is being felt, French diplomacy has also begun to adapt its discourse. The Minister of Foreign Affairs (Jean-Yves Le Drian until 2022, then Catherine Colonna) has made African tours during which they explicitly warned against the lies told by networks linked to Russia and stressed that France is providing concrete support to the populations through food aid and development projects where Russia is exporting chaos.

Jean-Noël Barrot's speech at Harvard, which we have analysed, also has a role to play in the domain of international influence. By delivering it in English in the United States and using international cultural references (Star Wars), it was calibrated to reach a large Western audience and convince them of the righteousness of the democratic camp in the face of Putin. The episode of Putin's comparison to Emperor Palpatine (the tyrant from Star Wars) was widely relayed on social networks, sparking reactions and debates – which, whether the speech was appreciated or not, draws attention to the substance of the message which was Putin's authoritarian actions.<sup>45</sup> It is also necessary to highlight that this speech was delivered against the geopolitical backdrop of the Trump 2.0 administration's rapprochement towards Russia. Barrot spoke in front of an American audience, in a political science faculty at Harvard and the speech was only relayed in French retrospectively through limited institutional channels. This speech was not initially intended for the French public and it was never widely disseminated in the French national media. Its educational scope and any value of threat pedagogy towards the French public thus remains significantly limited. The choice of location (an American training centre for international political elites) as well as the cultural references employed suggest that this discourse's primary aim was to be heard by an American audience that has a deep understanding of, and is rooted in, democratic traditions and values in a context of strong political uncertainty in the United States. However, the representative function of the interlocutor – Barrot as Foreign Minister – as speaking on behalf of France accords this speech real political weight. In this way, there is an underlying pedagogic value that remains, given the timing and the place of delivery, albeit directed towards a different audience model. The speech is a prime example of discourse that marks a turning point in diplomatic strategic communication because it ends diplomatic restraint, it names the anti-democratic enemy, and it raises awareness on the international stage.

In addition, France is pushing at European level to structure a collective European response in terms of influence. For example, in 2023 it supported the creation of an EU unit dedicated to the

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<sup>45</sup> Le Parisien. (2025, September 25). *At Harvard, Barrot compares Putin to Emperor Palpatine* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/fqNT8YEAKzw>



fight against information manipulation, and proposed, according to press reports<sup>46</sup>, the establishment of a hybrid European Resilience Centre modelled on the Finnish Centre of Excellence, but open to all EU countries. The idea was to unify analysis, intelligence sharing and responses to interference, because information has no borders – fake news launched in Saint Petersburg can spread to Paris as well as Dakar.

Beyond Europe, France is striving to win the battle of narratives in the South. This requires more intense public communication towards these audiences. For example, explanatory content on the war in Ukraine and Russian disinformation is produced in several languages via the French external audiovisual sector 'France Médias Monde'. The aim is to prevent the Russian argument (which presents itself as anti-colonial and anti-Western to seduce opinions in places such as Africa or Latin America) from going unanswered. France also promotes its positive actions such as humanitarian aid to Ukrainians and the cancellation of African countries' debts to counter the inflationary effect of the war and dismantle the Russian narrative that accuses it of indifference or neocolonialism. In his speech of 5 March, 2025, Emmanuel Macron enunciated an interesting passage where, while speaking to the French population, he also addressed other countries. He welcomed "*all initiatives that help peace*"<sup>47</sup> and made it clear that peace cannot be concluded under Russian diktat, recalling the experience of Minsk that was betrayed by Moscow. This passage seemed to be aimed at international opinion (some of the 'global South' countries were calling for a quick peace even at the cost of Ukrainian concessions. In it, Macron justifies the Western position of prolonged support for Ukraine by invoking the universal principle that a lasting peace cannot be based on the impunity of the aggressor. This type of formulation is calibrated for foreign diplomacy and international relations at the UN.

In short, French strategic communication vis-à-vis Russia is deployed on all information fronts - internally to unite the French nation and externally to convince allies and non-aligned countries of the Russian threat. France, which sees itself as a *power of balance and values*, intends to show that, by being firm in the face of Moscow, it remains faithful to its democratic and multilateral principles and that it acts not out of warmongering but in defence of international law and global stability. The effectiveness of this international communication remains questionable in some regions, such as the Global South, where Russian conspiracy narratives retain influence. But there is a growing awareness, at the highest level of the French state, that it is necessary *to occupy the field of the information battle*, otherwise France could win militarily but lose on the public level, which would have crucial implications for the formation of coalitions and imposition of sanctions). The French strategy is therefore also a narrative strategy to clearly define the parties and their roles (i.e. who the aggressor is and who is the one being aggressed), to recall why France is helping Ukraine and why France is rearming – in a word, to legitimise the actions taken by the French state to all audiences.

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<sup>46</sup> See for example, Loiseau, N. (2025). The European project is the target of an organised disinformation strategy. Toute l'Europe. <https://www.touteleurope.eu/economie-et-social/nathalie-loiseau-le-projet-europeen-est-la-cible-d-une-strategie-organisee-de-desinformation/>

<sup>47</sup> Macron, E. (2025, March 5). Address to the French. Presidency of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/03/05/address-to-the-french-people>



## IV. The rise of hybrid warfare and the French response: cyber security, disinformation, sabotage and the nuclear threat

### 1. A multifaceted threat: the continuum of Russian operations under the threshold of open war

The 'hybrid war' waged by Russia is not rhetorical, but a concrete reality that has been increasingly experienced by France and its allies since 2022. This concept covers all hostile actions carried out by Moscow outside the scope of a direct military confrontation with NATO (aimed at weakening, dividing and intimidating its adversaries. The characteristic of these operations is that they are intertwined with the normal activities of our societies, often exploiting our systemic or legal vulnerabilities, and that they are carried out in such a way as to maintain ambiguity about the involvement of the Russian state through the use of hackers, relay media (check definition) and mercenaries. France, like other states, has had to adapt urgently to detect and counter these diffuse threats, sometimes invisible to the general public until they produce effects.

Among the aspects of the Russian hybrid war identified by France are:

- **Cyberattacks against French infrastructures and organisations.** These have increased in intensity and visibility. In addition to the already mentioned case of the sabotage of TV5 Monde in 2015 by a group affiliated with the GRU, a computer attack against the French company *Centreon* (a monitoring software provider) was revealed in February 2021, also attributed to APT28. Importantly, there have been a series of incidents since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, such as attempts to break into French ministerial networks and hospital ransomware attacks (e.g. the Corbeil-Essonnes hospital was paralysed at the end of 2022. Although attribution is not always easy, the Russian threat context points to actors encouraged, if not sponsored, by Moscow). The French declaration of April 29, 2025 officially confirmed what was being talked about – that Russia had targeted or compromised dozens of French entities since 2021. This targeting is considered to be a sustained campaign. Paris considers these cyberattacks a component of strategic confrontation: publicly attributing them to Russia also aims to increase the political cost for Moscow. France has also participated in NATO cyber defence exercises and is campaigning for stronger European coordination in this area. On the legal front, in 2023 the French state set up a *Committee for the Response to Major Cyber Attacks*, bringing together the ANSSI, intelligence services and operators of vital importance, to be able to react more quickly and in a unified manner in the event of a massive cyberattack. This body, discreetly created by decree, is inspired by the French terrorist crisis model and contains elements such as an interministerial crisis cell which is applied to cyber.
- **Information warfare and disinformation.** France is the target of many Russian influence campaigns, particularly on social networks. For example, in 2022, shortly after the invasion



of Ukraine, anti-sanctions protests in Africa and Europe were spurred by pro-Kremlin narratives accusing the West of causing food shortages. French intelligence has also detected more targeted operations. Examples of these include the creation of fake social media accounts posing as concerned French citizens and the dissemination of rumours that European sanctions were starving Africa that were hyped up by Russian state media and then picked up by local conspiracy websites. Faced with this, the French doctrine of cognitive defence – a term that appeared in the strategic debate – aims to arm people's minds against manipulation. In concrete terms, this is done through Viginum (the Service for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference), which has been operational since the end of 2021, and which monitored the 2022 presidential election and continues to track foreign influence operations online. Viginum has highlighted, for example, fake online referendums which have been increasingly propagated in French cyber space from within Russia on controversial French subjects such as vaccines and pensions with the aim of fracturing French public opinion. The response has been to quickly unmask these interferences in order to limit their impact. France is also working with the EU (through the EU's Rapid Alert system against disinformation) and has supported the European Digital Services Act (DSA), which legally obliges large platforms to fight against coordinated online manipulation. Internally, efforts are focused on media literacy and the Ministry of Education has strengthened digital civic education programmes, in line with provision 200 of the NSR 2025 which focuses on familiarising young people with the threats of such cyber influence. The challenge of cognitive defence is immense because of how it affects freedom of expression and social cohesion. France must navigate between fighting firmly against Russian propaganda and avoiding any measure that would be perceived as internal censorship. So far, the French state has opted for strong targeted measures, like banning Russia Today and Sputnik from March 2022 due to their pro Ukrainian war propaganda, coupled with a discourse of truth that is formed by occupying the media space with France's own narrative and explanations.

- **Sabotage and the threat to physical infrastructure.** Europe rediscovered its vulnerability in this area with the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in September 2022. While the origin of this act remains shrouded in mystery, it acted as a general alarm signal. In France, as early as April 2022, coordinated acts of vandalism against fiber optic cables severely disrupted the internet in several French geographical regions. Again, without irrefutable public evidence, suspicions turned to a possible hostile operation carried out by Russian accomplices, in a context of extreme tension between Russia and the West. However, it is fair to say that other hypotheses have also been put forward to explain this vandalism – both eco-terrorism and anti-5G activism have been investigated, without confirmation that these causes are at the origin of the vandalism. In any case, the French government has increased the level of vigilance around critical infrastructure such as power grids, submarine cables, transport systems. A reinforced protection plan has been launched in conjunction with operators (EDF, RTE, Orange, etc.), including the multiplication of sensors to detect anomalies, the reinforcement of the presence of the French Navy along submarine cables passing through the Mediterranean and Atlantic and increased cooperation with France's neighbours (for instance energy liaisons with Norway after the sabotage of its pipelines at the end of 2022). In 2024, the Council of the EU even adopted an Act on the resilience of



critical infrastructure, encouraged by France and its partners, to oblige each Member State to assess their risks and share more information. At the same time, France has quietly intensified its monitoring against networks of Russian agents on its soil who are likely to carry out sabotage. Several espionage cases have led to the expulsion of Russian diplomats involved in clandestine activities since 2022. The idea is to neutralize sleeper cells upstream.

- **The nuclear threat.** Although indirect, Russia's threat to use nuclear weapons has weighed heavily in the security equation. Each time Vladimir Putin or someone close to him mentioned nuclear weapons (such as in March 2022 or later via the announcement of the deployment of Russian nuclear missiles to Belarus), the French state has reacted on multiple levels. Firstly, France has adopted a policy of vigorous verbal condemnation in international forums. For example, Macron spoke of a *"particularly shocking Russian threat of nuclear weapons in space"*, during a speech in November 2025<sup>48</sup>, castigating the possibility of Russia testing nuclear anti-satellite weapons, which was an idea attributed to Russian strategists. Secondly, there have been private warnings via NATO channels according to diplomatic sources<sup>49</sup>. France helped to send Moscow red line messages in 2022 about the catastrophic consequences that any nuclear use, even tactical, would cause in Ukraine or elsewhere. Thirdly, there has been a strengthening of the French deterrence posture to make it more visible. On this last point, it is noteworthy that France has multiplied the training exercises of its Strategic Oceanic Force and its Strategic Air Force, while communicating in a measured way about them. For example, in 2023, an M51 missile was launched during a FOST exercise without a charge of course. This was publicly mentioned as proof of the continued credibility of the French deterrent. The French state's objective is clear: to cool Russian ardour by demonstrating that France retains a nuclear second-strike capability whatever happens. Additionally, the NSR 2025 specifies that France will defend Europe including through its nuclear deterrence if necessary. This is a noteworthy formulation, addressed both to allies to reassure them and to adversaries to dissuade them. In addition, the potential threat to civilian nuclear facilities, as has been witnessed with the Ukrainian Zaporizhzhia power plant that has been bombed several times or cut off from the grid, has led France to review its CBRN (nuclear, radiological, biological, chemical) crisis management scenarios. The SGDSN and the Nuclear Safety Authority have strengthened the exchange of information and emergency plans. Without falling into alarmism (France does not fear a direct nuclear attack in the short term), it is also a matter of being ready to react, for example, to a nuclear accident caused, or instrumentalized, by Russia in Ukraine that could have repercussions in Europe.

In summary, the hybrid continuum of the Russian threat ranges from computer hacking to the thermonuclear threat, including the subversion of public debate and the sabotage of infrastructure.

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<sup>48</sup> Macron, E. (2025, November 12). *Discours du Président de la République sur la stratégie spatiale nationale depuis le Commandement de l'espace à Toulouse*. Elysée Palace. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/11/12/inauguration-du-commandement-de-lespace-a-toulouse>

<sup>49</sup> Reuters. (2024, September 25). *Putin says Russia reserves right to use nuclear weapons if attacked*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-reserves-right-use-nuclear-weapons-if-attacked-2024-09-25/>



In a short period of time, France has had to build a multi-domain response: strengthening national cybersecurity, strengthening counter-intelligence resources (Viginum, intelligence services and European partnerships), physically protecting sensitive zones and adapting its deterrence doctrine. In doing so, it has effectively implemented what the NSR 2025 calls a comprehensive national security approach, combining civilian and military components. It is now necessary to examine in more detail how the French response is organized on these different levels, and what challenges it encounters.

## 2. The French response: infrastructure protection, cybersecurity and cognitive defence

In the face of this shadow war, France has deployed a range of defensive and preventive measures, often in coordination with its allies, to strengthen its robustness. We have already mentioned many of them. They can be structured as follows:

- **Critical infrastructure protection:** This is an area where secrecy prevails, but we know that sectoral plans exist for energy, transport, health and communications. The Vigipirate plan, historically focused on terrorism, has been expanded to explicitly include the risks of foreign sabotage. Massive blackout simulation exercises relating to electricity and telecoms were conducted in 2023 and 2024 under the aegis of the SGDSN to test the country's resilience and the chain of command in the event of hybrid hostile operations. The NSR 2025 also recommends organising coordinated national hybrid exercises — simulated power cuts, massive cyberattacks, panic campaigns on social networks — on a regular basis which is a sign of the importance given to training the nation to deal with the shock. Maritime and aerial surveillance around sensitive areas has also been strengthened. For example, the French navy has intensified its patrols in the Bay of Biscay after the detection of suspicious underwater drones near cables in 2023. Similarly, exo-atmospheric space is the subject of increased vigilance. In 2022, France officially ordered a space patrol satellite, Yoda, (which is intended to monitor third-party satellites) to prevent malicious acts against French satellites. This opens the subject of Russia's potential space threat, which was illustrated by the Russian anti-satellite launch in November 2021. All of this is part of the dissemination of a culture of safety in essential civilian sectors. It should be noted that the private sector is also heavily involved: operators of vital importance (OIVs) and operators of essential services (OSEs) have been required since 2018 to comply with cybersecurity rules under the control of the ANSSI. Current events have only tightened these requirements, with more frequent audits and regulatory updates.
- **Cybersecurity and cyber defence:** The ANSSI has seen its resources increased, as announced in the Cyber 2021 plan and then reinforced after 2022. From a few hundred experts a decade ago, it now exceeds a thousand agents. The French army has also developed its Cyber Defence Command (COMCYBER), which has teams capable of carrying out counter-attacks or defensive cyber warfare operations. Unsurprisingly, France has sought to obtain a united posture at European level, hence the collective public attribution by the EU of certain



cyberattacks to Russia. For instance, the attack on the Viasat satellite network in February 2022 was formally attributed to the GRU by an EU statement in May 2022 that France supported. Internally, the ANSSI has multiplied the number of alerts and security guides. It now regularly publishes alert bulletins explicitly mentioning the Russian threat in a particular sector which, a few years ago, would have been considered diplomatically sensitive. For example, in October 2023, the ANSSI issued a note to strategic companies urging them to be more vigilant in the face of a sophisticated phishing campaign attributed to a Russian group. This transparency aims to *involve economic actors in national defence*. We are almost witnessing a return of the 'Nation in arms' spirit transposed to the cyber domain: each company, each administration must consider itself as a link in collective security. Moreover, the NSR 2025 puts forward the integration of a comprehensive module of cybersecurity and disinformation detection into the Universal National Service (UNS) for young people, thus training the next generation in the fundamentals of digital hygiene and critical thinking.

- **Cognitive defense and digital sovereignty:** This component covers the fight against disinformation and the protection of information sovereignty (preventing foreign powers from controlling our information channels). The closure of the Russian media RT and Sputnik in Europe is part of this and can be considered an exceptional measure assumed to be legitimate in the context of the war, even if criticized by some as an attack on press freedom. In France, the CSA (now ARCOM) had to intervene to ensure that these media did not resurface under other names or via the Internet. Digital sovereignty also concerns digital equipment: France has blacklisted certain technology suppliers suspected of espionage, such as Kaspersky in some French administrations (although this remains contentious), and has pushed for European digital equipment for critical networks such as Nokia/Ericsson 5G rather than their Chinese counterparts. At the same time, the French State is supporting the emergence of national pioneers in the cyber cloud and cybersecurity domains in order to reduce dependence on non-European solutions which would otherwise expose French citizens to other interference. These efforts are not specifically aimed at Russia but do contribute to an overall cyber robustness. In terms of political counter-interference, a law on transparency of the financing of associations and political parties was adopted in 2023. This was particularly aimed at preventing funds from entities linked to Russia from influencing public life – a lesson learned from the scandals involving Russian loans to European parties. France has also strengthened the sanctions it imposes against agents of influence. After the 2022 Ukrainian invasion, the EU (supported by France) has sanctioned several Russian propagandists including TV hosts and disinformation strategists. Paris is pushing to go further with a common regime of sanctions against foreign agents of influence at the EU level.
- **European and Allied Coordination:** A significant element of the hybrid response is international cooperation. France is playing a leading role in the EU-NATO Task Force on the Resilience initiative launched in 2023, which aims to align NATO and EU standards to protect submarine infrastructure and other critical networks. This is partly in response to





the cables cut in the Baltic Sea at the end of 2024).<sup>50</sup> In addition, Paris is encouraging strengthened bilateral partnerships with countries on the front line of the Russian hybrid threat: for example, rapprochement with Finland (which has expertise in civilian resilience and anti-influence campaigns, via its Helsinki Centre), or with Estonia which is very advanced in cyber defense. Among the list of recommendations made by French experts is the idea of creating a *European Hybrid Resilience Centre* – which shows the French desire to institutionalise the fight against hybrid warfare at the highest level, in a similar way to how there are centres against terrorism.

It can be assessed that France has risen rapidly on all these fronts, but that challenges remain. Among these challenges there are the funding constraints (resilience and cyber are costly, and the defence budget, even if increased, must be divided between conventional forces and these new needs), interministerial coordination (ensuring that intelligence, the armed forces, the interior, foreign affairs and the economy all work together on hybrid issues, which is not always natural, hence the creation of bodies dedicated to the SGDSN), or the legal dimension (how to respond to hybrid attacks without falling into grey areas of international law – for example, can we counterattack in cyberspace in an offensive – defensive way against servers in Russia? ) France remains cautious and favours the collective framework of the EU or NATO to do so, so as not to act alone and risk an uncontrolled escalation.

Ultimately, the French response to Russia's hybrid war is that of a democratic state that strengthens its defences while trying to preserve its model. It is a balancing act: to partially militarize itself through a war economy and a posture of vigilance in all directions, without falling into a permanent state of siege contrary to democratic freedoms. So far, France seems to be charting this path in a measured way – its institutions are functioning normally and there is no authoritarian drift in the name of the threat that has been noted; At the same time, it no longer minimises anything and invests seriously in resilience. The next part will deal with the tension between this strategic trajectory and the need to maintain the social contract and democratic legitimacy, because this is indeed where the last challenge, perhaps the most decisive in the long term, lies.

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<sup>50</sup> Sytas, A. (2024, November 19). *Lithuania steps up surveillance at sea following damage to undersea cable*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/lithuania-steps-up-surveillance-sea-following-damage-undersea-cable-2024-11-19/>



## V. The strategic trajectory, the war economy and social resilience: tensions and democratic legitimacy

### 1. An essential strategic turning point, which is demanding for society

The strategic shift made by France in the face of the Russian threat – accelerated rearmament, preparation of a war economy and firm communication – has been determined an objective necessity in view of the context. However, this shift inherently raises tensions within the French model which is one of a liberal democracy with fragile budgetary and social balances after a wave of successive crises ranging from the financial crisis of 2008, the ‘yellow vest’ crisis in 2018 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. The main challenge is to go the distance in this new posture without eroding French popular support or the quality of democracy.

On the one hand, the French post-2022 strategy involves a sustained effort over the long term. As is explicitly stated by the NSR 2025, the strategic scope is to maintain the defence effort over the long term, including after the possible end of the war in Ukraine, because the Russian threat will continue. This means that even if a ceasefire or peace were to take place in Ukraine, France would have to continue to invest massively in its armed forces and its resilience, due to a persistently hostile Russia. However, history shows that public opinion tends to turn away from the war effort once the immediate crisis has passed. For example, after the Cold War, the peace dividend was quickly demanded by the French public. The risk here would be that at the first political change or the first severe economic slowdown; there would be a great temptation to ‘take one’s foot off the accelerator pedal’ on the defence budget or to weaken the focus. The course to be followed is therefore as much psychological as it is financial. In this regard, there is talk of creating an *interparty consensus on deterrence and posture in the East*, like the one that the Federal Republic of Germany had during the Cold War when all the major parties agreed on the need for the Bundeswehr and NATO despite nuances. Will France succeed? For the moment, the main parties (LREM, LR, PS, moderate greens) support the Ukrainian effort and the increase in the military budget. But in the longer term, the rise of populist or pacifist movements could significantly challenge this consensus. The government's pedagogy will then have to be particularly convincing to justify maintaining high military spending in times of relative peace. This is where the importance of institutionalizing strategic awareness in the population and among political leaders comes in, Strategic awareness must be perpetuated beyond the immediate circumstances.

On the other hand, having a war economy raises questions of societal choices. Directing more resources towards defence may conflict with other public priorities such as health, education and ecological transition. Admittedly, the 2024-2030 MPL is hedging on economic growth that will make it possible to finance both the military and the other measures deemed necessary. However, in the event of economic difficulties, painful trade-offs could arise. France will then have to create a renewed social contract for citizens to accept that an increasing share of the budget will be allocated to security, to the possible detriment of other items. This notion relates to the concept of ‘*effort pedagogy*’, which is the idea that the French state is preparing its population for the efforts and sacrifices that could potentially have to be made in the name of defence. The authorities will



have to explain that without security there is no lasting prosperity, and that investment in defence is an insurance against much greater costs if war were to occur. However, this discourse will have its limits with certain fringes of the French population facing immediate problems such as inflation and unemployment and for whom the Russian threat may seem distant. The risk here is, public fatigue - especially if the war in Ukraine is bogged down in a long stagnation. The public could lose sight of the urgency and therefore start to question the extension of any exceptional effort.

In addition, a shift to a more militarized economy could have impacts on France's socio-economic structure. For example, favouring defence industries could create highly skilled jobs in the defence sector at the expense of other sectors. There may be local resistance through establishment of controversial arms factories and debates on arms exports. French society, with its strong network of associations and its unions, will not fail to question the way in which this turning point in the economy is taking place. How far can the State go in industrial mobilization? Will France have to resort to exceptional measures such as the requisition of factories or the nationalization of certain critical chains in the event of a serious crisis? These are sensitive subjects because they touch on property rights and economic liberalism. However, this is not the issue at hand for the moment – the concept of the war economy put forward translates into increased public orders and a closer dialogue with industry, not into a dirigiste economy. But in an extreme situation, the question would arise. It will then require broad assent for such extraordinary measures to be accepted in a democracy. Hence the importance, once again, of intellectual *anticipation* now.

Moreover, social resilience in the face of the Russian threat requires addressing the vulnerability of public opinion to manipulation and extremist propaganda. The French state is aware that Russia is trying to exploit divisions by supporting anti-elite, anti-European discourse, or by stirring up protest movements. In recent years, France has experienced intense internal protests, the yellow vests movement and opposition to reforms. With no direct link to Russia, these reflect a sometimes-tense social climate. The risk is that the perception of a prolonged commitment against Russia will be instrumentalised. For example, populist discourse arguing along lines such as '*this is not our war, let's take care of our problems*' or '*we are sacrificing the purchasing power of the French for Ukraine or NATO*' could follow. These arguments and this type of language are already used by some extreme political leaders in France. Maintaining unity in the face of the Russian threat therefore implies countering these internal narratives through transparent and well-argued communication. This can be done through demonstrating how French security is linked to the European situation and how helping Ukraine or protecting oneself against Russia is not an ideological whim but a precondition for the stability of the continent and therefore for our future well-being.

There is also tension between the urgency of mobilisation and respect for democratic processes. In 2022-2023, many decisions were made quickly in an emergency situation (sending weapons, unplanned expenses, etc.). Parliament supported this, but often a posteriori. In the long run, it will be necessary to ensure that the nation's representatives are more involved in strategic choices to avoid any feeling of democratic dispossession. In this respect, the consultation of parliamentary committees during the drafting of the NSR 2025 is a positive point. More broadly speaking, however, a public debate on these issues would be healthy to legitimize any chosen direction. There are difficult questions to answer on how to safeguard defence spending beyond changes in government through democratic consensus. For example, cross-cutting parliamentary agreements setting



minimum defence spending levels for 10 years could be considered anti-democratic in nature because these spending commitments would outlive any French electoral mandate. However, inserting clauses requiring a qualified majority to deviate from such measures would ensure that a democratic element remains. This type of qualified majority voting arrangement exists in some Scandinavian countries for security policy.

Finally, at the European level, there is tension between the national dimension and the European dimension of the response. France is pushing Europe to act, but not all EU countries have the same perception of the threat or the same desire for a Europe of defence. There could be friction if France wants to go too fast or too far in the "post-Europeanist" direction mentioned by some experts (that is to say, accepting a Europe of defence that operates at a multi-speed level with the most heavily invested countries positioned at the core). Internally, although French public opinion remains attached to the European ideal of this European investment, this could change if it is perceived that other European partners are not following the same rigour in their efforts due to a general feeling of 'doing more than the others'. It will therefore take skilful diplomacy from France to keep the EU united without expecting, however, to achieve perfect uniformity. This also plays a role in the element of legitimacy (and fairness), with the French people being more willing to accept sacrifices if all Europeans are proportionately doing the same. Hence the importance of aligning Germany, Poland, Italy and other Member States on comparable objectives. The signs of cooperation are encouraging. For instance, many EU Member States are increasing their defence budgets and states like Poland and Germany are massively rearming. However, in terms of partnerships, taking the Franco-German couple as an example, finely tuned strategic coordination, remains a challenge due to differences over arms exports and the place of nuclear power. If this particular couple was better synchronised, it would be an asset for the legitimacy of the entire European Union defence project.

In short, the democratic legitimacy of France's strategic trajectory will be built on transparency, inclusiveness and results. **Transparency:** by continuing to explain the threat and the actions taken and refraining from hiding difficulties or embellishing successes. **Inclusiveness:** through involving parliamentarians, civil society and independent experts to show that this is not the whim of a small group of people, but a concerted national effort. **Results:** it will also be necessary for France to prove that this policy is working. This could be by demonstrating that investments do indeed strengthen French security though a reduced number of (or even no) successful attacks and the effective deterrence of Russian aggression. Also, it could be shown that France's firm posture contributes to the defence of peace through a maintained deterrence and that France's support for Ukraine is paying off. If the Russian threat is contained without degenerating into a general conflict, and if France goes through the period without major clashes, then the public will be able to judge a posteriori that the strategy was the right one.

This brings us to the fundamental question of the social contract in times of threat. This implicit social contract could be formulated as follows: *citizens accept certain efforts and renunciations (for example in budgetary and personal domains) and in exchange the state ensures their security and the preservation of their values.* It is a delicate balance, because if the state asks too much or fails to protect, trust is broken. Conversely, if citizens refuse to make any effort, the State cannot accomplish its mission. The government's strategic communication and coherent action are aimed at



maintaining this balance. For the time being, polls in France show that the majority of French citizens support aid to Ukraine and firmness towards Russia, even if there are questions about the duration. It is therefore a question of capitalizing on this initial support to transform it into a long-term understanding.

Thus, the circle of our analysis closes: the Russian threat, initially poorly understood, has forced France to take a strategic and communicative leap. This upheaval has strengthened national security but must now be consolidated in the long term without fracturing French society. This is the ultimate challenge, which in reality will condition the success of everything else. Because in the face of an adversary like Russia, patient and resilient, only a France that is itself socially and democratically resilient will be able to hold out *"for as long as necessary"*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Macron, E. (2024, February 26). Speech on the conflict in Ukraine [Presidential address]. Vie publique. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/293634-emmanuel-macron-26022024-conflit-en-ukraine>



## Understanding post-Europeanism

Post-Europeanism is not anti-Europeanism, nor is it a brutal break with the European Community project. Rather, it refers to a pragmatic reconfiguration of the European strategic software, born out of a cumulative observation:

- Integration is no longer progressed in a linear way, but in fits and starts, under the effect of crises;
- Member States are regaining control over sovereign issues (defence, border closures despite Schengen rules, energy, critical industries);
- Russia is imposing a brutal return to the balance of power and the logic of blocs;
- the federalist consensus has been gradually dissolved over the shocks of 2008 (financial crisis), 2015 (migration crisis), 2020 (pandemic), 2022 (war in Ukraine).

Post-Europeanism thus corresponds to a "post-illusion" phase:

Europe is no longer moving forward mainly out of ideological conviction – around a federalist horizon – but out of strategic necessity. The European Union is no longer perceived as an unsurpassable horizon and is becoming one instrument among others of European power, alongside NATO, ad hoc formats (coalitions of the willing, reinforced bilateral agreements), or even structuring industrial cooperation.

In this paradigm, national sovereignty once again becomes the centre of gravity. This is not an outright return to power nationalism, but the assertion that:

- it is the States that remain the ultimate holders of democratic legitimacy in terms of security and defence;
- they are the ones who bear the political, human and budgetary cost of strategic choices;
- finally, they are the ones who must be able to decide quickly, in a crisis situation, without being paralysed by unanimity mechanisms.

Post-Europeanism is therefore reflected in the rise of flexible, asymmetrical, modular formats: structured cooperation between a few willing states; groups of countries sharing the same level of threat conception (Eastern States, Nordic countries, Mediterranean countries); strengthened partnerships around defence industrial programmes. The challenge is no longer to do everything, everywhere, with everyone, but to move forward in concentric circles, accepting that some states go further and faster than others on key segments (military capacity, anti-missile defence, support for Ukraine, sanctions, etc.).

Post-Europeanism is therefore not opposed to the EU or to the European idea; it is opposed to the illusion of uniform, linear and consensual integration in an environment that has once again become conflictual. It puts the following question back at the centre: *which states are really ready to assume a high level of strategic commitment, even at the **price** of internal political costs?*

In this perspective, the French response to the Russian threat must be thought of in a post-Europeanist framework:

- a realistic, non-uniform Europe of security, structured around nuclei of states ready to act;
- an architecture based on concrete capabilities (ammunition, air defence, intelligence, cyber, resilience) rather than on institutional proclamations;
- a governance driven by the states that take the strategic risk – first and foremost France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the states of the eastern flank – rather than by the Brussels institutional dynamic alone.

Post-Europeanism does not mean the end of Europe, but the end of a certain European naivety: the idea that integration, in itself, would be enough to produce security. In the era of lasting confrontation with Russia, it imposes a rougher, more asymmetrical, more selective – but potentially more effective – Europe where France must assume the role of power-architect, articulating national sovereignty, coalitions of the willing and existing European instruments.



## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The examination of the 2022-2025 period highlights the late but decisive shift made by France in its perception and management of the Russian threat. From an approach initially marked by restraint and hope for cooperation, Paris has moved – under the shock of the war in Ukraine – to the explicit recognition of Moscow as a major adversary, requiring a reinforced mobilization of the Nation. This shift has resulted in a notable doctrinal evolution manifested by the priority designation of the Russian threat in the NSR and a reshuffling of strategic objectives towards resilience and the war economy. This shift can also be noted through concrete actions such as an increase in military investment, the reorganization of France's security apparatus, and an adaptation of public discourse. France has thus found its way back to an all-out strategy of deterrence and defence, repositioning itself at the heart of the European front against Russia.

Several major findings emerge:

- The Russian threat was underestimated until 2022, despite the warning signs in 2008 (Russian invasion of Georgia), and in 2014 (Russian annexation of Crimea). This belated realization left Moscow with a temporal advantage in certain areas such as informational interference and military preparation. However, since 2022, the French and European surge in reactivity has been real and strategic unity in the face of Russia is stronger today than it has been in decades, reducing the initial surprise effect sought by the Kremlin.
- The long-discussed concept of European strategic autonomy has been stimulated and legitimised by the Ukrainian crisis. In the space of a year, Europe has broken critical dependencies on Russian energy, increased its defence spending without precedent and innovated in terms of joint military support. Nevertheless, this autonomy remains more a potential to be realised on the horizon than a definite outcome and the robustness of the Western response still relies heavily on NATO and the support of the United States. In the long term, the credibility of European defence will depend on the ability of Europeans to institutionalise and sustain the efforts that arose in the emergency of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. France will need to play a leading role to ensure that the momentum does not drop once the war in Ukraine is over.
- French strategic thinking now fully integrates the hybrid nature of modern conflicts. An all-out effort has been initiated to strengthen national resilience and the ability to respond on all fronts including in the cyber, information, economy and technology domains. This global approach, which may seem broadly dispersed, is in fact essential to counter a power like Russia, which seeks to avoid a head-on confrontation by exploiting French interstices. However, the implementation of such an integrated strategy requires fine-tuned inter-ministerial coordination and cooperation with the private sector, as well as constant public awareness. This is a long-term project.
- The time factor is critical. The urgency remains, despite the decidedly belated French awareness of it. The war in Ukraine is not over, and its possible outcomes all carry risks. For



instance, a partial Russian victory would strengthen Russia's aggressiveness elsewhere; A Russian defeat could open up an unstable period in terms of a succession crisis and potential acts of retaliation. In any case, France and Europe should expect to live under the Russian threat for the next few years, if not decades, whether in the form of a resentful Putin regime or another authoritarian avatar pursuing similar goals. The strategic vigilance acquired must therefore not weaken as soon as the Ukrainian page is turned.

In light of these observations, it seems essential to sustain and consolidate France's strategic adaptation to Russia. Below, we make several recommendations intended to anchor this posture in the long term and to strengthen France's ability to deter and counter the Russian threat, alongside its European partners:

- To make the response to the Russian threat a long-term one, by assuming a 'post-Europeanist' positioning. France must protect the defence effort from any fluctuations, in order to prevent a political change in 2027 from weakening the 2024-2030 MPL, the backbone of the national posture against Russia. It is a question of building a lasting inter-partisan consensus on three pillars: French deterrence, heavy high-intensity capabilities, and a reinforced posture on the eastern flank, while recalling that nuclear deterrence remains strictly national under the exclusive authority of the President of the Republic. In a fractured Europe, France must assume a post-Europeanist model of security cooperation between willing nations, structured by a strategic permanence more than by an integrationist ideology. Like the FRG during the Cold War, it is a question of anchoring the fight against the Russian threat into long term strategy.
- Send the following strong message to Moscow: 'Ukraine will never be alone again'. This should be done by transforming the coalition that currently supports Ukraine into a sustainable security partnership for post-war Europe. Make Ukraine a pillar of security, not a sacrificial no man's land. Achieve this by adopting the following measures: establishing a permanent planning mission in Kiev, aiding the reconstruction of Ukrainian forces in line with NATO/EU standards, starting a process of gradual doctrinal integration through exercises and planning and creating a mechanism of quasi-automatic politico-military consultations in the event of Russian pressure.
- Clarify the role of French nuclear deterrence as the national foundation of a collective European shield. Rather than talking about 'extended deterrence' in the Anglo-Saxon sense, it is a matter of specifying (through some form of official documentation) that:
  - Deterrence remains entirely French, not shared, and decisions to engage are taken exclusively by the French President, without foreign nuclear co-decision;
  - French nuclear deterrence contributes de facto to the protection of Europe, by supporting a collective shield composed of robust conventional forces, integrated air and missile defences and national resilience systems.

The recommendation is to:

- Strengthen strategic consultations with the most exposed European states (Baltic, Poland, Finland, Romania, Germany) on escalation scenarios and the role of French deterrence and the link with American deterrence;





- Protect investments in the modernization of the two components (oceanic/airborne) and chains of command;
- Develop a public pedagogy surrounding nuclear deterrence and its defensive logic and stabilizing role, via the French State's strategic communication and, in the long term, integrating modules to this effect into the UNS.

Nuclear deterrence remains a purely French lever, but it should be seen to support a European shield built around air defence, conventional capabilities and resilience.

- Publicise this shield with a European capability and industrial logic. States that wish to fully benefit from this 'collective shield' must be integrated into a capability continuum, which includes purchases of French and European systems (such as the Rafale, CAESAR, Scorpion, ground-to-air defence and frigates), standardisation of weapons systems, joint training, interoperability and infrastructure sharing. There is no sharing of the nuclear decision, but there is a sharing of conventional efforts and defence architectures such as anti-missiles, air integrated defence and intelligence. France is thus at the centre of a European capability system that strengthens the credibility of the nuclear shield without affecting nuclear sovereignty.
- Strengthen the Franco-German couple through a realistic strategic convergence set out in a Bilateral European Security Plan structured as follows:
  - German leadership in heavy land capabilities, continental anti-missile defence and logistics on the eastern flank;
  - French leadership on power projection, nuclear deterrence (for national use but stabilizing for Europe), space, maritime and external crisis management.The objective of the Plan: assumed complementarity rather than unclear rivalry.
- Expand France's strategic geography to include front-line states (Poland, the Baltics, Finland, Romania). Strengthen partnerships through regular deployments, high-intensity exercises, integrated industrial projects and cooperation on critical infrastructure. Poland is a pivot here. A Paris-Warsaw-Berlin axis around heavy programmes such as tanks of the future and air defence makes it possible both to deter Moscow and to limit dependence on non-European equipment.
- Establish a strengthened security partnership with the United Kingdom. Reviving and expanding the Lancaster House spirit including establishing a permanent Franco-British Security Council, joint expeditionary forces, cyber cooperation and dialogues on responses to Russian escalation. Europe's two nuclear powers, each sovereign in its deterrence, should be seen as together supporting the same conventional and hybrid shield.
- Accelerate European defence by moving from ad hoc to structural setups. Launch a *Eurogrid Defence*: an integrated network of European industries financed by a common plan such as NextGenEU, dedicated to critical capabilities of drones, ammunition, air defence and cyber technology. Make the EU Rapid Reaction Force truly operational through a full-scale exercise on an eastern flank scenario.



- Strengthen the toolbox against Russian interference and hybrid attacks – and create a public directory of operations. At national level: strengthen Viginum, the ANSSI, the intelligence services and toughen the legal framework against foreign agents of influence.
- Adopt a new strategic communication format:
  - Create a Directory of Russian Operations in France as a public platform listing hostile operations (cyber, news, corruption, sabotage, etc.);
  - Publish daily an educational focus on an operation: context, Russian method, objectives, impacts, French/European response.

Objectives:

- Introduce aggressions that are often invisible into the realm of the visible;
  - Raise the level of citizen vigilance;
  - Show Moscow that its operations are detected, understood and documented. In the long term, this French directory would be integrated into a hybrid EU-NATO European Resilience Centre, to pool analysis, intelligence and countermeasures.
- Develop an offensive influence strategy in the Global South. Counteract the Russian pseudo-decolonial narrative through structured communication (via France Médias Monde and European partners), strengthened cultural diplomacy, exchange programs and a clear narrative of what Europe really brings in terms of aid, investment and stability.
  - Maintain a channel with Russian civil societies to prepare for the ‘day after’. Support the Russian free media in exile, host programmes for students/researchers/artists, maintain certain targeted academic exchanges, start a discreet diplomatic reflection on the actors with whom a dialogue can be opened when Russia evolves.
  - Institutionalize strategic democratic security communication for the population. The increase in intensity of the Russian threat, now recognized at the highest level of the state, requires a change of scale in French strategic communication. National security can no longer be implicitly based on the supposed ability of citizens to decipher strategic documents, or to interpret specialized political discourse. In a context of long-term confrontation and hybrid conflict, the French state has a democratic responsibility to explicitly educate its population about the threat. This communication cannot be exclusively political or institutional - it must infiltrate at social levels (i.e. be intelligible, accessible and anchored in the daily lives of citizens). At this stage, the threat remains too abstract for a large part of the French population, which constitutes a strategic vulnerability exploited by adversarial information operations. It is therefore essential to reduce the cognitive distance between the French state's strategic diagnosis and French citizens' perception.

The recommendation is to:

- Assume continuous, visible and assumed security communication, aimed at providing clear direction, a form of strategic reassurance, and stable benchmarks in a period of increasing uncertainty marked by escalating rhetoric and informational conflict;



- Radically diversify communication formats and channels, beyond written media and official speeches to include visual media, educational narratives, partnerships with everyday players (such as telecom operators, digital platforms, entertainment media, major brands, sports and cultural events);
- Integrate security communication into ordinary living spaces, where citizens actually interact, in order to make the threat concrete without being anxiety-provoking, and understandable without being technocratic;
- Use the expertise of non-institutional communication professionals (cognitive sciences, visual communication, narrative design), in order to adapt messages to contemporary uses, particularly digital and cultural.

This approach may arouse criticism and resistance, in particular in the name of protecting private space or refusing communication perceived as intrusive. However, the state cannot allow itself to be paralyzed by the fear of democratic contestation when the protection of the population and collective resilience are at stake. It is neither a question of electoral communication nor propaganda, but of the full exercise of the sovereign responsibility of protection. In a hybrid war where information is a battlefield in its own right, not occupying the space of everyday life is tantamount to abandoning it to the adversary. Democratic, educational and socially integrated strategic communication thus becomes an integral pillar of deterrence and national resilience.

In conclusion, since 2022, France has shown its ability to leapfrog and adapt in the face of a threat that it had initially underestimated. The challenge now is to perpetuate this new strategic posture, without exhausting its democracy or its economy. This requires a clear-sighted vision, political courage and an intelligent mobilization of society. The above recommendations aim to strengthen the foundations of the French strategy: anchor the effort in the long term, cement essential alliances, and fortify the national edifice on all its pillars (military, economic, technological, moral).

Publishing such a note by La Ligne Fine Institut is precisely part of this process of reflection and dissemination of a renewed strategic culture. The current situation, although worrying, may be an opportunity for France to reconnect with the best of its geopolitical tradition: that of a balancing power, showing a determination to defend freedom and collective security, while remaining faithful to its democratic principles. If it stays the course with cohesion and prudence, France will not only contribute to overcoming the ordeal imposed by Putin's Russia, but will also succeed in reinventing a stronger strategic and social contract for the decades to come, in the face of all the challenges of this uncertain century.



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## Appendices

**Comparison table of key elements on Russia in the 2022 vs 2025 NSR**

Dimensions analysed	NSR 2022 – France's position on Russia	NSR 2025 – France's position on Russia
<b>Status of Russia in French doctrine</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Russia is described as an assumed revisionist power, seeking to reshape the European security order.</li><li>• Russia is a major disruptive player, but part of a broader landscape of competition between powers (China, others).</li><li>• A central strategic adversary but still presented in a "rival/competitor/partner" continuum inherited from the post-Cold War years.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Russia designated as the "main threat" to France, its allies and the stability of the European continent.</li><li>• A direct adversary, openly hostile, structuring French defence planning.</li><li>• This threat is considered a priority over other states (Iran, China, North Korea, etc.).</li></ul>
<b>Nature of the threat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A threat first characterized by a strategic shift: the return of high-intensity warfare in Europe.</li><li>• Insistence on Russian hybrid warfare: interference, information, influence, cyber, mercenary activity (Wagner).</li><li>• A nuclear threat perceived as an instrument of pressure and intimidation, without a total doctrinal break.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Threat described as multidimensional and systemic in military, nuclear, cyber, informational, economic, energy sectors</li><li>• Explicit hypothesis of an open war against the "heart of Europe" by 2030.</li><li>• Russia is presented as an actor ready to combine major conflict and massive hybrid attacks on French and European territory.</li></ul>
<b>Temporality of the threat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A threat analysed mainly over the long term: Russia will remain a strategic problem beyond the war in Ukraine.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This threat is considered immediate and structural for the "years to come".</li><li>• Horizon 2030 identified as a "particularly high" risk window for a major high-intensity war in Europe.</li></ul>



Dimensions analysed	NSR 2022 – France's position on Russia	NSR 2025 – France's position on Russia
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A multi-decade projection for the regeneration of the Russian military apparatus and the erosion of its economy.</li> <li>The likelihood of a direct NATO-Russia conflict remains implicit, not formulated as the main scenario.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>France is positioning itself in a logic of emergency preparedness: the Russian threat is structuring the coming decade.</li> </ul>
<b>Reading Russian strategic intentions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moscow has been attributed imperialist and revisionist ambitions, seeking to reconstitute spheres of influence.</li> <li>Emphasis on the work of "politico-diplomatic undermining": interference, information warfare, encouragement of transatlantic decoupling.</li> <li>Russia is seen as playing on the ambiguity between competition and confrontation, testing red lines without fully crossing them until 2022.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia is described as pursuing a frontal challenge to the international order and security rules in Europe.</li> <li>These objectives are described as maximalist, based on a logic of vassalisation of neighbouring states, annexation and contestation of their sovereignty.</li> <li>Moscow is explicitly presented as considering Europe as an "enemy", and no longer as a mere adversary or rival.</li> </ul>
<b>Types of Russian actions highlighted</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political interference (support for parties, networks of influence, opaque financing).</li> <li>Disinformation via influential media (RT, Sputnik) and social networks.</li> <li>Targeted cyberattacks (media, institutions, ad hoc infrastructures).</li> <li>Use of mercenaries (Wagner) in external crises (Africa, Syria).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sabotage and threats to critical infrastructure (submarine cables, gas pipelines, energy networks).</li> <li>Massive cyberattacks against hospitals, administrations, OIVs, with concrete effects on the lives of citizens.</li> <li>Migratory pressure instrumentalized via Belarus and other vectors.</li> <li>Systematic use of low-cost drones, missiles and saturating salvos (Iranian Shaheds) against Ukraine, with direct lessons for European defence.</li> </ul>
<b>Conventional military dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognition of Russia's ability to wage a high-intensity war in a European theater (Ukraine).</li> <li>Perception of a robust Russian military apparatus but vulnerable to sanctions and losses.</li> <li>Fear that the regeneration of Russian conventional power will pose a long-term problem, even after a partial failure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hypothesis of a major conventional conflict in Europe integrated into French planning.</li> <li>Russia is seen as capable, despite attrition, of reconstituting a shock force to test NATO.</li> <li>Emphasis placed on the French need to prepare for the long term: stocks, ammunition, industrial endurance, preparation of the territory.</li> </ul>
<b>Nuclear dimension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russian nuclear threats are identified as a "deviation" from the logic of deterrence.</li> <li>France stresses the importance of maintaining a credible and legible deterrent in order to avoid any misunderstanding.</li> <li>Moscow's use of nuclear rhetoric is seen as a way to limit Western room for manoeuvre.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russian doctrine and statements are considered openly coercive: routine use of the nuclear reference to influence European and NATO decisions.</li> <li>The NSR 2025 considers that Western deterrence has worked: no direct extension of the war despite massive aid to Ukraine.</li> <li>French deterrence is implicitly recognised as a central element of stability in Europe, without formal sharing but in a logic of de facto extended protection.</li> </ul>
<b>Hybrid warfare / unconventional fields</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The concept of "next-generation warfare" attributed to Russia: the conjunction of cyber, information, lawfare, economics, and military actions.</li> <li>Recognition of disinformation campaigns and attempts to weaken Western cohesion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia is defined as the main carrier of hybrid threats against France and Europe.</li> <li>Hybrid threats seen as permanent: no ceasefire line in cyber, information, corruption, sabotage.</li> <li>Orientation towards a global defence integrating armies, services, companies, communities, citizens in the prevention and response to hybrid attacks.</li> </ul>



Dimensions analysed	NSR 2022 – France's position on Russia	NSR 2025 – France's position on Russia
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National resilience mentioned but still treated as a complement to the strictly military posture.</li> </ul>	
<b>Geography of threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main focus on the Ukrainian theatre and its immediate surroundings (NATO eastern flank).</li> <li>Mention of the Black Sea, the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, the Euro-Atlantic area.</li> <li>Threats in Africa via Wagner perceived as a vector of influence projection rather than as a direct threat to European security.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Threat extended to a complete arc of instability around Europe: Belarus, Moldova, Balkans, Baltic.</li> <li>Increased attention to the Arctic/Far North and strategic shipping routes.</li> <li>Taking into account the seabed, exo-atmospheric space and energy/data links as possible areas of Russian action against Europe.</li> </ul>
<b>Perception of Russia's alliances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on strategic rapprochement with China (convergence of views, diplomatic coordination).</li> <li>Mention of cooperation with other authoritarian regimes (Iran, Syria).</li> <li>Concern about the emergence of an authoritarian bloc, without considering it to be fully constituted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confirmation of a consolidated strategic partnership with China at the economic, technological and diplomatic levels.</li> <li>More visible military and technological cooperation with Iran and North Korea (drones, ammunition, technology).</li> <li>Russia appears to be the node of a network of revisionist powers, even if a comprehensive formal military alliance is not considered likely in the short term.</li> </ul>
<b>Impact on NATO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reaffirmation of NATO as the essential framework for collective defence in Europe.</li> <li>Recognition of the Alliance's key role in strengthening the eastern flank after 2014 and 2022.</li> <li>France insists on the link between NATO and the ambition of European strategic autonomy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NATO presented as indispensable in the face of the major war scenario.</li> <li>Explicit possibility of putting Article 5 to the test against Russia.</li> <li>Need for better integration of capabilities, including air and missile defence, force mobility and forward posture on the eastern flank.</li> </ul>
<b>Impact on the European Union</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The EU is beginning to appear as a security actor through sanctions, financial and logistical support for Ukraine.</li> <li>European strategic autonomy is put forward as a desirable political horizon.</li> <li>Still limited role in the direct provision of military capabilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The EU is becoming a strategic player in its own right: arms financing (EPF), joint purchases of shells, massive and coordinated support for Ukraine.</li> <li>Acceleration of the construction of a European defence capability (Strategic Compass, rapid reaction force, industrial programmes).</li> <li>Strategic autonomy is no longer just a concept, but a concrete project under the pressure of the Russian threat.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommended French Posture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen the defence tool to return to a credible level of high intensity.</li> <li>Consolidate European strategic autonomy in addition to NATO.</li> <li>Adapt doctrines, formats and capabilities to an environment of competition between powers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in global rearmament: military, industrial, technological, moral and societal.</li> <li>Explicitly prepare France for a major war scenario in Europe (endurance, mobilization, continuity of the state).</li> <li>Make national resilience and global defence central priorities of security policy.</li> </ul>
<b>Role of European strategic autonomy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This is a strong ambition supported by France, sometimes contested by certain partners (particularly in the East) who fear a weakening of NATO.</li> <li>Highlighting the need to reduce dependencies (equipment, energy, technologies).</li> <li>This concept is still in the doctrinal structuring phase.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic autonomy reinterpreted as a condition for the survival of a credible European pillar within NATO.</li> <li>It is imperative to combine the increase in European capabilities with the maintenance of American commitment.</li> <li>Autonomy thought of in industrial, capability and decision-making terms, in direct reaction to the Russian threat.</li> </ul>





Dimensions analysed	NSR 2022 – France's position on Russia	NSR 2025 – France's position on Russia
<b>The role of French nuclear deterrence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reminder of the centrality of national deterrence for French sovereignty.</li> <li>Assertion that Russian behaviour reinforces the relevance of the French posture.</li> <li>Implicit reference to the French contribution to global deterrence in Europe.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>French deterrence explicitly presented as a pillar of Euro-Atlantic stability in the face of Russian threats.</li> <li>Recognition that Western deterrence has made it possible to support Ukraine without direct escalation.</li> <li>The issue of extended deterrence is raised in the strategic debate (without formal commitment in the NSR), in a context of uncertainty about the sustainability of the American umbrella.</li> </ul>
<b>National resilience and civil society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilience mentioned as a necessity (infrastructure protection, business continuity).</li> <li>Role of the private sector and local authorities still unclear.</li> <li>Dimension of "moral rearmament" absent or implicit.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilience elevated to the rank of strategic pillar: society as a whole is a security player.</li> <li>Integration of companies, communities, public services, citizens, health systems in the preparation for hybrid shocks.</li> <li>Explicit call for a "moral rearmament of the Nation" to face a period of prolonged threats.</li> </ul>
<b>Russia's Global Vision (Summary)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia is seen as a major revisionist adversary, responsible for the return of war in Europe, to be countered via deterrence, NATO, and a gradual rise in power of European defence.</li> <li>The focus is on raising awareness of the historic turning point caused by 2022.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia is perceived as the main strategic enemy, engaged in a lasting and all-out confrontation with Europe.</li> <li>The priority now is active preparation for a high-intensity conflict and a permanent hybrid war, in order to deter it by the credibility of the French and European posture.</li> </ul>



### **Main measures taken by France after February 2022**

Reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank (French military presence)

Romania – NATO Battlegroup Framework Nation:

From March 2022, deployment of about 500 French soldiers in Cincu to arm the "Aigle" battlegroup, with armor, artillery and ground-to-air defense.

Gradual ramp-up to around 1,000 troops at times, including Leclerc tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and Mamba/SAMP-T air defense systems.

Role of framework nation: France coordinates the presence of allied contingents (Belgium, the Netherlands, etc.) and structures NATO's forward posture on Romanian territory.

Estonia – contribution to the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP):

Continuation and strengthening of French participation in the NATO Battalion in Estonia (TAPA), with regular rotations of armoured companies and support units.

Deployment of Leclerc tanks and armoured infantry fighting vehicles, as well as artillery support assets, in addition to the British contingent.

Lithuania, Poland, air reinforcements:

Participated in ad hoc deployments to Lithuania and Poland as part of NATO exercises and deterrence posture, with ground elements and fighter jet detachments for air policing on the eastern flank.

Reinforcement of the French naval presence in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea (when politico-military conditions permitted) within the framework of NATO naval groupings.

Volume and nature of French military aid to Ukraine

Cumulative effort:

France has risen to become one of the main European contributors to the Ukrainian war effort, with military aid estimated at several billion euros (including the cost of replacing equipment and budgetary support), even if Paris communicates mainly in terms of capabilities rather than amounts.

Emblematic deliveries:

Artillery: CAESAR 155 mm guns delivered in several waves, allowing Ukraine to have a very accurate and highly appreciated mobile artillery on the front.

Reconnaissance and support armor: Sending AMX-10 RC, armored vehicles with 105 mm cannons, marking the supply of "heavy cavalry" assets to Kyiv.

Surface-to-air systems and ammunition: Contribution to ground-to-air defence and supply of anti-tank missiles, surface-to-air missiles and artillery ammunition (155 mm shells), with a commitment to support the European initiative for the production and delivery of large-scale shells.

Training: Active participation in EU (EUMAM Ukraine) and bilateral training missions, with thousands of Ukrainian soldiers trained on French soil or in Europe (artillery, high-intensity combat, war medicine, etc.).

Increase in the defence budget and switch to a "war economy"

LPM 2024-2030:

Adoption of a Military Programming Law with a budget of approximately €413 billion over 7 years, an increase of around +33% compared to the previous programming.

Priorities: regeneration of ammunition stocks, strengthening readiness for high intensity, modernisation of nuclear deterrence, increase in cyber defence, space and ground-to-air defence.

Concept of "war economy":

Call by the President of the Republic to transform the defence industrial apparatus so that it is capable of producing faster and in greater quantities (ammunition, spare parts, weapons systems).

Establishment of multi-year contracts with industry to secure supply chains and stabilize production.

Cyber defence and counter-intelligence initiatives

Strengthening cyber defense:

Ramping up the Cyber Defence Command (ComCyber) and increasing the ANSSI's staff and resources to deal with the increase in cyberattacks, particularly those attributed to Russian actors targeting hospitals, local authorities and operators of vital importance.

Development and updating of national response plans to a major cyber attack, with regular organisation of crisis exercises (DEFNET exercises).

Fight against foreign digital interference:

Consolidation of the Service for Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference (Viginum), responsible for detecting and analysing disinformation and hostile influence campaigns targeting French public opinion.

Enhanced cooperation with other intelligence services (DGSE, DGSI) to map pro-Russian networks of influence, expel identified undercover agents, and document hybrid operations.

European dimension:

French contribution to the EU's tools against hybrid threats:

FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) Toolbox, work on a European sanctions regime targeting foreign agents of influence and propaganda structures, participation in the NATO-EU Joint Task Force on Resilience and

Critical Infrastructure (submarine cable protection, energy networks, etc.).

This box makes it possible to link the doctrinal evolution highlighted by the 2022 and 2025 NSR to concrete decisions: deployments on the eastern flank, military support for Ukraine, budgetary rearmament and the switch to a war economy, as well as the rise of