

**FRANCE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
AND THE MENA REGION'S GEOPOLITICAL
COMPETITION**

FRENCH GRANDEUR OR EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY?

Toni Alaranta



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- The global rivalry between the US and China, as well as geopolitical competition and instability in the EU's southern neighbourhood, are perceived by France as urgent matters requiring stronger EU foreign policy, conceptualized as European sovereignty.
- The French foreign policy elite are still largely committed to the idea of France's exceptional role in the world, and to the extent that the EU as a whole fails to live up to the tasks presumed by France, continue their attempts at forging coalitions of the willing.
- France has in recent years built a web of strategic partnerships, for example with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, through which it aims to govern the instability in the EU's southern neighbourhood. The aim is also to deter regional adversaries such as Turkey, a strategy that needs to be re-evaluated due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- France often equates its national interests with those of the EU. While this can be seen to enhance European sovereignty, it also risks increasing the perception that the EU would be a participant in various Middle Eastern conflicts. This undermines the EU's ability to function as an objective broker and anchor of norms.



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ISBN 978-951-769-722-4

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Cover photo: Pixabay

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INTRODUCTION

France has held the six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union since January 2022. According to the official parlance, European sovereignty will be high on the agenda. In addition, incumbent President Emmanuel Macron will try to regain his mandate in the presidential elections, the first round of which will take place on 10 April. It is therefore an opportune moment to analyze France's increasingly active foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions.

In recent years, a new kind of security cooperation has been taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, which has now linked together these two regions and also added new characteristics to their pre-existing tensions. In its attempt to carve out a more prominent role in the increasingly multiplex world, France has become an integral part of the Middle Eastern regional security cooperation network together with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). More than anything else, this cooperation has entailed characteristics of an anti-Turkey alliance, as all of its participants have seen Turkey's regional power projection as antithetical to their own interests. There are initial indicators that this mechanism may be in transformation due to the UAE's recent steps towards rapprochement with Turkey. The Russian aggression in Ukraine will also have its consequences in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, where the US and its European allies, France included, will aim to deter Russia's power projection.

This Briefing Paper analyzes the increased French foreign policy activity in the MENA region. It begins by briefly scrutinizing the overall French strategic culture and its conceptualization of France's place in the changing international system. This is followed by a closer look at France's cooperation with individual countries, namely Greece and the UAE. The main question here concerns the interests and aspirations that have drawn France to establish stronger relations with these two states. The paper also evaluates the traits possessed by Greece and the UAE that have induced President

Macron to choose them as strategic partners. The paper concludes by assessing French Middle East policy in the wider context of increased great-power competition, debates on the EU's strategic autonomy, and the EU's attempts to forge a more unified foreign policy, formally known as the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

FRANCE IN THE WORLD: FRENCH EXCEPTIONALISM AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY

In one of the official photos of Emmanuel Macron, one can notice a book on the table, *Les mémoires de guerre*, written by Charles de Gaulle. Inspired by the ideas of French *Grandeur* (Greatness), Macron's view of his country's place in the world is a specific synthesis of long-term Europeanization and French nationalism. The French state representatives, traditionally coming from a few elite schools, still largely uphold the universalist view that the ideas of the French Revolution continue to provide the normative foundations of modern Western democracies.

Humiliation after World War II caused France's foreign policy to be dominated by the ambition to restore the country's lost status. In order to accomplish this, France has been pushing for a more effective and influential common European security and defence policy. However, its thus far relatively modest results have led the French to seek a more flexible approach by opting for more unilateral action on behalf of Europe.¹ In this sense, France leads the increasing trend whereby individual EU member states form coalitions of the willing in order to respond to various conflicts, duly bypassing the common European Union Security and Defence Policy.²

The increasing strategic competition, and the US focus on China and its concomitant relative withdrawal from some of the key conflict regions in the EU's southern neighbourhood (Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan), is conceptualized in French strategic thinking as a power

1 Pernille Rieker, *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World: Practicing Grandeur*, Palgrave Macmillan 2017, p. 26.

2 Jana Puglierin, 'Direction of force: The EU's Strategic Compass', European Council of Foreign Relations, 1 April 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/direction-of-force-the-eus-strategic-compass/>.



The President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg in January 2022.
 Source: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France (CC0 1.0)

vacuum that France should respond to. Thus, the strategic review of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces from 2021 states that ‘it would be dangerous to overlook the continuing threat of jihadist terrorism or to leave regions plagued by instability to fend for themselves, as they provide opportunities for the ambitions of emboldened global and regional powers’.³ Accordingly, the French authorities underscore that the American refocus on China has bolstered the confidence of regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. Their actions are seen to weaken international and regional organizations by developing transactional models for resolving crises.

It is still too early to evaluate how the Russian invasion of Ukraine will affect French policies towards the Eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region. However, it is logical to assume that this will only consolidate the French foreign policy elite’s understanding of the international system as undergoing a profound transformation from an allegedly liberal rules-based order into a new era of power politics and geopolitical competition. Accordingly, there is a sense of urgency in attempts to make Europe match this challenge so that Europeans can, as President Macron has put it, choose their own

rules for themselves. In this context, the French interpretation of European sovereignty, or strategic autonomy as it is sometimes referred to in French parlance, would produce a notably higher capacity to act, even to the extent that Europe would be an autonomous actor in world politics.⁴ It is on this premise that France has recently engaged with the Eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region.

FRANCO-GREEK STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

France has historically been partly shaped by its imperial ambitions both in the Middle East (Syria and Lebanon) and in the Maghreb region (Tunisia and Algeria). This has created interdependencies that continue to have an impact on France’s relations with these regions. It is noteworthy that around six million people living in France have an identity relationship with the Middle East and North Africa, while 1.2 million French people, often with dual citizenship, live in the region. Nevertheless,

3 French Ministry for the Armed Forces, Strategic Update 2021, p. 20.

4 Claudia Major, ‘France’s Security and Defence Policy under President Macron: Pragmatic, Ambitious, Disruptive’, in *France’s Security and Defence Policy under President Macron: the Consequences for Franco-German Cooperation*, edited by Ronja Kempin. SWP Research Paper 4. Berlin, May 2021.

France's economic influence in the region has been declining, and it can be argued that its soft power, particularly cultural and educational penetration, has also been increasingly challenged by other states, not least by Turkey.⁵ From this perspective, the idea of Turkey as a regional emerging power, and a systemic competitor, explains France's strong support for Greece and Cyprus in their confrontation with Turkey over exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Second, the heightened Eastern Mediterranean geopolitical competition has been directly linked with France's policies in Libya, where it has backed rebel general Haftar against the UN-approved Government of National Accord (GNA). The GNA is affiliated with the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, an international Islamist movement that France justifiably sees as a highly problematic movement also within the framework of French domestic social cohesion and internal security.⁶ Turkey has in recent years been the most vocal supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance hosting the exiled Egyptian Brotherhood members in Istanbul. Turkey's intervention in the Syrian civil war was also to a large extent motivated by the attempt to oust Assad and replace his regime with a Brotherhood-led government. France's increasing cooperation with Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt is partly explained by these states' usefulness in helping to curb Turkey's power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya – and via Libya in vast areas of Northern and even sub-Saharan Africa, where France is keen to maintain its traditional influence.⁷ On the other hand, as Russia has also been supporting rebel general Haftar in Libya, where it has its notorious Wagner group of mercenaries, there is now obvious pressure for France to distance itself from its previous policies in Libya, and concentrate more on confronting Russia, also in Africa.

Recently increasing Franco-Greek cooperation can be explained by France's economic and energy interests. The French oil giant Total, one of the world's biggest energy companies, has long planned to carry out exploratory drilling in waters disputed by Turkey. There has thus been consternation in Greece in particular that

when Total and the Italian oil giant Eni likely start their drilling in part of the EEZs of Cyprus in the first half of 2022, Ankara might again aim to sabotage these efforts.

However, there are signs that the militarized dispute over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean might calm down at least partially, mainly due to the US withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project that was meant to ship gas from deposits offshore Israel and Egypt through a 1,250-kilometre pipeline running via Cyprus and Greece to European markets. Being excluded from the project was a major irritant to Turkey, so its abandonment eases the situation to some extent. In addition, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU is urgently seeking to end its energy dependency on Russia, and this has increased the need to transport Azeri and perhaps also Israeli natural gas through Turkey.

Nevertheless, it is clear that France's interests significantly diverge from those of several other EU members, particularly Germany, Italy and Spain, which have been keen to halt any further escalation between the EU and Turkey. Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, on the other hand, have found a vocal supporter in France. Most recently, France and Greece signed a comprehensive military pact that will allow them to come to each other's aid in the event of an external threat, including any threat caused by Turkey. This is an extraordinary pact as it entails a security alliance in order to prevent a military attack by a fellow NATO member.

The Greek side indeed conceptualizes the new pact as providing a key element that finally secures what NATO membership failed to provide. In the words of Athanasios Platias, professor of strategy at the University of Piraeus, Greece has 'lived with NATO's unwillingness to deal with Turkey since the 1950s, because Article 5 doesn't cover threats among alliance members'. For France, on the other hand, the pact with Greece exemplifies 'European sovereignty', and includes Greece buying up to four French-built Belharra frigates and up to four French Gowind corvettes with state-of-the-art radar and hypersonic missiles. Greece has also committed to the purchase of 24 French Rafale fighter jets.⁸ In addition to specific national interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the French have emphasized the pact as a concrete step in an attempt at European strategic autonomy.

5 Hakim El Karoui, 'A New Strategy for France in the New Arab World', Institut Montaigne, August 2017.

6 A recent report on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood's network in Europe has revealed that the organization incites confrontation and has the potential to engender radicalization among its supporters. See Lorenzo Vidino and Sergio Altuna, 'The Muslim Brotherhood's Pan-European Structure', Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism, Study Report 2/2021, <https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/en/2021/10/27/the-pan-european-structures-of-the-muslim-brotherhood-study-report/>.

7 Michael Tanchum, 'Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente', Turkey Analyst, 25 August, 2020, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/646-turkey-advances-in-africa-against-franco-emirati-egyptian-entente.html>.

8 John Psaropoulos, 'Greece ratifies landmark intra-NATO defence pact with France', Al Jazeera, 7 October, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/greece-ratifies-intra-nato-defence-pact-with-france>.

CONSOLIDATED FRANCE-UAE RELATIONSHIP

In December 2021, France and the United Arab Emirates signed a large defence contract that had been under preparation for over a decade. Accordingly, the UAE will buy 80 Rafale fighter jets and twelve Airbus helicopters. After signing the deal, both partners hailed it as a further sign of a deepening strategic partnership. Beyond the arms deal, the drivers behind the cooperation are some key shared interests and a common adversary. The UAE and France have for several years put their weight behind rebel general Haftar in Libya. Both France and the UAE have seen him as a necessary counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented GNA, strongly backed by Turkey, a regional adversary of both France and the UAE. France has its key economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North Africa, and Turkey has become an actor keen to project its own influence in these same regions during the last fifteen years. With its long-term attempt to support the Muslim Brotherhood, which functions as a grassroots populist transnational movement questioning the legitimacy of Gulf Sunni monarchies, Turkey has become a common adversary for France and the UAE.

Since 2005, the UAE has become a powerful regional player whose rise has complicated the traditional landscape solely dominated by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Before this, UAE foreign policy was largely characterized by its self-perception as a small, fragile federation in a hostile environment, squeezed between Iran and Saudi Arabia. From these foundations, the UAE's foreign policy doctrine was for over three decades based on maintaining US security guarantees and participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council under Saudi Arabia's de facto hegemony. However, since 2005, a more self-reliant, assertive and independent foreign policy has emerged.⁹ A notable current manifestation of this increased self-assurance is the UAE's leading role in normalizing ties with the al-Assad regime in Syria. The same can be said of the UAE's insistence that it will determine its own policy towards Russia, irrespective of the Western position. As this has at least up to now also included its refusal to participate in any sanctions against Russia, it is likely that these policies will also problematize France-UAE relations to some extent.

In order to understand why President Macron has been keen to consolidate the Franco-UAE relationship, it is useful to look at the agenda of its current leader, Mohammed bin Zayed. He is known for the attempt to

turn the UAE into a regional powerhouse that can even transform the Middle East regional order, based on the economic liberalism embodied by Dubai and the secular ultra-authoritarianism enforced by Abu Dhabi. Bin Zayed oversees more than \$1.3 trillion in sovereign wealth funds, and commands a military that is better equipped and trained than any in the region apart from Israel's. On the domestic front, he has cracked down hard on the Muslim Brotherhood and built a hypermodern surveillance state where everyone is monitored for the slightest whiff of Islamist leanings.¹⁰ Bin Zayed's vision, based on anti-Islamist secular authoritarianism and on making the UAE a modern financial and energy hub, is seen as attractive by President Macron. Macron thus interprets the UAE as some sort of vanguard of Middle East secularism and effectiveness, traits he also thinks should animate France in a new multipolar order.

Indeed, the UAE seems to be Macron's answer to the widely held European conception whereby the Middle East is seen as an unwelcome arc of anarchy on the EU's doorstep. No doubt, the Franco-UAE partnership is meant to provide France with a say in the Middle East, countering Russian and Chinese influence in an allegedly post-American Middle East regional system. However, there are obvious points of controversy in this strategic engagement. The UAE is currently the prime actor pushing for a normalization with the Assad regime in Syria, whereas France and its Western allies refuse to take this step.¹¹ Further, the future significance of the anti-Turkey block is questionable, due to the recent Turkey-UAE normalization talks and the urgent need to rearrange the European security architecture in the face of the Russian invasion. In addition, the UAE is an authoritarian state that is also heavily involved in the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen, which has resulted in a huge number of civilian deaths and casualties. Various human rights organizations have criticized France for selling weapons to such a problematic state.¹² It is indeed hard to ignore the argument that there is an obvious contradiction in France's vocal declarations of being a champion of universal human rights and its de facto enabling of war in the Middle East.

9 Ebtessam Al Kettbi, 'Contemporary Shifts in UAE Foreign Policy: From the Liberation of Kuwait to the Abraham Accords', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14 (3) 2020, pp. 391-398.

10 Robert F. Worth, 'Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future', *The New York Times*, 9 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/magazine/united-arab-emirates-mohammed-bin-zayed.html>.

11 Giorgio Cafiero, 'Renormalising with Syria: The trend in the Gulf', *The New Arab*, 21 December, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/renormalising-syria-trend-gulf>.

12 Elvire Fondacci, 'France Should Stop Selling Arms to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia', Human Rights Watch, 2 December 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/02/france-should-stop-selling-arms-united-arab-emirates-saudi-arabia>.

CONCLUSION

France has increasingly attempted to combine its own desire for global actorness with the increased perception of the EU's urgent requirement to generate a common EU foreign policy capable of defending the Union's key interests and values in the emerging multipolar world. Now this urgent need also increasingly includes the attempt to deter Russian influence.

On the other hand, as France largely equates its national interest with that of the EU, its specific foreign policy agenda, such as confrontation with Turkey in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East, creates a strain within the EU, not least because Germany, Italy and Spain perceive the Union's policy towards Turkey from a very different perspective. This divergent position by Greece, Cyprus and France on the one side, and Germany, Spain and Italy on the other, is also reflected in the new EU Strategic Compass, where Turkey seems to be described both as an external threat and as a potential partner with whom the EU attempts to cooperate.¹³ It is likely that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there will be an increased attempt by many EU member states to seek a rapprochement with Turkey in order to induce it to break off its special relationship with Russia. Accomplishing this would first require France to adopt a considerably more favourable position towards Turkey – a policy change that is now very much on the cards but unlikely to take place overnight.

While there are definitely many European admirers of Macron's doctrine of demonstrating force, for instance against Turkey's gunboat diplomacy, France's current foreign policy, which actively takes sides in the conflicts in the eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region – and which tends to equate French and EU

interests – is also problematic for the common EU foreign policy. It runs the risk of making the EU a participant in various regional conflicts, duly undermining its ability to function as an objective broker and a normative anchor. To the extent that France is ready to strengthen security cooperation with Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes involved in highly questionable bombing campaigns targeting civilians, as is the case in Yemen, this will inevitably problematize French-led EU operations.

However, neither France nor the EU can effectively govern their southern neighbourhood without making deals with the region's states – any realistic formulation of European sovereignty implies a web of states with which the Union addresses the external threats. In the case of France and its attempt to equate its own national interests with those of the whole EU, the problem is that not all member states share the same threat perception or agree on with whom the Union should actively cooperate. The result is the current coalitions of the willing, whose agendas can even undermine the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

On the other hand, all of the EU's potential partners in the Middle East – Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel – have during the Russian invasion of Ukraine tried to maintain their balancing policy, condemning Russian aggression yet also aiming to maintain their particular relationship with the country. All of these recent developments leave many question marks hanging over France's future policy choices regarding the Eastern Mediterranean and the MENA region, but they also offer an opportunity to overcome recent differences between its EU partners in order to adopt a more united stance against Russian aggression. /

¹³ Council of the European Union, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 21 March 2022.