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Macron in praise of folly? How Macron's France seeks to gain from power vacuum during the war in Ukraine

Introduction

France's diplomatic position has been raising eyebrows since the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian war. Supporting Zelensky both publicly and passionately while prudently 'leaving an open door' to diplomatic talks with Putin has now become the peculiar and heavily criticized official position of the Elysée. France likes to recall some symbolic traditions of rallying opponents since its 19th-century revolutions, but realistically, such public diplomacy seems insufficient in terms of protecting national interests through dialogue with both parties of the war, especially compared to the policy pursued by those who chose a third solution like China, Israel, or Turkey. Nostalgic researchers and political analysts found themselves digging into de Gaulle's powerful diplomatic argument: 'diplomacy of balance,'¹ the so-called exit from a bipolar world through balancing the interests of each bloc. However, beyond certain Gaullist references that the French President's communication has cleverly played on, the concept has fallen short of coherence with ongoing global dynamics, and in fact, has failed to result in the strong legitimacy that Paris likely sought. Whether Macron succeeded in convincing his people that he was the new de Gaulle remains doubtful.

¹ M. Barbero, *There's a Method to Macron's Madness. The French president wants to leave room for talks and carve out a bigger role for France*, "Foreign Policy", 15 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/15/macron-putin-france-russia-ukraine-war> [accessed: 30 July 2023].

To his detriment, this policy of ‘at the same time’ that he has showcased in his national and international agenda is a public diplomacy disaster. That said, when it comes to such failures of political communication, we should ask ourselves: what is there to gain? How did the conflict in Ukraine radically alter French diplomacy, and how was Paris forced to change its course with the war?

The answer to that question requires us to look at how the invasion generated opportunities for gaining power by transforming interstate relations. Above all, the global geopolitical and economic conditions have remained largely consistent since the outbreak of the war: 1) high inflation causing daily prices increase, accentuating polarization of the minds in Western countries, and destabilizing weaker states in Africa and the Middle East; 2) delineation of former political tensions between world or regional superpowers, relatively throttled back by mutualisation of financial risks on a world scale, revealing an anarchical structure of the international system in which narratives on ‘free world’ conflict and states’ actions tend to diminish the hegemonic discourse of America. Thus, Macron’s France definitely attempts to assert its own narrative on power. This essay is based on Henry Kissinger’s claim that power, as decided by a narrow portion of leaders in each state, dominates the global structure² of neo-Gramscianism, neorealism, and especially the theory of offensive realism. The ante-war ‘organic crisis’³ of the US’ hegemony exacerbated by the war has accelerated power vacuum dynamics. Therefore, weakened or isolated spaces fearing their power deletion and states capable of actualizing power reshape their mutual power relations, with or without integrating the hegemon in their calculations. This situation may refer to what Gilpin used to describe as ‘rational calculation in the face of the evolution of the system is only within the reach of the Large, while the behaviour of small units will be structurally determined.’⁴

Macron’s bet on this new chessboard is no different: maximizing power by ensuring gains from power vacuums at a moment of global uncertainty. The Russian invasion has profoundly changed power relations in which Paris was actively involved for its own benefit, mostly at three levels. The global impact on markets and the wakening of alliances has affected how states perceive the reliability of their connections. For this reason, we assume that Macron’s diplomacy during the war equals to maximizing powers after evaluating the reliability of connections with other states. Three distinct domains of thought are then to be highlighted in the French rationale. This division into three ‘levels’ will assist us in proving that the war weakened the position

² H. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–22*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 1957, 376 p.

³ T. Chodor, *A Nébuleuse for a New World Order? The G20 From a Neo-Gramscian Perspective*, [in:] *The G20 and International Relations Theory: Perspectives on Global Summitry*, ed. S. Slaughter, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK 2019, pp. 135–153.

⁴ J.-F. Rioux, E. Keenes, G. Légaré, *Le néo-réalisme ou la reformulation du paradigme hégémonique en relations internationales*, « Études internationales » 1988, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 57–80.

of certain powers in politically cohesive spaces, and that France has attempted to step into power vacuums that emerged in these spaces. These three levels are: the EU, the French-privileged diplomatic spheres including France's former colonies, and the hegemon of the block France choose to join: the US. In each case, we will try to reconstruct the rationale the French government favours in these three areas and see the potential gains it aims at.

France and Germany in the EU: the end of a lifelong coalition?

The first level and probably the most significant one to Macron pertains to the European Union (EU). The war produced significant economic and energy-related ramifications for Germany, a long-time French rival. Shaken internally due to its historical ties with Moscow and not even sparing the European 'Mutti,' but also Macron's France had the incredible timing of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU to assert a certain French advantage in Europe, and over Germany. The EU seems no longer governed by a duumvirate; the French presidency has unprecedentedly reinforced the French leadership in Brussels, despite various visions of the war between Western and Eastern Europe. Better yet, Macron has finally been able to seize the opportunity and advocate for his dearest project of a 'European Defence.'⁵ The invasion of Ukraine generated not only a power vacuum, but also a window of opportunity for France to gain recognition as a leader on the European stage.

While Berlin has been profoundly shaken by the political and economic effects of the war, the German crisis opened the door for Paris to take on a leadership role in the EU economy, a long-time object of competition between the two countries.⁶ However, seeking a certain advantage over Germany seems to be a delicate game for Macron. Taking over leadership is less a matter of vanquishing your adversary than making them depend on you. From an economic-political perspective, Macron has therefore employed multiple strategies. First, the French aid to export electricity to EU members such as the ARENH plan at the beginning of the war, as well as exporting water during summer droughts (with the water level in the Rhine so low that it had threatened German maritime transport), quickly strengthened France's dominant position. Second, a rebound of the German economy would be a disaster due to direct effects on the French economy in the current European economic structure. It means that, as we will see on a more political level, when the Elysée Palace

⁵ B. Szewczyk, *Macron's European Vision Crashed and Burned in Ukraine. A grand intellectual edifice has collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions*, "Foreign Policy", 08 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/08/macron-putin-france-russia-ukraine-europe-sovereignty-strategy> [accessed: 20 March 2023].

⁶ P.-E. Thomann, *Le couple franco-allemand et la dimension géopolitique de la crise de l'euro*, « Hérodote » 2013, no. 151, pp. 39–59.

defines its leadership in the world as European, it assumes duties of representation of the German states in its stead. The most convincing example was the Davos Forum during which France voiced its economic interests as well as the Germans' by disparaging the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and green subventions. Generally, the expression of this influence-seeking by France tends to benefit France and Germany themselves and finds its roots in a certain questioning of the dependence on the US, a position even presented in the 'road map for competing with American green subsidies' set out by the EU executive body in February 2023.⁷

Obviously, these apparent mutual gains face realistic limits. As of 13 March 2023, Paris considers the protectionist policies on motor industries in Germany 'dangerous,'⁸ but less than two weeks later, 'Germany and France steal the show – again'⁹ as EU leaders hope to focus on the economy and foreign affairs at the Euro Summit, on 24 March 2023. The French intentions seem obvious for other EU members that reproach a division between wealthy member states and those less able or inclined to spend on industry support. "Politico" estimates that 'it will probably be 25 to 2 at the EU summit in Brussels.'¹⁰ The Franco-German rapprochement is a welcome change because a strong Franco-German axis has always been central to the proper functioning of the EU, but some believe that the threat of the IRA is being exaggerated, particularly by France in order to push its agenda.

Involved in the concept of 'European strategic autonomy,' Macron initiated a broad common security plan of a similar design. In December 2022, Macron called again for reducing France's dependence on the US for its security while still insisting that it was not proposing an alternative to NATO. Such declarations are not new: they echo an ambition asserted already in 2017. However, they manifest a vision mostly upheld by France only. The previously mentioned project of autonomy includes dialogues with Russia, China, and Turkey, with the idea of not leaving diplomatic monopoly to the last two.¹¹ Once again, this attempt on European defence under a French paradigm demonstrates power seeking after the war created a new sense of need, rather than

⁷ K. Mackrael, *EU Sets Out Options to Compete With U.S. Green Subsidies*, The Wall Street Journal, 01 February 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-sets-out-options-to-compete-with-us-green-subsidies-11675253742> [accessed: 30 July 2023].

⁸ J. Posaner, G. Leali, H. von der Burchard, *France attacks 'dangerous' German effort to change EU car engine rules*, "Politico", 13 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-attack-dangerous-germany-effort-change-eu-car-combustion-engine/> [accessed: 20 March 2023].

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ S. Lynch, B. Moens, S. Stolton, *France and Germany go it alone as EU summit prepares to tackle fightback against US*, "Politico", 08 February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-and-germany-go-it-alone-as-eu-leaders-meet/> [accessed: 20 March 2023].

¹¹ N. Bisserbe, S. Meichtry, *France's Macron Calls on Europe to Reduce Reliance on U.S. for Security*, "The Wall Street Journal", 21 December 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/macron-renews-call-for-russia-to-receive-security-guarantees-to-end-war-in-ukraine-11671627645> [accessed: 20 March 2023].

a common agreement. The attempts to negotiate with Putin, rejected by the Russian leader, triggered criticisms of Kiev and the Baltic States against President Macron for his call for security guarantees for Russia.¹²

France in the world: a power in triumph or disintegration?

Strategic areas for French-privileged diplomatic spheres remain on the second level. International consequences of the war have transformed the French project. On the one hand, it has been quite disappointing that few have correlated the end of the Barkhane operation in Sahel with the ongoing conflict in Caucasia. Africa was yesterday's display of the French military force; today, it is Europe. And witnessing Wagner's barbarity is only one striking consequence of the French withdrawal from the region. On the other hand, it is certainly impossible not to notice the renewed French diplomatic efforts with the Gulf States, clearly shifting in a direction different from the one prior to the war and in favour of a closer rapprochement with country leaders who are not properly aligned with the belligerents in the Ukraine war. For instance, whereas the Elysée was an active proponent of a new JCPOA, whose chances are highly diminished by Khamenei's policy inside and outside Iran's borders, it is now all about dealing with a surge in energy prices and engaging in talks with the Arab monarchies. Macron showed off his 'personal relationships' with emirs many times,¹³ including the Saudi heir Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, ostracized since Khashoggi's murder.¹⁴

Africa, especially the Maghreb and the Western areas, has constituted the sphere of the most profound changes regarding the French presence in the world. Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the French project, widely involved in military operations against terrorism in the Sahel, has significantly reduced. Two dynamics need to be outlined. First, the invasion of Ukraine and Russia's retrieving states partners have steered the Kremlin to rapprochement with African counterparts, all this to the detriment of France, relying on historical bounds until now. In fact, the bottom-line is crystal clear: Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group are pushing France out of the Central African Republic (CAR). The group's propaganda has a clear target: Paris. A report by the French group All Eyes on Wagner and

¹² M. Crowley, M. Shear, *U.S. Sees Little Prospect for Ukraine Talks with Putin After Biden Offer*, "The New York Times", 2 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/us/politics/biden-putin-ukraine-talks.html> [accessed: 21 March 2023].

¹³ B. Surk, M. Macpherson, *France, United Arab Emirates sign deal on energy cooperation*, AP News, 18 July 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-biden-france-7532af3426ce-8067375a54253829c75d> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

¹⁴ R. Noack, K. Fahim, *Saudi crown prince engages in long handshake with Macron on rehabilitation tour*, "The Washington Post", 28 July 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/28/mbs-macron-france-khashoggi/> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

the British group Dossier Centre pointed out that Wagner forces Central African miners to transfer or sell exclusively to its shell company Diamville, in violation of conventions prohibiting diamond trading in conflict zones. Yevgeny Prigozhin accuses E. Macron of being the owner of Diamville via a henchman, and NATO of being responsible for the 'racket' by units called S DFA. These actions are only meant to advance Russia's geopolitical objectives in Africa by capitalizing on 'divisions between African governments and their traditional allies in Europe.'¹⁵ Consequently, the resentment toward the French government and the threat of Wagner grow: the expulsion of the French ambassador to Burkina Faso last January equals to a high potential of implantation of Russian mercenaries.¹⁶

Second, this Russian-African rapprochement has naturally alerted the US in a context of intensifying great power rivalry; the American position echoes the Cold War, a comparison that the Biden administration wants to avoid in order to present Africa as a valued partner and not a pawn in the power struggle. In Chad, for instance, the US are escalating the rivalry between Russia and Chad through sharing sensitive intelligence about the President of Chad, who was targeted for assassination by Russian mercenaries. The United States are asserting its position in the region in order to consolidate the shaky position of France, which has ceded ground to Russia. Nevertheless, in the fight for the power vacuum left by France in the region, E. Macron's tour of Africa did not turn out to be successful. If the objective was to shed the cloak of paternalism and absolute security, 'France cannot simply win in Africa.'¹⁷ One should recall that three of the four visited countries abstained from the recent UN voting condemning Russia. In sum, E. Macron produced mixed results in Africa, where Russia seemingly gains traction.¹⁸

That said, Macron's foreign policy in the Middle East may turn out more positive. In addition to relative closeness in bilateral relations with the Gulf monarchies, reinforced by the energy crisis, it is important to notice recent evolutions. Whereas the France-Iran relations, as said earlier, deteriorated due to the implication of Iranian military support to Russia in Ukraine, the Iranian case has recently given opportunities for the French government to wield a proclaimed 'independency of thoughts'

¹⁵ J. Ling, *Russian Mercenaries Are Pushing France Out of Central Africa*, "Foreign Affairs", 18 March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/18/russian-mercenaries-are-pushing-france-out-of-central-africa/> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

¹⁶ A. Aboa, T. Ndiaga, *France eyes Ivory Coast after Burkina Faso boots out French troops*, Reuters, 21 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-eyes-ivory-coast-after-burkina-faso-boots-out-french-troops-2023-02-20/> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

¹⁷ P. Taylor, *Macron's Africa reset struggles to persuade*, "Politico", 13 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-africa-reset-strategy-francafrique/> [accessed: 30 July 2023].

¹⁸ C.P. Clarke, *How Russia's Wagner Group Is Fueling Terrorism in Africa*, "Foreign Affairs", 25 January 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/25/russia-wagner-group-africa-terrorism-mali-sudan-central-african-republic-prigozhin/> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

detached from Russia, China, or the US – as ‘a power should have.’¹⁹ For instance, during his official visit to Beijing, President Macron had a chance to meet Saudi and Iranian delegates after the resumption of diplomatic relations between both states. This non-alignment position toward the US position has sometimes been seen as an affront to the White House. France has tended to join progressively this non-alignment since February 2022. The Ukrainian war allowed this paradigm as a possibility by drastically shifting the power relations in the Middle East in favour of the local countries and deteriorating the US influence. Their desire for independence generates a need to substitute the US, and therefore presents France with economic opportunities which could be obtained by presenting a similar rhetoric of independence.²⁰

Neither Ukraine, nor Russia: looking towards America

Finally, the Ukrainian war has enabled Paris to revive its relations with Washington, which sometimes has allowed France to attempt to stand on the same power level. Ironically, France has not gained substantially from its ‘sometimes ambiguous’ diplomatic position in its relations with the two belligerents. Mostly, it has become the main partner for the US obliged to collaborate with France in certain areas. Some have even concluded that the AUKUS scandal is now behind. Macron stands as *the* European counterpart.²¹ For example, headlines on the day following his re-election did not concentrate on his victory over Le Pen, but rather on his newly reinstated role as a leader of Europe.²² His recent state visit to the White House, only four months after his coming to the UN, is no coincidence. This legitimacy the Biden Administration entrusted in him recalls a traditional strategy of the US foreign policy of ‘special election’ in US’ interest-bounded countries – countries the US has selected to delegate actions fostering their interest in these countries’ neighbourhood.²³ Just like the original one, this new Marshall Plan sometimes lacks realism.

¹⁹ S. Mabrouk, *Bruno Le Maire: «Le président a parfaitement raison de réclamer la souveraineté européenne»*, Europe 1 [interview], 11 April 2023, <https://www.europe1.fr/emissions/linterview-politique-de-8h20/bruno-le-maire-le-president-a-parfaitement-raison-de-reclamer-la-souverainete-europeenne-4177208> [accessed: 12 April 2023].

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Z. Montague, *White House to Host Biden's First State Visit*, “The New York Times”, 26 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/26/us/politics/biden-macron-state-visit.html> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

²² D. Herszenhorn, J. Barigazzi, *EU celebrates, and frets, over Macron's victory*, “Politico”, 25 April 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-celebrates-and-frets-over-macrons-victory/> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

²³ M. Jourdain, C. Belin, *Biden and Macron's Historic Opportunity: How France and the United States Can Solidify Their Alliance*, “Foreign Affairs”, 28 November 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/bidens-and-macrons-historic-opportunity> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

Macron is still working for his own interests, not those of the US – or is it the price the White House is willing to pay? Indeed, Macron is not satisfied with simple foreign recognition and perhaps never will be. With strong support now behind him, Macron is adopting an unwavering approach in order not only to reach the top, but also to knock out the current superpowers. If the media find it alarming or slightly arrogant, Macron tends to show he could do better than Biden, especially in the Middle East. Whispering secret information during the G7 summit, inviting Mohammed bin Salman to Paris while US leading newspapers declared the Prince's backstabbing on oil, calling Putin on a regular basis... Macron envisions himself more than just a counterpart: he wills to run a superpower that can do what a post-Trump US diplomatically cannot.

Macron's state visit in the US in December 2022 demonstrated his approach. There, Macron's actions or their perception indirectly make his aims, or even the opportunities, possible in the current context. Above all, press coverage particularly emphasized the unwavering France-US 'friendship,' with a strong attention to high standards during the visit that cause many to wonder why France would receive such a treatment contrary to other states' leaders. In addition to these ceremonies usually implemented for leaders of equal powers, Macron's speeches expressed certain seeking for power, made possible thanks to geopolitical concerns and the US' 'organic crisis,' such as the 'convergence of interests in Africa,' the 'required moderation' of Twitter, and even Thomas Pesquet's proposal for a NASA-matching operation, with space remaining a symbol of US' supremacy over the world since the Cold War. Moreover, Macron even spoke in a 'threatening tone' sometimes, be it on potential 'freeze' of US assets in the case of application of the IRA and critique of excessively mobilizing protectionist measures, and publicly differed on geopolitical topics such as Ukraine, the end of the war, being proponent of direct discussions with V. Putin, and the crisis touching China and Taiwan.²⁴ A strategy we know now to be an active preparation for the non-alignment position the Elysée displays. Macron left the White House unanimously depicted as the 'European leader,' the first counterpart in Europe.²⁵

Four months later, his applauded boldness leaves a bitter taste for the Biden Administration. Journalists penned critical pieces on the President's visit to China on 4 April 2023, pointing out that the Europeans believe they can change Xi Jinping's mind on Russia: 'Europe somehow believes it can talk China out of deepening ties with Russia. And that impression — shared above all by France's President Emmanuel Macron — is of course what Beijing most desires, as it will look

²⁴ B. McCandless Farmer, *Macron on war crimes, Taiwan, and Putin's ambitions*, CBS News, 04 December 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/emmanuel-macron-war-crimes-taiwan-putin-60-minutes-2022-12-04/> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

²⁵ G. Debinski, *Can Macron Woo Biden?*, GZERO Media, 02 December 2022, <https://www.gzero-media.com/can-macron-woo-biden> [accessed: 23 March 2023].

to exploit even the tiniest of transatlantic rifts.²⁶ A couple of weeks before, the American media were closely watching Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's tour of Europe, with Foreign Policy noting that he began it with a meeting with President Macron.²⁷ The non-alignment the Elysée proclaimed will definitely alter the French trustworthiness in the US' eyes. Some analysts have announced the 'era of Europe First',²⁸ others have criticized Joe Biden's America First policy, such as Edward Alden, who fears a 'widening gap with Europe',²⁹ After months of 'strategic intimacy' with world leaders, this position has reinforced the impression of miscalculation³⁰. This rapprochement could bear fruit for Macron, as in this way, he might ensure commercial advantages with China, on which France is commercially dependent, after months of being the favoured European counterpart for the US, while America feels the urgency to decouple its economy from China in the perspective of a potential war in the Pacific and hegemonic replacement.

A final word: is striking a balance between two extremes really a virtue?

Elaborating this article required introducing numerous corrections as policy changes were carried out almost weekly by President Macron and his government. However, subdividing the research into three areas was the Planck constant. Despite all the historical contingents, the invasion of Ukraine has deeply modified power positions on the international scene and therefore states adjusted their aims and their own power-seeking calculations. Trying to fill diplomatic power vacuums³¹ left on the world

²⁶ S. Lau, P. Kine, *Xi's 3 EU magi — Huawei scoop — Biden's democracy summit*, "Politico", 07 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-watcher/xis-3-eu-magi-huawei-scoop-bidens-democracy-summit/> [accessed: 08 April 2023].

²⁷ J. Cheng, *China Is Starting to Act Like a Global Power*, "The Wall Street Journal", 22 March 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-has-a-new-vision-for-itself-global-power-da8dc559> [accessed: 08 April 2023].

²⁸ B. Moens, H. von der Burchard, *Europe First: Brussels gets ready to dump its free trade ideals*, "Politico", 05 December 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-joe-biden-trade-europe-first-brussels-gets-ready-to-dump-its-free-trade-ideals/> [accessed: 08 April 2023].

²⁹ E. Alden, *Biden's 'America First' Policies Threaten Rift With Europe*, "Foreign Policy", 05 December 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/05/biden-ira-chips-act-america-first-europe-eu-cars-ev-economic-policy> [accessed: 30 July 2023].

³⁰ B. Moens, H. von der Burchard, *op. cit.*; J.A. Tarquinio, *Macron's Gone From 'Strategic Autonomy' to 'Strategic Intimacy'*, "Foreign Affairs", 05 December 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/05/macron-biden-france-state-visit-europe-economy-energy-natural-gas/> [accessed: 08 April 2023].

³¹ This vision of French diplomacy is not new. Highly implemented during Jacques Chirac's presidencies (S. Taylor, *Power vacuum at the heart of Europe?*, "Politico", 19 April 2000, <https://www.politico.eu/article/power-vacuum-at-the-heart-of-europe> [accessed: 08 April 2023]), by whom E. Macron claims to be inspired, seeking and filling power vacuums is a regular

chessboard by its European neighbour Germany and, up to some point, by the US, Macron's France looks irrational at first sight. It is not. Reaching out to countries in which the US hegemonic power seems to decline might pay off on the condition that the US discerns tensions between them (among others Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China). Yet, nothing ensures that such a plan will be efficient or sustainable.

New opportunities for French diplomacy during the conflict might shortly face internal limits. Analysis tends to underestimate the internal pressures as a parameter of sustainability of decisions, even on a global scale. For the French voters who do not necessarily share his visions, Macron does not properly assess the widespread economic fatigue – notably for low and middle-classes. Still, money remains the sinews of war, be it military or diplomatic. France, like the states instead of which it wills to fill power, is suffering from inflation and energy prices, and the future of the EU will not be bright for all its members if its economic powers cannot stay afloat. In the short term, France hardly seems economically prepared for assuming the role of a superpower. Moreover, Le Pen herself starts to find foreign partners out of reach for Macron, such as in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In sum, Macron's diplomatic ambitions are facing inner pressure. The French may support their new 'Napoleon,' while this trait provokes criticism toward his Neronian ego and his 'political impuissance.' It is quite easy to explain the paradoxes and the apparent boldness when sources close to him reveal his 'dreams' of the Nobel Peace Prize as the French Obama. The recent retirement pensions crisis reveals much of the rationale behind the philosophy of the 'at the same time:' obtaining as much room for maneuver as possible by establishing no clear directions, which undermines a fragile understanding, exacerbates a crisis of trust and degradation of political legitimacy, or the risks of potential ousting of the partners, and increases contradictions in the future.

As far as our original questions are concerned, we must conclude that the French bet on unpredictability is a double-edged sword: it benefits from an impression of surprise that could be considered power while ensuring publicity, but it always produces mixed outcomes. Explaining this policy choice through neorealism helps to see some gains, but always to the detriment of trust in the main partners, more reluctant to cooperate if not obliged. The consistent criticism from the US and Eastern Europe of the French ambiguity shows proof of potential damage to relations that are still necessary for France. Moreover, the emergence of 'autonomy' in the French public discourse seem to assert rightfully how we will need to define power as 'strategic autonomy' in a globalized world. Yet, without *kairos* – a talent to seize opportunities at the right time, such an approach appears to fragilize the

strategy in French diplomacy. A recent declaration of the current French Foreign Minister on Lebanon has even made the concept of power vacuum a public communication tool (N. Housari, *French foreign minister warns Lebanon cannot risk 'power vacuum'*, Arab News, 14 October 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2181221/%7B%7B> [accessed: 08 April 2023]).

positions of partners more than adversaries at a time when partners should be encouraged to cooperate.

Macron's calculations are surely rational, but are they reasonable? Kissinger has proven that the field of international relations is essentially intertwined with the psychologies of world leaders. The choice of ambiguity does not emerge from a public demand but results from the decision of a few persons. During interviews with ambassadors, some confided to me their own surprise at a lack of listening at the Elysée Palace. Speculations aside, the Gaullist 'diplomacy of balance' helped France obtain tools of global power such as the nuclear weapons during the Cold War. However, today, the 'at the same time' policy seems to constitute a subterfuge easy to play by ear, without the need to announce a real long-term plan or to have to formulate a cohesive perspective that the opposition would constantly tackle.

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Macron in praise of folly? How Macron's France seeks to gain from power vacuum during the war in Ukraine
Abstract

The Russian invasion has profoundly changed major power relations in which Paris was actively involved to the benefit of the latter, mostly at three levels. The first level, probably the most significant in Macron's mind, is the European one. Not only did the economic and energy-related repercussions of the conflict put down the eternal German rival, shaken internally due to its historical ties with Moscow and not even sparing the European 'Mutti', but Macron's France also had the incredible timing of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU to assert a certain French advantage in Europe, and over Germany. The EU seems no longer governed by a duumvirate; the French presidency has unprecedentedly reinforced the French leadership in Brussels, despite various visions of the war between Western and Eastern Europe. Better yet, Macron has finally been able to seize the opportunity and advocate for his dearest project of a 'European Defence'.

Strategic areas for French-privileged diplomatic spheres remain at the second level. International consequences of the war have transformed the French project. On the one hand, it has been quite disappointing that few have correlated the end of the Barkhane operation in Sahel with the ongoing conflict in Caucasia. On the other hand, it is certainly impossible not to notice the renewed French diplomatic efforts with the Gulf States, clearly shifting in a direction different from the one prior to the war and in favour of a closer rapprochement with country leaders who are not properly aligned with the belligerents in the Ukraine war. Finally, the Ukrainian war has enabled Paris to revive its relations with Washington, not to mention an attempt to stand at the same power level.

Keywords: Macron, French diplomacy, power vacuum, neorealism, Ukraine war