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Introduction

With the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, war returned to Europe threatening European and global security and stability (European Council, 2022). In fact, the ongoing conflict represents a violation of international law, and it is dangerously redesigning the world order that has been established over the last thirty years (Mankoff, 2022). Since Russia unlawfully annexed Crimea in 2014, Ukraine's right to self-defence and territorial integrity has been fully supported, both politically and militarily. Expressly, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have acknowledged the importance of Ukraine's independence for Euro-Atlantic stability, thus steadily providing the country with economic and military aid (NATO, 2022).

Given the current geopolitical challenges, the EU intends to strengthen its role in security and defence in compliance with the objectives outlined in the Versailles Declaration and the 2022 Strategic Compass (European Commission, 2024). However, the conflict has unveiled limitations in the EU's defence industry and the challenges it faces in advancing production capacity and spending. The EU defence industry appears to rely excessively on external sources for critical materials and defence capabilities. In this context, in January 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron urged the European defence industry to adopt a "war economy mode, with a faster and stronger production capacity" (Bauer-Babef, 2024). France's current strategic and military visions originate from its 2017 Strategic Review of Defence and National Security and 2022 National Strategic Review. Moreover, the country has demonstrated its commitment to reinforcing its military capabilities by adopting the latest Military Programming Law (MPL). With the primary purpose of enabling France to confront emerging threats and to maintain its position among the world's major powers, the MPL allocates significant resources to support new capability efforts while enhancing France's defence readiness (Machi, 2024).

Based on these premises, this paper examines France's pivotal role in redefining European security dynamics against the backdrop of current geopolitical challenges. The first section of this work analyses the implications of the ongoing conflict and the initiatives the EU adopted in response, underlying the urgency of strengthening European collective defence mechanisms. The second section retraces the development of France's defence strategy as outlined in the country's 2022 National Strategic Review. More specifically, the section addresses President Macron's call for a "war economy mode" aimed at revitalising European defence readiness through enhanced partnerships and better resource allocation at the European level. Finally, the third section is dedicated to the recently adopted MPL (2024-2030); specifically, it analyses France's support to Ukraine by assessing France's defence capabilities and budget allocation.

The EU's Response to Geopolitical Turmoil

The EU and its member states have deeply condemned Russia's unprovoked war of aggression, providing Ukraine with "humanitarian, political, financial and military support" (European Council, 2024). The Union's commitment to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty dates back to the 2014 Russian illegal annexation of Crimea (NATO, 2024); in response, on 17 March 2014, the Council of the European Union adopted "Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP", setting out a series of "restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine" (Council of European Union, 2014). Russia recognised the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in the Ukrainian Region of Donbas on 21 February 2022; a few days later, on 24 February 2022, the country invaded Ukraine. The aggression led the EU heads of state to adopt the first package of sanctions against Russia; to date, the Union has implemented twelve additional restrictive measures to dismantle Russia's economy and limit its access to vital goods and technologies. Overall, the sanctions have exerted significant pressure on Russia; most notably, they have successfully affected the country's financial resources and disrupted supply chains in strategic industrial sectors (European Commission, 2024).

A significant step taken by the EU towards addressing the challenges posed by the war is the adoption of the 2022 EU Strategic Compass, defined as the "blueprint designed to fortify the EU's security and defence capabilities by 2030" (European Union External Action, 2022). The primary goal of the Strategic Compass is to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and reinforce the Union's role as a global security provider in accord with transatlantic partners. The Strategic Compass delineates four pivotal pillars of action: Act, Secure, Invest, and Partner (European Union External Action, 2022). Under the "Act" pillar, the EU pledges to enhance crisis response capabilities by erecting a Rapid Deployment Capacity and fortifying command and control structures. The "Secure" pillar prioritises "pre-emptive threat assessment", bolstering intelligence capabilities, and enhancing cyber defence frameworks. The "Invest" pillar emphasises investing in cutting-edge technologies to reduce dependencies and fill strategic gaps. Finally, the "Partner" pillar urges the EU to develop collaborations with its crucial partners, namely NATO and the UN (European Council, 2022).

Since its inception, the EU has made significant advancements in implementing the Strategic Compass' objectives. Indeed, EU member states have allocated €28 billion for military equipment through initiatives such as the European Peace Facility (EPF) and bilateral aid. Additionally, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the Council, Josep Borrel, announced that, by the end of 2024, more than one million artillery ammunition rounds will be delivered to Ukraine; the High Representative also announced that member states will provide training to 60,000 Ukrainian soldiers on EU territory by summer 2024.

Despite the general increase of defence spending on Research and Development (€ 3.5 billion to date), Mr Borrel warned that the devolved amount is still “significantly below the 2% collective benchmark in this domain” and that “this trend risks impeding future cooperation in the EU and weakening the [European Defence Technological and Industrial Base] EDTIB” (European Union External Action, 2024).

Along with the need to strengthen the EDTIB, the EU recognised the necessity of enhancing defence preparedness and providing continuous support to allies in such an evolving security landscape (European Council, 2023). In fact, prolonged underinvestment, fragmentation, and a shortage of critical raw materials have increased the EDTIB's dependency on third countries (Clapp, 2023). It is worth noticing that the Joint Communication issued by the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions in March 2024 recognises the need to develop an “innovative, competitive and resilient” European defence industry; this achievement will contribute to increasing European defence readiness, which is “defined as a steady state of preparedness of the Union and its member states to protect the security of its citizens, the integrity of its territory and critical assets or infrastructures”, including the “ability to provide military assistance to its partners, such as Ukraine” (European Commission, 2024). To this purpose, in 2023, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the adoption of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). Such strategy sets out ambitious goals for member states, such as collaborative procurement targets and intra-EU defence trade values by 2030 (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), solicited by the EDIS, has resolved to address industry challenges, e.g. supply chain security, and provide support to the Ukrainian defence sector. With a budget of €1.5 billion over the period 2025-2027, the EDIP seeks to enhance the competitiveness of the EDTIB and foster cooperation with Ukraine (DEFIS, 2024).

The Evolution of French Defence

France faces similar security challenges to its European counterparts and has actively contributed to shaping a unified European foreign policy to foster a more robust and influential Europe (Maulny, 2024). However, unlike many European nations, which primarily relied on NATO for defence throughout the Cold War and beyond, France has pursued a path marked by exceptionalism (Le Gleut, Conway-Mouret, 2019). This approach, evident since the country withdrew from NATO's integrated command structure in 1966, demonstrates France's commitment to fortifying its defence capabilities while maintaining national independence (Schmitt, 2017). Despite withdrawing from NATO, France has maintained a significant role in EU defence and actively sought to reinforce its engagement in the North-Atlantic Alliance after re-joining it in 2009 (Le Gleut, Conway-Mouret, 2019).

France is the most advanced EU country in terms of adopting reforms to strengthen its defence industry. Indeed, in a speech held at the 2022 Eurosatory Arms Fair, French President Emmanuel Macron urged the implementation of “war economy” measures oriented towards improving the French defence industry following the Russian war of aggression. “War economy” – or “wartime economy” – is the idea of mobilising a whole economy for war production when a conflict erupts. The concept of war economy builds around five pillars (visibility, simplification, securing supply chains, human resources, and access to financing), essentially aimed at “producing more, better and faster”. Each of the five pillars entails several priorities and measures to be implemented, such as giving visibility to prime and subcontractors to boost investments and limiting foreign dependency to make the industry more resilient (Schnitzler, 2024).

Initially articulated in the 2017 Strategic Review of Defence and National Security preface, President Macron’s vision emphasises the EU’s role as the “natural framework for France’s security and defence” (République Française, 2017). In this sense, Mr Macron advocates for revitalising European defence through strategic alignment, partnerships with like-minded States, and resource allocation at the European level. This vision resonates in the 2022 National Strategic Review, which aims to enhance France’s global influence by 2030, emphasising France’s traditional goal of strategic autonomy (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, 2024). Indeed, this review outlines the measures deemed as necessary to ensure France’s ability to effectively transition to a “war economy” when necessary, including strategic stockpiling, production reallocation, supply chain diversification, and sustainable development initiatives. It also advocates for European initiatives to enhance supply chain security and adapt essential equipment to different geopolitical contexts (Mantelet, 2022). The 2022 Strategic Review represents a milestone in France’s defence policy; in fact, it focuses on strengthening France’s influence in key areas while fostering a Europe capable of managing crises and safeguarding its security. As its main priority, France aims to grant the defence of its mainland and overseas territories by 2030; the country also supports European strategic autonomy, emphasising the need to acquire credible defence capabilities that complement NATO while upholding effective multilateral mechanisms grounded in international law (Strategic Review, 2022).

France’s Military Investment and Assistance to Ukraine

The French government firmly supports Ukraine through military investment and assistance—a way for France to reach its domestic and international strategic goals (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, 2024). France’s pledge to stand alongside Ukraine is backed by the recent adoption of the 2024-2030 Military Programming Law (MPL), whose main objective is to preserve France’s global standing by enhancing its defence readiness. Indeed, over the next seven years, the MPL envisions an investment of €413 billion aimed at addressing the shortcomings exposed by the conflict in Ukraine, including the need for additional ammunition and weaponry (Machi, 2024).

This investment aligns with France's strategic culture, comprising an autonomous foreign policy, a unified European approach to foreign affairs, and a solid transatlantic alliance (Maulny, 2024). As stated by Sébastien Lecornu, French Ministry of Armed Forces, the MPL aims to revitalise the armed forces model in the context of technological breakthroughs, rearmament, and explicit contention of international legal principles. The MPL also represents a political and military transformation project that seeks to protect the strategic autonomy of French sovereignty (Auran, 2024).

Despite some reluctance and amendments during the legislative process, the French government remains committed to securing the necessary resources for defence initiatives. Notably, while expenses related to Ukraine are excluded from the military programming law for transparency reasons (Delaporte, 2024), France has provided significant financial and material support to the country, totalling over €3.8 billion between February 2022 and December 2023. This support includes delivering military equipment such as artillery, ground-to-air defence systems, and armoured vehicles, and the organisation of training for Ukrainian troops (Ministère Des Armées, 2024).

Nevertheless, while President Macron strongly supported Ukraine in his speeches, several studies showed that France sends fewer arms to Ukrainians than countries such as Norway and Germany (Basso, 2022). Specifically, on 29 February 2024, the Kiel Institute for the World Economy published the "Ukraine Support Tracker – Methodological Update & New Results on Aid 'Allocation'". This research work serves as a database that quantifies military, financial and humanitarian support provided by foreign governments to Ukraine over the last two years. The Kiel Institute's database reported that, compared to Nordic countries (€10.2 billion) and Germany (€9.95 billion), France allocated a smaller sum of military aid to Ukraine, totalling below €2 billion since February 2022. It is worth noting that, according to the report, France has lacked transparency concerning the aid it has provided to Ukraine; this practice has required the report to underestimate the country's total allocations (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2024). On this note, the Kiel Institute released an update of the Ukraine Support Tracker on 25 April 2024; the most recent update of the official figures brings French delivered military aid to €2.6 billion (Bomprezzi et al., 2024).

Thomas Gassilloud, Chairman of the National Defence and Armed Forces Committee of the French National Assembly, addressed the criticism over the lack of practical support for Ukraine, stating that France has taken all the proper steps to demonstrate that the Russian invasion is unacceptable (Basso, 2022). More specifically, on 12 March 2024, the French National Assembly approved the Bilateral Security Agreement on Security Cooperation between Ukraine and France, which enumerates the main elements of France's long-term commitment to strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities and economic stability in the face of the Russian aggression and to deter upcoming threats (The President Office of Ukraine, 2024).

The Bilateral Agreement is a 10-year security pact addressing security cooperation in the military, political, humanitarian, and financial spheres. In this regard, the security pact requires France to devolve €3 billion in military aid to Ukraine by the end of 2024 (Casali, 2024). The French support is expected to inspire and encourage Ukraine's allies to take immediate and additional action (Le Monde, 2024).

France released recent statements regarding the conflict in Ukraine; more specifically, President Macron referred to the possibility of a Western troop deployment, which provoked debate among allies. He clarified that, as Ukrainian forces face setbacks on the battlefield (Caulcutt, 2024), France remains steadfast in its position, stressing the necessity of a unified and proactive approach in addressing the crisis and assuring its people that France would “never” take the “initiative” in any offensive in Ukraine, but that he “accepts the possibility” (Le Monde, 2024). Moreover, France is exploring innovative ways to support Ukraine; partnerships among French defence companies are encouraged and expected to produce and maintain weapons on Ukrainian soil (The Economic Times, 2024). To this purpose, France advocates for standard procurement processes and collaborative capability development within the European Union, aiming to enhance interoperability and collective defence capabilities. This commitment aligns with the EU's Strategic Compass, which envisions a robust Rapid Deployment Capacity to address various crises effectively (Matié, 2024).

Conclusion

More than two years after its start, the Russian war of aggression towards Ukraine keeps threatening the European continent's peace and stability. By undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, the conflict triggered a prompt response by the EU, primarily through means of restrictive measures directed towards both limiting the movement of natural persons and freezing those assets which are vital for Russia to finance its military efforts. Nevertheless, the conflict has exposed the shortcomings of the EU's defence industry; following years of underinvestment in the defence industry, EU member states are nowadays showcasing a reduced industrial production capacity. More specifically, the attempt to arm Ukraine in the context of the unexpected prolongation of the war led to the depletion of national stocks (European Council, 2024). Therefore, it appears imperative for the European industry to follow a long-term production strategy to create the structural conditions of the European defence industrial readiness. In this framework, the EDIS and EDIP initiatives play a significant role in pursuing the main goal of developing a stronger and more responsive European defence industry. The success of these two programmes depends greatly on resource allocation; however, it is expected that both Ukraine and the EDITB will benefit from the increased cooperation envisaged under EDIS and EDIP (European Commission, 2024).

Against the backdrop of such geopolitical instability, France aims to address the EU's overdependency on their American ally and its defence industry. Embodied in the 2017 and 2022 Strategic Reviews, French President Macron's vision is proactively oriented towards improving European defence readiness and reinforcing collective security efforts, appearing coherent with the goals set by the EU in the Versailles Declaration and the 2022 Strategic Concept. In this picture, President Macron has been considered "one of the few national leaders who has a strategic vision on national and European defence" (Dempsey, 2024). Most notably, he acknowledged the need for EU countries to do more by urging Europe to switch towards a "war economy mode", emphasising the need to increment European defence capabilities and industry while reducing defence procurement processes.

The propension of France to align its defence strategy with EU objectives is further exemplified by the adoption of the 2024-2030 MPL; the MPL is mainly intended to strengthen defence partnership and represents the French Government's attempt to provide the military with increased budget aimed at solving the weaknesses highlighted by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Auran, 2024). Despite some criticisms concerning the material support Macron has provided Ukraine over the past two years, France has made several steps towards increasing its role as a security provider for the invaded country; these efforts, mainly exemplified by the adoption of the Bilateral Security Agreement on Security Cooperation between Ukraine and France, will play a major role in supporting the Ukrainian armed forces' resistance against the Russian aggression. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that France will likely lead by example, as it positioned itself as the country Europe needs to overcome internal problems in both arranging the EU's defence industry and identifying practical and quick responses to Ukraine's current military deficiencies.

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