

FROM RAPPROCHEMENT TO DETERRENCE: EMMANUEL MACRON'S LEADERSHIP AND THE SHIFT IN FRANCE'S RUSSIA POLICY (2017-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Foreign policy shifts are often attributed to wars and crises, but how much do they also reflect the agency of leaders? While the French president Emmanuel Macron initially pursued dialogue and engagement with Moscow, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted a strategic realignment, revealing a shift in foreign policy orientation toward Russia from accommodation to confrontation. This thesis explores the evolution of Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia from 2017 to 2025, focusing on how his leadership agency shaped France's gradual but strategic realignment throughout the conflict. Employing a longitudinal case study and process-tracing, the thesis analyzes Macron's public rhetoric and foreign policy decisions across his two presidential terms. A theoretical framework combining Neoclassical Realism, Role Theory, and Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) is used to argue that France's foreign policy shift toward Russia was not solely driven by structural pressures, but also by Macron's leadership style and France's global role. The findings contribute to Foreign Policy Analysis studies by showing how leadership agency mediates systemic constraints in moments of geopolitical rupture, while illustrating the persistent tension between France's strategic ambitions and the realities of European security.

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, France, Emmanuel Macron, Russia, Vladimir Putin, Ukraine, War, European security, Leadership Trait Analysis, Neoclassical Realism*

AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Victoria Mária Širocká**, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled “From Rapprochement to Deterrence: Emmanuel Macron’s Leadership and the shift in France’s Russia Policy (2017-2025)” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 22 May 2025

Victoria Mária Širocká

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BACE – Belief in the Ability to Control Events

CC – Conceptual Complexity

EU – European Union

EUMAM – European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine

EP – European Parliament

EPC – European Political Community

ESA – European Strategic Autonomy

FPA – Foreign Policy Analysis

FP – Foreign Policy

IR – International Relations

LTA – Leadership Trait Analysis

NATO - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NCR – Neoclassical Realism

NRC – National Role Conception

PWR – Need for Power

RF – Russian Federation

SC – Self-confidence

UK – United Kingdom

US – The United States

1 INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in European security, shattering long-held assumptions about peace on the continent. As the culmination of an eight-year crisis that began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's act of aggression prompted many European countries, including France and Germany, to reconsider their security orientations and foreign policy strategies toward Russia and the EU. France's response to the invasion drew scrutiny, especially because its president, Emmanuel Macron, had long championed a Gaullist vision of France as *a puissance d'équilibre*, or balancing power between East and West (Duclos 2022; Maślanka 2023; Kapp and Fix 2024, 327). Yet, the sight of Russian tanks rolling into Ukraine in 2022 forced a recalibration – if not of Macron's core vision, then certainly of his strategy.

Elected in 2017 as a political outsider promising renewal, Macron swiftly advanced an assertive strategy of “European Strategic Autonomy” (ESA) as an idea of a “sovereign” Europe capable of “handling crises and implementing solutions that guarantee its security” (Ministère des Armées 2022, 27). In practice, this vision translated into a strong push for a more integrated military cooperation in EU foreign, security, and defense policy (Tertrais 2017; Maulny 2019; Momtaz 2019), vocal criticisms of NATO (Macron 2019b), and diplomatic overtures to Russia (Staunton 2022; Robinet 2022). Reflecting his belief in the power of diplomacy and mediation to avert conflict in Ukraine, Macron initially maintained direct diplomatic engagement with Russia (Stewart 2021; Maślanka 2023, 2024ab). However, as negotiations within the Normandy Format and the Minsk Agreements faltered and Moscow's aggressive stance persisted, the French president adapted his approach, moving from dialogue to deterrence, without abandoning his Europeanist ambitions.

Emmanuel Macron's evolving leadership style and France's shift towards a more hegemonic role in European security before versus after the invasion form the core focus of this research. Greater alignment with NATO and stronger support for Ukraine during Macron's second term raises a key question: *What explains the reorientation of Macron's foreign policy toward Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine?*

Addressing this question requires integrating all levels of analysis within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). To that end, I combine Neoclassical Realism (NCR), which posits that systemic pressures are filtered through domestic-level variables and leader perceptions (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016); Role theory, conceptualizing how leaders adopt and enact national role conceptions (Holsti 1970); and Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), which operationalizes stable personality traits that condition these interpretations and foreign policy behavior of a leader (Hermann 1980).

Methodologically, the thesis employs a longitudinal case study using Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and process-tracing to identify how Macron's leadership style influenced France's evolving position toward Russia. It compares Macron's foreign policy across two periods: his first term (2017–2022), during which he pursued strategic autonomy and dialogue with Russia; and the second term (2022–2025), in which France's stance hardened significantly following the war. To empirically assess the role of leadership, Macron's leadership traits are analyzed through a computer-assisted content analysis tool, *Profiler+*, based on public speeches, statements, and strategic communications (Levine and Young 2014). To establish the link between traits and foreign policy, I qualitatively process-trace key foreign policy events, using Macron's verbal outputs, academic literature, strategic documents, and analysis of media coverage to assess how Macron's leadership traits and systemic pressures interacted to produce FP reorientation. Through a multi-level lens, the thesis offers both a

theoretical contribution to FPA and an empirically grounded explanation for one of the most consequential foreign policy recalibrations in recent EU diplomacy.

The thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 presents the research question and empirical puzzle. Chapter 3 situates the research within the broader academic debate on the agency-structure dichotomy in foreign policy change, juxtaposing structural and leadership-based explanations and highlighting the importance of analyzing individuals' roles in foreign policy. Chapter 4 outlines the theoretical framework and formulates the core hypotheses. Chapter 5 details the research design and methodology, explaining the process-tracing technique and the operationalization of Macron's leadership traits, while also addressing its limitations. Chapter 6 presents the empirical analysis, tracing Macron's Russia policy before and after the 2022 invasion. Chapter 7 evaluates the findings in light of the theoretical framework. The Conclusion reflects on the theoretical implications and proposes avenues for future research.

2 RESEARCH QUESTION AND EMPIRICAL PUZZLE

Individuals have traditionally not been the focal point in the study of international relations, and instead, structural explanations have dominated foreign policy research and theory (Kaarbo 2017, 22; Çuhadar 2017a). Nevertheless, leaders play a crucial role in their nations' diplomatic capacities due to their incredible potential to impact the goals, plans, and foreign and security policies of their governments (Byman and Pollack 2011; Dyson 2006; Hermann 2002; Kaarbo 2018, 37; 2021, 21). Foreign policy is both a central element of France's national identity and *domaine réservé* of the President of the Republic, who holds extensive executive powers in military and defense affairs (Perottino 2005; Pannier and Schmitt 2019, 898). By “excessively personifying” the country's foreign policy (Duclos 2021), the President decisively influences France's strategic direction and international behavior.

A growing body of scholarship has examined the foreign and security policy orientation as well as ‘bold and personalized’ leadership of the French President Emmanuel Macron (e.g., Cole 2022; Drake 2020; Gomart and Hecker 2018; Maślanka 2023; Maulny 2019; Perottino and Guasti 2020; Staunton 2021; Robinet 2021), marked by a return to the “De Gaulle-Mitterrand tradition” (Duclos 2017, 2018; Tiersky 2018, 88). Macron's belief in “a strategy of boldness” and “risk-taking” (Macron 2019b), combined with the evolving conception of France's role, may carry explanatory power in accounting for her recent strategic adjustments, specifically the attitude toward Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The empirical puzzle lies in the fact that Russian aggression took place on February 24, 2022, while Macron was still serving his first term, and yet, compared to some European counterparts like Poland or the Baltic states, France's response to the invasion was initially measured and gradual (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024). Throughout most of his first presidential term, Macron, like his predecessors, engaged with Putin, viewing Russia as a necessary counterpart in constructing a stable European security order (Calmels 2021; Maślanka 2023).

However, following his re-election in April 2022, Macron's tone progressively hardened. His support for Ukraine grew more vocal and material, and his discourse increasingly aligned with the EU's confrontational posture (Maślanka 2024a; Caulcutt 2023; Sadovschi 2024) as he eventually endorsed Ukraine's EU candidacy (Mansoor 2022), supported NATO's Eastern enlargement, and backed potential EU troops on Ukrainian soil (Macron 2023c; 2025d).

France, as a "middle-power democracy," serves as a compelling case study not only due to its historic role in EU integration and its leading position in European defense and security, or its permanent seat on the UN Security Council as a nuclear power (Kleinfeld et al. 2021; Garnier 2023), but also because its stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is likely to influence the trajectory of EU and global politics in the long term (Weber 2025). Moreover, Macron's rhetorical and strategic pivot after 2022 stands out because it occurred under leadership and institutional continuity, contrasting with France's long-standing tradition of strategic balancing and accommodation toward Russia. The main research question of this thesis is, therefore: ***What explains the reorientation of Macron's foreign policy toward Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine?*** To understand its micro-foundations, the thesis will address the following sub-question: *How did Emmanuel Macron's leadership traits and evolving role conception shape France's recalibration of Russia policy after 2022?*

Theoretically, this puzzle speaks to a foundational debate in FPA about the relative weight of *structure* (international, institutional, and cultural constraints) and *agency* (the role of humans) in decision-making (Çuhadar et al. 2017b). From a neorealist classical perspective, France's foreign policy shift in 2022 can be seen as an inevitable reaction to a drastically altered security environment. Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the surge in NATO unity, and shifting expectations from European partners created a new external reality that few leaders could ignore.

However, structure alone cannot account for the timing, framing, or tone of France's response (Ripsman et al. 2016). The fact that France's policy shift was more incremental and rhetorically nuanced than that of other European powers suggests the importance of individual-level variables (Çuhadar et al. 2017b; Hudson 2005). Because leadership-centered accounts see international outcomes as fundamentally "grounded in human decision makers" (Hudson 2005, 1), scholars have applied Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) to many world leaders to understand how personality affects foreign policy (Çuhadar et al. 2017b; Dyson 2006). Despite Macron's centrality to French and European politics over the past decade, no longitudinal LTA has been applied to Macron's case, and no systematic attempt has yet been made to analyze how his personality traits and French role conceptions may have shaped the evolution of French foreign policy.

Finally, this question carries real-world significance. As geopolitical tensions in Europe persist and the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, understanding how leaders adapt amid exogenous shocks could be of use to other states navigating crises. It could imply that, depending on their psychological profiles and leadership styles, leaders do not experience structural pressures uniformly, and that leadership traits, rather than simply external threats, can be decisive in how they are perceived, shaping national strategy and foreign policy. Thus, if leadership traits play a substantial role in conditioning foreign policy responses, foreign policy change cannot be fully understood without accounting for agency. Macron's case provides a rare opportunity to examine how such dynamics play out not only between leaders but within the governance of a single state leader over time.

3 RELEVANCE TO THE IR LITERATURE

One of the foundational debates in international relations (IR) theory concerns the relative importance of structure versus agency in shaping foreign policy outcomes. While structure refers to external systemic forces, including the distribution of power, alliances, and norms that constrain state actions, agency emphasizes the determining capacity of decision-makers and domestic political variables. Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has long positioned itself as a subfield of International Relations (IR), seeking to explain variation in state behavior by looking into the “black box of the state decision-making” (Hudson 2005, 3; Kaarbo and Thies 2024), simply because all international politics stems from foreign policy actions (Hudson 2005, 21). By focusing on actors, FPA aims to “balance the agent–structure debate,” which had been dominated by structural theorizing in IR (Hudson 2005; Kaarbo 2017, 22). The case of French foreign policy toward Russia under President Emmanuel Macron provides an illustrative example of how both structural forces and individual agency interact.

3.1 STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

Structural realist and neorealist theories of IR see foreign policy behavior as constrained and shaped by the distribution of material power within the international system. Kenneth Waltz emphasizes that its structure compels states to act in certain ways to ensure survival, leading to predictable patterns of behavior such as power balancing and bandwagoning (Waltz 1979). John Mearsheimer’s (2001) offensive realism likewise asserts that the quest for security in an anarchic, uncertain system pushes states to maximize power and pursue self-help strategies. From this perspective, systemic incentives are commonly seen as primary drivers of foreign policy change (Gustavsson 1999; Hagan and Rosati 1994). Shifts in the external environment (be they crises, security threats, or normative shifts) often prompt states to rethink their foreign

policy priorities, threat perceptions, and strategic options (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014; Hermann 1990; Rynhold 2007). By this logic, individual leaders matter little.

Systemic shocks are tempered by powerful forces of continuity: satisfied states, for instance, tend to resist change (Volgy and Schwarz 1994), suggesting that international norms, agreements, and commitments frequently reinforce status-quo policies (Rosati 1994). Conversely, norms can also serve as engines of change through processes of international socialization (Risse and Sikkink 1999) or strategic use by domestic actors (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014, 489). However, foreign policy transformations are seldom a mere mechanical response to systemic incentives. While systemic accounts provide foundational explanations about the external constraints on state behavior (Keohane 1986), they fall short in explaining the considerable variation observed in foreign policy responses under similar structural conditions (Schweller 2003, 101; Foulon 2015; Voss and Dorsey 1992). Hence, Russia's aggression presents a case in point: even when confronted with the same structural shock, EU states, including France, pursued different foreign policy responses.

3.2 AGENCY-CENTERED EXPLANATIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

In contrast, agency-centric approaches in FPA emphasize domestic political processes and the central role of human decision-makers, arguing that their perceptions, beliefs, personalities, and preferences mediate systemic pressures to produce state behavior (Hudson 2005; Rose 1998; Dyson 2006; Kaarbo and Thies 2024; Çuhadar et al. 2017b; Welch 2005, 40). Gustavsson (1999, 84) contends that structural stimuli must first be perceived and interpreted as relevant or threatening by decision-makers to trigger change. For Valerie Hudson (2005, 7), leaders represent “the source of all international politics and all change therein,” which makes FPA's nature essentially “actor-specific” (George 1993). Similarly, David Welch maintains that foreign policy decisions are “as much about how leaders see the world as about the world itself” (Welch 2005, 40), echoing Kaarbo's claim (2017, 25; 2018, 35) that “personality characteristics

condition how leaders respond to both international and domestic constraints and opportunities.”

Generally, FPA scholars highlight the role of influential elites and ‘policy entrepreneurs’ as agents capable of driving foreign policy change by reframing debates, exploiting crises, or overcoming bureaucracy (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014, 487-88; Alden and Aran 2017, 130–31). For example, David Welch (2005, 5) argues that dramatic foreign policy change most often arises when leaders perceive continued adherence to the status quo as too costly or painful. Hagan (1995, 138) illustrates how leaders’ strategies to retain power shape their responsiveness to international pressures, while Holsti (1982) identifies personality and perception as the most powerful drivers of foreign policy change.

To illustrate the decisive role of individual agency and elucidate the human element in foreign policy, scholars have applied leadership-based approaches rooted in political psychology, namely George’s (1969) operational code analysis and Margaret Hermann’s (1980) work on the impact of leaders’ traits on their foreign policy choices. Using such approaches, Dyson (2006) argues that Tony Blair’s leadership role was “a crucial factor in understanding why the British went to war,” (Kaarbo 2017, 28) while Ziv (2014, 9) shows that Israel’s historic decision to negotiate the Oslo accords with the PLO was only possible due to Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres’ rethinking and revision of Israeli foreign policy priorities. In Ziv’s view, structural and domestic factors create “permissive conditions” but are rarely sufficient on their own to trigger foreign policy change (Ziv 2014, 18).

Nevertheless, purely agency-centered accounts also face limitations – bureaucratic routines, organizational inertia, and veto players can substantially limit a leader’s maneuvering space and often serve to entrench foreign policy continuity (Rosati et al. 1994; Welch 2005, 33; Joly and Richter 2019). Conversely, leadership transitions, electoral victories, political realignments, or dramatic policy failures can open windows of opportunity for policy change

(Volgy and Schwarz 1994, 27; Peltner 2017; Rynhold 2007, 433; Lee 2012, 739; Walsh 2006, 492-493). Ultimately, although leaders can serve as powerful engines of change, their agency remains historically, ideationally, and institutionally bound (Kaarbo 2017, 33). This is particularly true in France's semi-presidential system, where the centralization of foreign policy power constrains the agency of the head of state.

3.3 TOWARD AN INTEGRATED APPROACH: BRIDGING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Before turning to the interaction of structure and agency, it is helpful to clarify what is meant by foreign policy change (FPCh). Charles F. Hermann (1990, 5-6) offers one of its most widely cited conceptualizations, distinguishing between four degrees of change: (1) *adjustment* (tactical shifts); (2) *program change* (alterations in methods or instruments); (3) *problem change* (goal substitution) and (4) *international orientation change* as its most "extreme form" and redefinition of external alignments. Others have proposed similar categorizations, such as Rosati's (1994, 237) differentiation between intensification, refinement, reform, and restructuring. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that sweeping transformations, such as changes in foreign orientation, are relatively rare (Rosati 1994; Volgy and Schwarz 1994, 38; Welch 2005, 53, 40), with FPCh often taking the form of smaller adjustments or adaptations that accumulate over time (Haesebrouck and Joly 2021; Hagan and Rosati 1994). This conceptual framing is essential to situating Macron's shift in Russia policy within the broader literature.

Kaarbo and Thies (2024, 13) note that in the last three decades, IR as a field has seen a turn toward incorporating domestic and agent-level variables, sometimes called the "unit-level" or "first image" turn in IR. Recognizing the insufficiency of one-sided explanations, contemporary FPA scholarship increasingly treats foreign policy change as a multi-causal phenomenon that emerges from the interplay of structural pressures, domestic political

variables, and leadership agency (Alden and Aran 2017, 135; Haesebrouck and Joly 2021, 488; Kaarbo and Thies 2024, 1-2; Welch 2005; Merke, Reynoso, and Schenoni 2020, 415). In this vein, FPA considers the system-level as inseparable from the psychosocial *milieu*, in which the leaders operate and conduct foreign policy (Hudson 2005, 13).

For example, France led an intervention in Libya (2011) but exercised restraint in Syria in later years (2013). Why was that the case? The former saw the structure (UN authorization, Arab support, U.S. backing) combined with Sarkozy's activist stance as permitting intervention (Lindström and Zetterlund 2012, 18) while the latter lacked structural backing due to the absence of a UN mandate coupled with reluctance of the UK and US and domestic opposition, and was marked by hesitation in President Hollande's standing (Galbert 2015; Levallois 2016, 80; Lequesne 2016, 313). Foreign policy change, then, results from the "interplay between individual political style, institutional position and role, and external constraints and opportunities" (Cole 2022, 90).

As Carlsnaes (1992, 261) noted, structure and agency must be seen as "causally reciprocal entities," whose "co-constitutive relations" explain both continuity and transformation in foreign policy together (Freire 2012, 3). While the war in Ukraine and reconfiguration of European security represent powerful systemic constraints, Macron's distinct shift from accommodation to confrontation requires attention to how he interpreted France's international role and exercised leadership agency. Drawing on Neoclassical Realism (NCR), Role Theory, and Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), explained next, I predict that Macron's personal characteristics and national role conceptions interacted with systemic pressures to produce a change in France's approach toward Russia.

4 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

An extension of structural realism, Neoclassical Realism (NCR) acknowledges that the anarchic, self-help nature of the international system compels states to prioritize survival and engage in power balancing (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001; Walt 2002). Survival becomes “a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have” (Waltz 1979, 91), and the only way to ensure one’s security is “to be the most powerful state in the system” (Mearsheimer 2001, 33). By this logic, the rise of any power should lead to balancing against it.

In the case of France, this implies that the growing aggressiveness of Russia, escalating in February 2022, should trigger a more assertive French foreign policy as Macron’s approach seeks to balance against Russia. Yet, this prediction only holds partially because Macron continued to seek *rapprochement* with Moscow until 2023, even after Russia’s invasion. This limitation opens the door for NCR, which argues that systemic pressures alone cannot fully explain the timing and diversity of states’ foreign policy decisions (Ripsman et al. 2016, 19).

NCR introduces a set of intervening domestic variables that mediate the translation of external pressures into concrete foreign policy responses (Rose 1998, 147; Snyder 1991; Zakaria 1992; Lobell et al. 2009). These include strategic culture, state-society relations, domestic institutions, and above all, leader perceptions, as foreign policies are enacted not by abstract states, but by governments and individuals (Schweller 2006, 47) who process information differently (Sarotte 2014, 34). As such, states facing similar systemic pressures may still adopt divergent foreign policies depending on how their leaders interpret threats, roles, and opportunities (Brummer 2022; Dyson 2006; Foulon 2015, 636; Kitchen 2010; Ripsman et al. 2016, 62-63). Domestic-level filters ultimately act as “transmission belts” between structure and agency (Ripsman et al. 2016, 59; Ratti 2006, 96) – among these, two are particularly relevant for understanding Macron’s foreign policy response to Russia:

- (1) The national role conceptions of France as interpreted and enacted by Macron, and
- (2) Macron's leadership traits.

Each reflects a different sub-systemic factor altering France's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The next subsection discusses France's NRC and how Macron may have reaffirmed or reinterpreted it in this crisis.

4.2 ROLE THEORY AND FRENCH NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS

Developed by Kalevi J. Holsti, Role Theory offers a framework for understanding how leaders interpret and enact their state's identity and purpose in world affairs, and hence why states facing similar structural constraints behave differently (Wehner and Thies 2021, 1426-1428; Thies 2009, 2-3; Breuning 2017). Central to it is the concept of *national role conceptions* (NRCs), defined as policymakers' internalized beliefs about "the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment" (Holsti 1970, 245-6). These role-based expectations, whether self-defined or projected by others, can significantly influence foreign policy behavior by driving role performance (Holsti 1970, 243-4; Aggestam 2006, 23). Because NRCs are articulated through discourse and driven by leaders' "perceptions, values, and attitudes" (Holsti 1970, 239), the decisions about "what role to select and play internationally" remain ultimately contingent on subjective interpretations (Thiers and Wehner 2022, 1430; Kaarbo and Thies 2024, 221). In this way, NRCs are not fixed but develop "in response to cues and demands" (Walker 1992, 23) arising from changing structural conditions, domestic contestation, or leaders' strategic ambitions (Wish 1980, 536; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016).

Thies (2012, 30-31) posits that NRCs are formed through a process of *socialization*, in which states negotiate or contest roles with other actors, based on perceived alignment with national interests. In that vein, Holsti (1970, 239) emphasizes the relational nature of roles, distinguishing between *role performance* of the "ego" (ego-casting), and *role prescription*, as

an act of attributing roles to others (alter-casting) (Thies 2012, 8). She states that states rarely perform a single role and often hold overlapping or contradictory role conceptions at the same time (Holsti 1970, 277), which are always shaped by expectations about how others will or should behave. Building on this, Yarhi-Milo (2018) suggests that leaders often categorize counterparts through cognitive-affective heuristics such as the “friend-enemy” schema and adjust role attributions when observed behavior becomes too inconsistent with prior beliefs. Shore (2014, 14) reinforces this view, describing “pattern breaks” as moments of adversary’s unexpected behavior or deviation from routine that prompt leaders to reassess both their roles and those of others. In this view, individual foreign policy decisions represent “attempts to enact” NRCs within the wider system of role distribution (Holsti 1970, 247).

One of the core historical features of France’s NRC has been the pursuit of *strategic autonomy* – a deeply rooted belief in France’s status as a sovereign and globally influential power, grounded in the Gaullist tradition of *grandeur* (greatness) and independence (Chafer 2014, 514; Rapnouil and Shapiro 2017). The foundation of this role conception was laid in the 1960s, with France’s development of an independent nuclear deterrent and Charles de Gaulle’s withdrawal from the NATO integrated military command in 1966 (Grant 1985, 411; Rieker 2017, 63; Pannier and Schmitt 2019, 912), who, as the first President of the Fifth Republic, frequently asserted that an independent France had a duty to maintain *equilibrium* between the two Cold War powers (Holsti 1970, 271). This NRC has since then functioned not merely as a defining element of France’s identity, but as a performative role enacted and reinterpreted by successive French leaders on the global stage.

Strategic autonomy was first formalized in the 1972 White Paper on Defense, which framed strategic autonomy as the ability to act without overreliance on alliances, particularly NATO (Retter et al. 2017; Mauro 2018). This was later redefined in more cooperative terms under President Jacques Chirac (Sloan 1997; Lequesne 2016, 313), with the 2008 White Paper

calling for the development of a European capacity for independent action vis-à-vis the US and NATO (Mauro 2018; Retter et al. 2021; Howorth 2018), long regarded as “*une amie, alliée, mais pas alignée*” – a friend, ally, but not aligned (Major 2021, 35). The French NRC continued to evolve under President Sarkozy, who reintegrated France into NATO’s military command in 2009 while emphasizing national sovereignty (Irondelle and Mérand 2011, 29; Rieker 2017, 107). As such, there has been an enduring tension central to France’s NRC, which rests upon a continuous assertion of national independence and keeping multilateral commitments within the EU and NATO (Pannier and Schmitt 2019; Irondelle and Schmitt 2013).

That said, this tension was also evident in France’s balancing act toward Russia. Deeming it fundamental to European security (Calmels 2021), France “remained sensitive to Russian interests” and adopted an apprehensive stance toward NATO Eastern enlargement after 1991 (Rieker 2017, 64). Considering Ukraine’s accession as a red line for Russia (Gnesotto 2023), France, unlike Poland and the US, opposed granting Ukraine a Membership Action Plan at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest (Cadier and Quencez 2023) and advanced that “any rupture in relations would increase the risk of escalation” even after Russia annexed Crimea and war broke out in Donbas in 2014 (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 18-19).

Emmanuel Macron inherited this Gaullist idea of France as *puissance d’équilibre* but reinterpreted it with an emphasis on European strategic autonomy (ESA) and the idea of *Europe puissance* – Europe as a geopolitical actor (Fiott 2022, 11; Duclos 2018; Revue nationale stratégique 2017, 2022; Gnesotto 2023). He thus affirmed NATO’s role in European defense by increasing French participation in the Alliance’s deterrence and collective defense activities (Tiersky 2018, 94; Pannier and Schmitt 2019, 906), while simultaneously envisioning Russia as an indispensable partner in European security and building ESA. Following the invasion, however, Macron’s framing of Russia underwent a major shift, even as the ego-casting of France as European security leader remained consistent.

4.3 LEADERSHIP TRAIT ANALYSIS: FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL AGENCY

LTA provides a micro-foundational lens on leadership agency within the Neoclassical Realist framework (Brummer 2016; Dyson 2006; Kaarbo 2017, 2018, 2021; Wehner and Thies 2021; Keller 2005). As structural factors set the stage for foreign policy change or adjustment, and NRCs help capture Macron’s vision of France’s place in the international system, LTA helps assess how his traits affect the execution of that vision, treating traits as exogenous to the foreign policy context. This framework assumes they are stable and resistant to “changes across roles” (Çuhadar et al. 2017b, 39) and thus determine how leaders interpret and respond to the world.

Developed by Margaret Hermann (1980, 2002), LTA identifies seven core personality traits that influence how political leaders process information and respond to both “international and domestic constraints and opportunities,” which provides expectations regarding “which characteristics of leaders matter and how” (Kaarbo 2017, 25). This thesis focuses on four traits, as defined and listed in Table 1, which are particularly relevant to crisis leadership and structural adaptation (Çuhadar et al., 2017a, p. 4):

Table 1 - *Traits Relevant to Macron’s Leadership and Their Definition*

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Belief in ability to control events (BACE)</i>	Reflects a leader’s confidence in their capacity to influence political outcomes. High-BACE leaders are proactive and challenge constraints; low-BACE leaders are more deferential to external limitations (Hermann 2002, 13).
<i>Need for power (PWR)</i>	Captures the extent to which leaders seek to influence or dominate others. High-PWR scores imply assertive, control-driven leadership; low-PWR leaders are inclined to delegate or share influence (Hermann 2002, 16-17).
<i>Conceptual complexity (CC)</i>	Measures the ability to recognize nuances and multiple perspectives. High-CC leaders imply an open mind; low-CC leaders tend to engage in dichotomous, black-and-white reasoning (Hermann 2002, 16-17).
<i>Self-confidence (SC)</i>	Assesses a leader’s trust in their own judgment and capacity to make decisions. High-SC leaders are more self-assured and resistant to dissent, while low-SC leaders are more cautious and reliant on external advice (Hermann 2002, 17-20).

The distinct behavioral expectations associated with a combination of these traits shed light on two types of leadership: 1) **Responsiveness to constraints**; 2) **Openness to information** (Hermann 2002, 9; Thiers and Wehner 2022, 5), as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 - *Questions for Identifying Macron's Personality Traits*

<i>How does Macron react to political constraints? Does he respect or challenge them?</i>	<i>BACE +PWR</i>
<i>Is Macron cognitively flexible and open to incoming information?</i>	<i>SC + CC</i>

Although not applied in this research, Hermann's third type – **Motivation to seek office** (TASK) – can inform whether a leader is motivated by solving problems or building relationships (Hermann 2002, 24-25), which in turn allows for the categorization of Hermann's (2002, 9) leadership styles. For example, an opportunistic leader who respects constraints, is open to information and problem focused, will be more "context sensitive to adjust a role to his/her view," while a collegial leader follows "the role demands of others domestically and internationally." (Wehner and Thies 2021, 1435). Consequently, combining role theory with FPA leader-based approaches captures individual-level influences and offers "a more complete picture of why governments decide to prioritize certain roles over others" (Wehner and Thies 2021, 1426). Role Theory and LTA thus enable a differentiated account of how Macron interpreted French NRCs and strategically adapted them in light of his personal beliefs and external constraints, eventually bridging structural conditions and individual decision-making behavior. Table 3 below summarizes the individual contributions of the three theoretical lenses guiding this study. Results of Macron's LTA profile are discussed in [Section 5.2](#).

Table 3 - *Comprehensive Theoretical Framework of the Thesis*

<i>Theoretical Element</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Neoclassical Realism	Bridges systemic pressures (e.g. Russia's aggression, EU insecurity) with Macron's beliefs, perceptions and domestic agency.
Leadership Trait Analysis	Assesses Macron's leadership traits profile and its influence on foreign policy decision-making.
Role Theory	Explains Macron's evolving definition of France's national interest and adequate role behavior through NRCs.

4.4 HYPOTHESES AND EXPECTATIONS

Building on the theoretical discussion above, I propose hypotheses reflecting alternative or complementary causal mechanisms. They allow for independent or interactive evaluation of the explanatory power of structural pressures (H1), Macron's leadership traits (H2), and French national role conceptions (H3) in shaping France's evolving Russia policy under Emmanuel Macron. The corresponding evidentiary signatures (ES) provide concrete expectations against which empirical evidence can be systematically evaluated. They are stated as follows:

- H1: *Macron's reorientation of Russia policy was primarily driven by structural shifts in the international system, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

ES: Macron's foreign policy should closely observe signs of a growing Russian threat (Walt) or an increase in its offensive capabilities (Waltz, Mearsheimer), explicitly referencing power shifts in Europe. His actions and statements should reflect a logic of balancing against threats, progressing from a defensive realist approach pre-2022 invasion to an immediate offensive realist approach post-2022 invasion. Macron should instantly perceive Russia as a genuine threat to Europe due to expansionary and hostile behavior and significantly reduce or abandon diplomatic engagement shortly after the war starts on 24 February 2022.

- H2: *Macron's reorientation of Russia policy was primarily driven by his personality traits, particularly high conceptual complexity (CC) and belief in personal diplomacy.*

ES: Given Macron's actions and statements reflect assertiveness and a stable belief in his ability to control diplomatic outcomes with Russia, this should produce consistent insistence on personal involvement and mediation efforts. His openness to external information should drive persistence in engagement with Russia, even in the face of mounting evidence against its effectiveness.

- H3: *Macron's reorientation of Russia policy was driven by his increasing interpretation of France's role as a balancing power, contributing to the ideal of Europe puissance.*

ES: Macron should explicitly invoke France's role as a balancer in his discourse in the lead up to foreign policy change. In the previous period, he should talk about France as a coalition builder and advocate for European Strategic Autonomy.

To confirm or reject the stated hypotheses, the following chapter outlines the research design and methodology used to systematically trace the presence and relative influence of each hypothesized causal mechanism driving France's reorientation toward Russia.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to explain the reorientation of French foreign policy (FP) toward Moscow under President Emmanuel Macron following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The aim is to trace how this shift was jointly driven by systemic pressures, Macron's leadership traits, and national role conceptions (NRCs).

The methodological strategy follows the "causes-of-effects" logic typical of qualitative research, which seeks to identify the mechanisms producing a particular outcome (Ripsman et al. 2016, 108). A longitudinal single-case study is particularly suitable here because it enables the examination of the same spatial unit – France under Macron - over time, dividing it into analytically distinct time segments (Creswell 2013, 30; Ruspini 2003, 182). Therefore, this thesis traces changes in French foreign policy under Macron across two periods:

1. Macron's first term (2017-2022), characterized by attempts at 'strategic dialogue' and engagement with Russia
2. Macron's second term (2022-present), characterized by increasing assertiveness, alignment with NATO, and diplomatic distancing from Moscow

This design employs a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) logic (Anckar 2008, 389), since it holds key domestic factors constant: the same leader (Emmanuel Macron), the same foreign policy-making structures, and the same underlying French strategic culture centered on European strategic autonomy. What varies between the two periods is the external systemic conditions (Russia's invasion, threat environment), and potentially, Macron's leadership traits and France's role in EU security. This approach allows for precise identification of the factors influencing policy shifts, isolating the independent impact of individual agency – *Macron's leadership* – versus changing structural constraints in accounting for France's FP reorientation toward Moscow.

To empirically assess Macron's personality traits, I use Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), a reliable, 'at-a-distance' content analysis method based on Hermann's model (2002). A corpus of 51 verbal outputs related to broader themes in French foreign and domestic policy was compiled to generate Macron's leadership trait profile as prescribed by LTA, consisting of 31 files from his first term (2017-2022) and 20 files from the second term (2022-present) (See [Appendix 1](#)). Trait scores were derived using *Profiler+*, a specialized software for automated content analysis that calculates the frequency of pre-coded word categories from verbal outputs (Levine and Young 2014). The use of word frequencies assumes that the more frequently a leader uses certain words, the more these reflect underlying cognitive and personality patterns (Fouquet and Brummer 2023, 14; Schafer 2014). Scores from each period are benchmarked against mean scores of a global sample of 284 political leaders to determine whether Macron is high, low, or average on a trait (Cuhadar et al. 2017, 7). Macron's trait profile was then used as a baseline to explain the variation in strategies used.

To establish causal mechanisms linking explanatory factors (leadership traits, NRCs, and systemic pressures) to the dependent variable of *French foreign policy reorientation toward Russia*, I rely on process-tracing, a method well-suited for identifying sequences of events and decision-making moments, and their connection to observable policy outcomes (George and Bennett 2005, 214; Beach and Pedersen 2013). In this thesis, *reorientation* refers to a substantive change in strategic goals and role attributions, rather than an extensive redirection of France's international orientation. It combines elements of what Hermann (1990) classifies as problem/goal change and program change and is observable in Macron's discursive and material alignment with Ukraine and NATO, the shifting role-attribution and reassessment of Russia's role in EU security, and strategic initiatives undertaken after February 2022 (e.g., summits on Ukraine). I closely examine speeches, statements, key events, and actions that preceded and followed the invasion to determine how Macron filtered systemic cues; enacted

France's NRC while shifting in alter-casting of Russia; and how his core traits reflected in his responses. Rather than merely documenting that Macron's traits and the foreign policy shift co-occurred, process-tracing enables us to trace *how* his personality, French NRCs, and evolving role attributions of Russia interacted with structural changes to produce France's reorientation. The material for the process-tracing was selected based on its relevance to French foreign policy and Macron's diplomatic conduct *vis-à-vis* Russia and European security. To strengthen data triangulation and the robustness of causal inferences within the contextual and interpretive analysis of Macron's foreign policy discourse, the analysis is complemented by official statements and interviews retrieved from the *Élysée* website, French strategic documents such as *Revue Stratégique Nationale* (Ministère des Armées 2017, 2021), EU and NATO communiqués, expert policy reports from Institut Montaigne, IFRI, or ECFR, and secondary literature as well as credible third-party media reporting (e.g., *Le Monde*, *The Economist*).

5.1 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The chosen approach comes with several limitations. First, reliance on publicly available speeches and official rhetoric raises the concern that LTA might not fully capture or reflect Macron's genuine beliefs or intentions. However, public statements are usually carefully crafted and cross-checked by the government as they are often used as strategic acts. Moreover, Macron is known to rely heavily on public rhetoric as a policy tool (Duclos 2021).

Second, as Macron's second term is ongoing, this thesis cannot offer definitive conclusions about the long-term evolution of his leadership style or role adaptation. Although the MSSD design enhances causal leverage, the possibility remains that unobserved variables such as electoral pressures, elite contestation, or bureaucratic dynamics may have influenced the observed policy shift. For this reason, the term "causal mechanism" should be understood as probabilistic rather than deterministic, providing room for future research.

5.2 MACRON’S LEADERSHIP TRAIT PROFILE

The present chapter briefly interprets the results of Emmanuel Macron’s Leadership Trait Profile spanning from his first election in April 2017 to March 2025.

Table 4 - *Results of Macron’s LTA according to Hermann’s LTA model as adapted by Brummer (2022)*

Profiler+ Findings	PWR	BACE	SC	CC	IGB	TASK	DIS
First Term/Pre-invasion (2017-2022): 31 speeches	0.29	0.37	0.42	0.60	0.15	0.68	0.12
Second Term/Post-invasion (2022-2025): 20 speeches	0.30	0.39	0.40	0.57	0.17	0.63	0.13
122 Political Leaders according to Hermann (2002)	Mean = 0.50 Low < 0.38 High > 0.62	Mean = 0.45 Low < 0.33 High > 0.57	Mean = 0.57 Low < 0.34 High > 0.80	Mean = 0.45 Low < 0.32 High > 0.58	Mean = 0.43 Low < 0.34 High > 0.53	Mean = 0.62 Low < 0.48 High > 0.76	Mean = 0.38 Low < 0.20 High > 0.56
284 Political Leaders according to Brummer (2022)	0.26	0.35	0.36	0.59	0.15	0.63	0.13
Emmanuel Macron's overall LTA score (all 51 speeches)	0.29	0.38	0.41	0.59	0.16	0.66	0.12
	Leans High	Leans High	Average	High	Low	High	Low

Consistent with LTA theory, Macron’s traits profile remained stable across both terms, suggesting that his core psychological makeup did not change significantly over time. However, this does not imply static foreign policy behavior – rather, Macron’s leadership traits interacted with evolving structural conditions, notably the escalation of Russian aggression after 2022, and predisposed him to different strategic choices across periods.

Compared to 284 political leaders, Macron scored moderate-to-high in both *Need for power* (PWR – 0.29) and *Belief in the ability to control events* (BACE – 0.38). This combination indicated Macron as a leader who engages assertively and believes in influencing political outcomes but adapts to constraints “depending on the situation” (Brummer 2022, 245; Brummer 2022, 240-1; Hermann 2002, 13-17). As Dyson (2006, 296-8) notes, leaders with this orientation typically adopt proactive strategies and seek visible leadership roles, rather than

passively react to challenges. Macron's diplomatic activism toward Russia during his first term and later his leadership in NATO-aligned support for Ukraine both manifest this underlying drive for influence and control.

Macron scored average in *Self-confidence* (SC, 0.41) and high in *Conceptual complexity* (CC) score (0.59), which designates his openness to information (Hermann 2002, 34). Leaders with this profile tend to engage in reflective as opposed to impulsive behavior (Kaarbo 2018; Çuhadar et al. 2017a), perceive various perspectives, and employ nuanced, multi-layered reasoning in decision-making (Thiers and Wehner 2022; Çuhadar et al. 2017a). The slight decline in SC (to 0.40) and CC (to 0.57) during his second term likely mirrors the uncertainty of wartime Europe rather than a fundamental shift in leadership style. Altogether, Macron emerges as an actively *independent* and *opportunistic* leader (Hermann 2002, 9; Brummer 2022, 247), one who is cognitively open, problem-focused, and actively unravels changing circumstances. The following empirical chapter examines how Macron's leadership profile, though stable across both terms, manifested in distinct behaviors, conditioning both his initial engagement with Russia and his eventual realignment.

6 CASE EVIDENCE

6.1 BEFORE THE UKRAINE INVASION: RAPPROCHEMENT (2017–2022)

From the outset of his first term in 2017, Emmanuel Macron positioned himself as a vocal advocate for European sovereignty, collective security and effective multilateralism (Duclos 2021; Anghel et al. 2020, 6; Lefebvre 2019), making the survival of the liberal order “a priority of his presidency” (Staunton 2021, 18). In his *New Initiative for Europe* speech at Sorbonne University in September 2017, he called for “a sovereign, united, and democratic Europe,” and declared that “only Europe can, [...] guarantee genuine sovereignty or our ability to exist in today’s world to defend our values and interests” (Macron 2017a). This Europeanist strategy, incentivized by the UK’s departure from the EU and the declining leadership role of Germany’s Chancellor Merkel (Zandee et al. 2019, 20; Dempsey 2019; Krotz and Schild 2018) laid the foundations for *Europe puissance* as “the condition for a new, more stable world order calming the rivalries of the powers” (Macron 2017b). Macron’s view of Europe as a power can be seen as a normative project rooted in European identity, beyond a security goal (see [Section 4.2](#)).

Many scholars have described Macron as one of the EU’s most active proponents of defense reform and military capacity-building (Tertrais 2017; Rieker 2017; Zueva and Timoteev 2018). Aligning with his predecessors, Macron went further and proposed reforms to the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Momtaz 2019; Mauro 2018), pushed for the creation of the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) (Maulny 2019), and supported increasing EU defense spending through the European Defense Fund (EDF) (Ducoux and Fejérdy 2021, 14, 19; Kuokštė 2020). Along these priorities featured in the National Strategic Review 2022 (Ministère des Armées 2017, 2021), Macron attempted to revive de Gaulle’s notion of France as a balancing power, calling for it to “play its role as a counterweight when imbalances appear” (Macron 2017b). To that end, he also called for a “profound

reconsideration” of the EU’s ties with Russia while seeking to balance U.S. dominance in Europe (Maślanka 2023; Kapp and Fix 2024; Wasson 2024; Cadier 2022).

Only two weeks after he was elected in May 2017, Macron hosted the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, at the Palace of Versailles to signal a fresh start in the countries’ relations and celebrate the France-Russia partnership (Minic 2024, 3; Staunton 2022, 2; Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 22). Motivated by the belief that establishing a personal relationship with Putin would lead to a peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Macron sought to position himself as a credible interlocutor (Macron 2019a). His bilateral diplomacy was preceded by earlier multilateral attempts to resolve the conflict through the so-called “Normandy Format” launched on June 6, 2014. The Format aimed to monitor the implementation of the 2015 Minsk II ceasefire agreement, signed after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 (Galbert 2015; Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères 2025). However, the Format’s 2016 round and the subsequent meetings failed to meet their objectives due to differing views and Russia’s lack of political will to withdraw its troops from the occupied Eastern Ukrainian territory – the Donbas region and Crimea (Legucka and Szeligowski 2019). As a result, key political and military provisions of the Minsk II agreement, including the withdrawal of heavy weapons, local elections, and restoration of Ukrainian control over its eastern border, were never implemented (Åtland 2024, 11; Elefteriu 2025).

Despite increasingly strained EU-Russia relations and the imposition of sanctions, Macron pursued several bilateral actions to strengthen ties between Moscow and Paris (Maślanka 2023, 2024), including the revival of the 2+2 format, which set up frequent meetings between the foreign and defense ministers of the two nations (Stewart 2021, 34). Nevertheless, Macron’s outreach to Putin, driven by his belief in control (BACE) and high conceptual complexity (CC), was often unilateral, which other EU states, particularly Poland and the Baltic, viewed skeptically (Kapp and Fix 2024, 327; Reure 2022; Cadier 2022, 39).

6.1.1 RECASTING FRANCE'S ROLE THROUGH ACCOMMODATION

In August 2019, Macron invited Putin to his summer residence at the *Fort de Brégançon* to initiate a 'strategic dialogue' on European security with Russia included (Stewart 2021, 31), affirming that "Russia is deeply European, and we believe in this Europe that stretches from Lisbon to Vladivostok" (Macron 2019c). Later that month, at the Annual Conference of Ambassadors, Macron warned that "pushing Russia away from Europe is a profound strategic error," driving it either to isolation or closer to Beijing, which he argued was not in Europe's interest (Macron 2019a; 2019b). For this reason, Europe needed to "rebuild" what he called "an architecture of trust and security" (Macron 2019a). Believing Putin to be a pragmatist and a rationalist, Macron asserted that "the main objective of engagement with Russia is an improvement in collective security and stability conditions in Europe" (Macron 2020). This initiative was largely shaped by Macron's personal style, and belief in diplomacy that "remained open in troubled times" (Cadier 2022, 41).

Macron's overtures toward Russia were not merely normative but also strategic; French national interests in key regions like Libya, the Sahel, and Syria often overlapped with Russia's growing influence in these areas, which – attributing it to Western strategic failures – Macron said necessitated a channel for easing tensions and warned that excluding Russia from Europe was a key mistake (Macron 2019b; 2019c; Cadier 2022, 41). This became even more pronounced amid growing doubts about U.S. reliability under the first Trump presidency, when casting NATO as "brain-dead," Macron lamented the lack of strategic coordination and coherence among allies in his 2019 interview with *The Economist* (Macron 2019a; Chrisafis 2019). He also criticized the Alliance's overemphasis on Russia as an existential threat while neglecting other threats like terrorism and challenged the traditional French view of NATO as a strictly military alliance (Major 2021, 36, 40). In doing so, he urged Europe to "wake up" and assume greater responsibility for its own security (Macron 2019a), which initially spurred

controversy and indignation among European partners. He later explained, he did not mean it as an alternative to NATO, but rather he wanted Europe to strengthen its pillar within NATO (Macron 2021b; Staunton 2021, 27-8), whose strategic goals had to be “clarified (Macron 2019a) . Nevertheless, Macron’s rhetorical positioning of Russia as a partner revealed a blind spot: the underestimation of Central and Eastern European threat perceptions and Russia’s actual strategic trajectory.

While framing Russian behavior as driven by perceived threats, particularly as a response to possible NATO expansion and ‘broken promises’, from the West, he simultaneously characterized Putin’s “anti-European project” as unsustainable in the long term, suggesting that the conflict would eventually give way to “a partnership project with Europe” (Macron 2019a). Unlike other EU states such as Germany, however, Macron based his policy on his analysis of what Russia’s “logical” interests might be, instead of his actions (Macron 2019a; Stewart 2021, 32) and France’s strategy reflected the belief that Europe’s long-term security must include a re-integrated Russia, despite lacking a wider consensus in the EU (Gressel et al. 2019; Cadier 2023).

To that end, Macron pressed for renewed dialogue and a revival of the stalled peace process in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine as “the only way to properly implement the Minsk agreements” (Macron 2019d). By hosting the Normandy Format summit with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Vladimir Putin, and new Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in December 2019, Macron positioned France at the center of European diplomacy (Elysée 2019). Still, the summit produced only modest results; consensus was reached only on a few *ad hoc* measures aimed at confidence-building and de-escalation, with a ceasefire in Donbas and “all for all” prisoner exchange out of sight (Legucka and Szeligowski 2019; Szeligowski 2020). The talks revealed the format’s limits, namely its inability to reconcile the positions between Moscow and Kyiv and the risk of pressuring Ukraine into premature

concessions “to avoid a wider confrontation with Moscow” (Lohsen and Morcos 2022), ultimately reaffirming the constraints of Macron’s engagement strategy.

6.1.2 TELEPHONE DIPLOMACY ON THE EVE OF INVASION

By spring 2021, Russia had begun amassing its forces and military hardware near Ukraine’s border (Bielieskov 2021), and the contradiction between Macron’s role conception as a balancing mediator and Russia’s threatening behavior became harder to sustain. Coinciding with a surge in “anti-French discourse” and private military companies’ activity in former French African colonies (Maślanka 2021; 2024), Moscow was justifying its unprecedented concentration of troops as a preemptive defense against a potential Ukrainian offensive in Donbas and a reaction to the US/NATO Defender Europe 2021 exercises, despite Ukraine’s non-participation (Bielieskov 2021). The scale of this mobilization – the largest since Russia’s incursion in Crimea in 2014 – prompted alarm in the West¹. In its Russia policy, however, France continued to stress a dual Western approach of ‘firmness (*fermeté*) and dialogue’ (Ministère des Armées 2021, 17; Cadier 2022, 40; Kastouéva-Jean 2018).

Reflecting his high CC and propensity to challenge constraints, Macron continued to see Russia as both a rising threat and a potential collaborator. Seeking to leverage his personal connection with Putin and persuade him to de-escalate (Robinet 2021), he advocated for an “open, quiet and respectful discussion with Russia” even as he publicly condemned the buildup as “unacceptable” and “counterproductive” (Macron 2021). The collapse of Macron and Merkel’s July 2021 proposal for an EU-Russia summit, which was vetoed by Poland and the Baltic states, dealt a blow to the waning credibility of Macron’s balancing policy (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi 2021), showing a disconnect between his desire to lead and mediate, driven by

¹ The U.S. President Biden and the Russian President met at a Geneva summit, but the outcome of the meeting was rather pragmatic, aimed at stabilizing relations between the two powers instead of easing tensions in Ukraine (Bennett 2021; Herszenhorn 2021; Keith 2021).

his self-confidence (SC) and belief in controlling outcomes (BACE), and his ability to perceive the growing threat environment in Europe.

While seeking engagement, Macron consistently emphasized the need to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity as "fundamental principles" of international law, invoking France's role as a defender of the rules-based order based on historical commitments enshrined in the UN Charter (Macron 2022a). Believing in diplomacy's ability to avert escalation (Robinet 2021), Macron reaffirmed support for Ukraine in a November 2021 call with Putin, as Russia resumed its military mobilization (Puri 2021). Yet, out of concern that Western or NATO assistance to Ukraine could escalate Russia's aggressiveness, Macron refrained from offering concrete measures or military support (Maślanka 2021).

By the end of the year, however, his caution failed to deter escalation, as more than 100,000 Russian troops had gathered near the Ukrainian border (Watson and Martin 2021). Despite the looming threat of an invasion, Macron was widely perceived as the "main interlocutor" in the crisis (Staunton 2022, 20), who continued pushing for strategic dialogue with Moscow, albeit to the detriment of Franco-Ukrainian relations, with military cooperation limited to early-stage proposals (Maślanka 2024b, 2; Minic 2024). In a speech before the EP in January 2022, Macron evoked his traditional Gaullist rhetoric, urging the EU to act as a "power of equilibrium" capable of deciding its own future (Staunton 2022, 22). He sought to find a compromise by offering Russia "tangible security guarantees" while simultaneously rejecting "the use of force, threats, and coercion" and defending the "territorial integrity of states" (Macron 2022a).

Following five phone exchanges aimed at calming tensions between Russia and Ukraine since mid-December, Macron traveled to Moscow and Kyiv between 7-8 February 2022 (Maślanka 2024b, 3; Staunton 2022, 20). At a joint press conference, Putin reiterated Russia's "categorical" opposition to NATO's membership expansion to the East (Macron 2019c). Thus,

seeking to broker a deal to de-escalate, Macron raised the idea of Ukraine adopting a neutral status, as a form of “Finlandization,” which was rejected by Ukraine and Eastern European countries who felt Macron was freelancing again (Eckel 2022). Regardless of Macron’s visits and appeals for peace, by 18 February, Russia had amassed up to 190,000 troops on the Ukrainian borders (Wintour 2022), making the invasion a “very distinct possibility” (Roth et al. 2022).

Two days later, just four days before the invasion, Macron appeared to persuade Putin to consider a de-escalatory summit with the U.S. President through another round of phone diplomacy (Macron 2022c). During their exchange, Macron questioned Putin’s rationale for legitimizing separatist actions in the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and retorted, “I don’t know where your lawyer learned the law,” emphasizing that in a sovereign country, legal norms cannot be written by separatist groups, but by “democratically elected authorities” (Macron 2022c). Ultimately, Macron’s attempt to include Russia in a revised European security architecture proved “counterproductive” for his European project (Minic 2024, 3). Russia’s aggression not only undermined the very rationale behind the Franco-Russian dialogue but also shattered the foundations of the common cooperative security framework, setting the stage for a gradual but profound shift in France’s Russia policy.

6.2 AFTER THE UKRAINE INVASION: REALIGNMENT (2022-2025)

Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, came as “a psychological and intellectual shock in France” (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 23), dealing a “serious blow to peace and stability in our Europe in decades” (Macron 2022d). Although Putin’s invasion signaled the failure of Macron’s diplomatic approach (Staunton 2022), France’s strategic reassessment of Moscow evolved gradually (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024; Minic 2024), fully crystallizing only between late 2022 and mid-2023, with Macron’s transformation appearing complete by early 2024.

6.2.1 AMBIVALENCE AND RHETORICAL AMBIGUITY (FEBRUARY-DECEMBER 2022)

In his *Adresse aux Français* on the evening of the invasion, President Macron condemned Russia's aggression in strong moral terms, stating that "by breaking his word, refusing the diplomatic path, and choosing war, President Putin has not only attacked Ukraine; he has decided to trample on Ukraine's sovereignty" (Macron 2022d). Addressing the French Senate the following day, Macron declared that France would take additional commitments within NATO to "ensure unity with European partners and allies to protect our sovereignty, our security and our democracies" (Macron 2022e). This assertive rhetoric aligned with France's EU Council Presidency, which began in January 2022 and gave Paris a strategic opportunity to influence Europe's response to the war (Weber 2024, 3; Welc 2023). Within weeks, Macron coordinated EU sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation (RF), promised increased military commitment to NATO's Eastern Flank, and agreed to lead a new NATO's enhanced Forward-Presence deployment (eFP) in Romania (Ministère des Armées 2022; Staunton 2022, 21).

Nonetheless, despite initial alignment with Western allies, Macron's diplomatic standpoint as a security guarantor remained ambivalent, as he continued to pursue direct communication with Putin in the months following the invasion (Caulcutt 2022). His public statements through December 2022 embodied a nuanced, almost 'bipolar' position, which can be attributed to his internal reassessment of Russia's role in Europe, driven by his high CC trait. On one hand, he called Putin's actions a "historic and fundamental error" and affirmed the protection and safety of Europe and France (Macron 2022f). On the other hand, he cautioned allies in June 2022 "not to humiliate Russia so that the day the fighting stops", a settlement could be guaranteed "through diplomatic channels" (Macron 2022g; Ricard 2022). Even after the Bucha massacre and Russia's deliberate targeting of residential buildings, hospitals, and schools in defiance of international humanitarian law (IHL) in March, Macron still hoped to keep the lines of communication open (Mendras 2022) and uphold France's NRC as a balancer.

A first turning point came on 16 June 2022, when Macron endorsed Ukraine's EU candidate status alongside leaders of Germany, Italy, and Romania (Mansoor 2022), which marked a clear departure from France's traditional emphasis on deepening EU integration over expansion, reiterated in his speech before the EU parliament in January that same year (Macron 2022a; Caulcutt 2023). Macron had already articulated this vision in his speech in Strasbourg in May 2022, when he proposed a project of European Political Community (EPC) "to rethink European geography" (Macron 2022f) and post-war European security architecture (Hajko 2024, 1300; Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 37).

In his September 2022 speech to French Ambassadors, he reiterated the EPC's relevance but, acknowledging that the accession process might take "several decades" (Macron 2022f), he conditioned further EU enlargement upon institutional reform or amendments to the Lisbon treaty (Macron 2022h). The EPC was formally launched at the October 2022 Prague Summit, bringing together 44 states who framed it both as a solidarity mechanism for Ukraine and a long-term platform for European cooperation (Hajko 2024, 1300-2). Although its unclear status within the EU raised concerns, especially among Western Balkan states wary of "membership dilution" (Morillas 2022), France saw Ukraine's army potential and the EU's Eastern enlargement as a step closer toward *Europe puissance* (Buras and Morina 2023, 4-5).

In the same speech, however, Macron's high CC manifested in a somewhat contradictory way – he still cast Russia as "a prerequisite for a stable European order" (Hajko 2024, 1294), even though labeling its war "imperialist" (Macron 2022h). He defended the EU's strength as his guiding principle, concluding with a clear warning: "We must not let Europe be divided by this war. European unity is key" (Macron 2022h).

During the UN General Assembly in September, Macron denounced Russia's "return to the age of imperialism and colonies," implicitly criticizing its military activity in Africa and Ukraine (Macron 2022i). While defending earlier peace efforts, he postulated that negotiations

can only be considered successful “if Ukraine’s sovereignty is respected, its territory liberated, and its security protected” (Macron 2022i). This coincided with France joining the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM) and endorsing the EU’s plan to establish a Special Tribunal for prosecuting Russia’s “crimes of aggression” in November 2022 (Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères 2022). On 30 November, the French *Assemblée Nationale* passed a resolution condemning Russia and affirming full support for Kyiv (Mendras 2022).

On 3 December 2022, Macron caused indignation yet again when he proposed that “security guarantees” would be needed not only for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and long-term security but also for Russia, as Moscow would eventually “return to the negotiating table,” and require “assurances” as a party to any post-war peace settlement too (Macron 2022j). This mentality, propelled by his BACE and PWR traits, reflected Macron’s self-perception as a “the world’s premier diplomatic broker” even amidst Russia’s revisionist actions (Snell 2022), while his high CC and SC determined his continued openness to future settlement frameworks despite Putin’s consistent framing of the war as a broader existential struggle against the West. By late 2022, Russia’s nuclear rhetoric had intensified, slowly undercutting Macron’s appeasing logic. While considering the inclusion of preventive nuclear strikes in Russia’s new military doctrine, Putin (2022) warned that any Western interference would prompt Russia “to respond immediately,” including using its nuclear weapons kept in “a special mode of combat duty” (Lewis 2024; Martynyuk 2024).

As former French Ambassador Sylvie Bermann (2024) observed, it was “Putin’s radicalization,” rather than an internal adaptation, that ultimately compelled the French president to adopt a more confrontational stance. His New Year’s address signaled the beginning of the end of his previous ambiguity, when pledging France’s “unconditional” support for Ukraine, he assured Ukrainians, “*We will help you to victory*” (Macron 2022k).

6.2.2 FROM MEDIATOR TO COALITION LEADER (MAY 2023-FEBRUARY 2024)

As the war ground on in 2023, Macron increasingly framed the war in Ukraine as “an opportunity to consolidate the EU” (Minic 2024, 9), implicitly recognizing that his prior belief in building a personal relationship with Vladimir Putin had proven to be “an illusion” (Maślanka 2024b, 4). At the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, he delivered one of his clearest rhetorical departures from the earlier accommodationist stance by asserting that “Russia cannot and must not win this war [...] because we cannot allow the illegal use of force to become the norm” (Macron 2023a, 3). His call for greater military support “to build a lasting peace” in Ukraine (Macron 2023a, 3), mixed with the delegitimization of the aggressor’s strategic rationale, signaled a redefinition in France’s role attribution, away from Russia, formerly altercast as a partner in European security.

Conditioned by his high CC, Macron was able to reassess his stance and employ multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives. Rather than embracing binary framings of friend or foe, he underscored Russia’s “four clear failures” – its underestimation of Ukraine’s resistance, “misreading of the future,” “colonial mentality,” and harboring distrust in other nations (Macron 2023a, 2), while at the same time, he stated that “to crush Russia [...] has never been France’s position” (Gnesotto 2023, 2). In this manner, he egocast France as a stabilizing, peaceful power, which was consistent with his moderately high BACE and PWR traits, expressed through a desire to shape outcomes rather than dominate.

The clarity of Macron’s stance was reinforced at the Summit in Bratislava on 31 May 2023, where, referring to Russia’s persistent efforts to undermine Europe’s stability, he declared that “there is no place in Europe for imperial fantasies” (Macron 2023b). Reflecting on past Western attitudes and a failure to sufficiently heed the concerns and positions of Central and Eastern European states, he admitted, “We sometimes missed opportunities to listen. That time is over, and today, these voices must be all our voices.” (Macron 2023b). In this pivotal speech,

Macron publicly distanced himself from his earlier ambivalent stances and accentuated that the path to a sovereign *Europe puissance*, and eventually “*Europe de la défense*”, must be built primarily through intra-EU cooperation and “the credibility of a European Defense within NATO” (Macron 2023b). His call for “solid security guarantees” for Ukraine rather than making concessions to Russia reflected a reorientation in both tone and substance (Minic 2024, 9; The Economist 2023). The following day, Ukrainian President Zelensky reiterated Ukraine’s calls for NATO membership and more military support at the second EPC summit hosted in Bulboaca, Moldova (Hajko 2024, 1302).

Domestically, the *Assemblée Nationale*’s inquiry committee further echoed this reorientation of French policy when its 1 June 2023 report on foreign interference designated Russia as “the principal threat” to French and European security² (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 25). Facing Russia’s increasingly assertive behavior both in the Sahel and Ukraine, French policymakers began to view Ukraine’s integration into Euro-Atlantic structures as indispensable for long-term European stability, framing NATO membership as the most credible guarantee of Ukraine’s security and a key to deterring future aggression (Cadier and Quencez 2023; Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères 2023).

This recalibration was publicly affirmed at the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023, when President Macron publicly endorsed Ukraine’s future membership in the Alliance (Ricard 2023; Cadier 2023), calling its Article 5 the only deterrent that “keeps Russia in check” (Macron 2023c). While signaling a reversal of his earlier skepticism about NATO expansion expressed in December 2022 (Ricard 2022; Minic 2024, 7), it also revealed a broader evolution in French strategic thinking from regarding Eastern neighborhood as a potential point of contention with Russia to perceiving EU and NATO enlargement as a stabilizing geopolitical instrument

² France’s tougher stance toward Moscow provoked diplomatic tensions, stemming from disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks (Pietralunga et al. 2024) to Moscow relying on private military companies such as the Wagner Group to spread its influence and undermine French standing in Africa (Sadovschi 2024, 82; Le Cam 2018; Audinet 2021).

(Cadier 2023; The Economist 2023). Breaking with France’s longstanding position, Macron’s strategic recalibration was followed by concrete defense measures: the French defense ministry delivered modern combat systems such as AMX10-RC light tanks and long range (SCALP-EG) cruise missiles, created a special fund for bilateral support to Ukraine and reaffirmed French security commitments to NATO’s Eastern Flank (Staunton 2022; Tenenbaum and Zima 2024; Cadier 2023, 2; Le Monde 2023).

In January 2024 in Stockholm, Macron (2024a) argued that “we must be prepared to act, defend, and support Ukraine no matter what happens,” regardless of decisions taken in the United States, arguing “there will be no future” for EU security without such commitment. Similar to his Bratislava address, he advocated for a European-designed security architecture to serve as an “essential pillar” of NATO, complementing, rather than replacing the Alliance, so that Europeans could avert bearing the “real cost of a Russian victory” (Macron 2024a). The idea of a European pillar thus became “inseparable” from Macron’s drive to advance ESA (Garnier 2023, 64) and parted ways with his predecessors, wary of provoking Russia through NATO’s eastward expansion (Ricard 2022). While Macron’s commitment to EU strategic and defense autonomy remained consistent with his long-standing European leadership ambitions, his calls for a new security architecture in Europe now reflected sharper urgency and no longer counted on Russia as a trustworthy security partner.

6.2.3 FINAL STRATEGIC PIVOT (FEBRUARY 2024-MARCH 2025)

Noting a switch in Russia’s attitude and hostile actions toward Europe and France (Minic 2024, 10; Pietralunga et al. 2024), Macron deemed it necessary to open a new phase of “strategic and operational reflection” with Ukraine (Macron 2024b). This materialized on February 16, 2024, when the French president signed a landmark bilateral security agreement with Ukrainian President Zelenskyi, pledging military, humanitarian, and budgetary support, as

well as cooperation on institutional reform and countering disinformation (Élysée 2024).³ Over the next 6 months, France provided more than €1.32 billion in military assistance, including training nearly 2000 Ukrainian soldiers in cooperation with Poland (Ministère des Armées 2024). Macron's repositioning culminated in the hosting of the Conference in Support of Ukraine on 27 February 2024, in Paris, where he declared that "Russia's defeat is indispensable to the security and stability of Europe," and positioned the conflict as existential for the European order (Macron 2024c).

When asked about the issue of sending Western troops to Ukraine, Macron did not rule out the possibility and asserted that "nothing should be excluded" (Macron 2024c), deeming it necessary to promote "strategic ambiguity" and introduce unpredictability in Russia's strategic calculations by refraining from specifying the extent of Western support to Ukraine (Macron 2024d; Bourgery-Gonse 2024; Goury-Laffont 2024). In a way, this statement challenged the prevalent view of an escalation of a global war between NATO and Russia on one hand, but also divided Western allies on the other, given no official consensus on the matter (Irish, Rose, and Gray 2024). In an interview with *La Provence*, however, Macron confirmed his principle of "not setting limits against an enemy who has none" (Macron 2024c) again and referred to Russia as "a destabilizing power that sets no strategic limits to its action" (Le Figaro 2024). Political factors were determining for Macron's stance as he was worried about Ukrainian troops falling and losing grip on Odesa, a key port for global grain trade (Maślanka 2024b, 5).

Macron's second *Discours sur l'Europe*, delivered at Sorbonne University on 25 April 2024, warned that "Our Europe is mortal" and its survival "depends on our choices" (Macron 2024d), by which he explicitly linked the defense of Ukraine and European sovereignty to the survival of the European project itself and the creation of the European defense initiative

³ Between February 2022 and June 2024, France became the fourth largest contributor of all bilateral aid to Ukraine, amounting to more than €12 billion and the second-largest provider under the European Peace Facility (EPF), following Germany (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 28).

(Maślanka 2024b, 6). Days later, he warned in an interview with *The Economist* that “if Russia wins, the life of the French people will change. We will have no security in Europe” (Macron 2024e). Both speeches thus essentially highlighted both Macron’s belief that France must actively shape the European security order as its foremost protector and the realization that a strong and sovereign Europe is impossible without “massive and determined support for Ukraine” (Minic 2024, 11). In this light, Macron stressed credibility and deterrence, calling on Europe “to dissuade, be present and continue the effort” while “not giving full visibility as to what we will or will not do” (Macron 2024d, 5; 2024e). Later, on 7 June 2024, France entered “a new phase” of military aid, providing Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets and joining the multinational air force coalition for Ukraine (Tenenbaum and Zima 2024, 34).

At the Ambassadors’ Conference in January 2025, Macron warned that some nations sought to “fragment the world to their advantage,” and urged France’s diplomatic corps to remain unified in defending European sovereignty (Macron 2025a). During the second conference on 17 February in Paris, Macron stressed that “a strong and lasting peace in Ukraine” must be accompanied by “credible security guarantees,” otherwise any ceasefire would fall like the Minsk agreements (Macron 2025b; 2025c). His message became even more pronounced following Donald Trump’s return to the Oval Office in January, which brought a thaw in US-Russia relations and consistent attacks targeting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s administration and diplomacy (Pedro and Darame 2025). During a state visit in the United States on 24 February, Macron gave an interview to *Fox News*, where he highlighted the indispensable role of U.S. commitment to any future peace treaty and insisted that Europe must “step up” defense spending to “take part of the burden,” as Putin’s aggression had been emboldened by “a lack of credibility of [European] collective deterrence” (Macron 2025c).

As Russia launched a significant counteroffensive in the Kursk region in March 2025 and reclaimed territories previously held by Ukrainian forces, Macron’s tone further sharpened. In

a televised national address on 5 March, he explicitly said that Russia “knows no borders” (Chrisafis 2025a) and “has become, at the moment I am speaking to you and for the years to come, a threat to France and Europe” (Macron 2025d). Given the reversal of the US policy on Ukraine through direct ceasefire negotiations with Russia in Saudi Arabia, Macron remarked that “our ally has changed its position on this war,” yet affirmed that “the future of Europe does not have to be decided in Washington or Moscow” (Macron 2025d; Le Monde 2025a, 2025b; Burdeau 2025). In this context, he specifically raised the possibility of sending European troops to Ukraine “as a presence” to enforce a peace deal that “cannot be the capitulation of Ukraine” and called for a “massive rearmament” to confront future security challenges (Macron 2025d; Le Monde 2025b). Considering Russia as “no longer to be trusted to keep its word,” Macron suggested opening a “strategic debate” on potentially extending France’s nuclear deterrent on the European continent (Macron 2025d; Le Monde 2025b). The following day, the EU Council convened a special defense summit in Brussels, agreeing that “Europe must become more sovereign,” and “more responsible for its defense” (European Council 2025; Burdeau 2025).

Two weeks later, on 20-21 March, 26 EU members endorsed conclusions on Ukraine, emphasizing “comprehensive, just and lasting peace,” grounded in the UN Charter and international law (Papunen and Zamponi 2025, 1-2). Despite Hungarian dissent, Macron reaffirmed his openness to deploying peacekeepers, emphasizing that “Europeans are not bellicose powers. We want to protect peace” (Élysée 2025a). Consequently, in a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Zelensky in Paris on 26 March, Macron announced a €2 billion military aid package for Ukraine, including anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, *Mirage* fighter jet missiles, armored vehicles, and ammunition (Cadier 2025). Finally, on 27 March, Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer convened the so-called “coalition of the willing” summit in Paris to coordinate “credible and long-term” security guarantees for Ukraine, explicitly ruling out any demilitarization scenario (Le Monde 2025b; Élysée 2025b).

Summa summarum, Macron's Russia policy had clearly shifted in response to structural pressures determined by wartime conditions, transforming the national conception of France from a mediator to a defender of Europe while increasingly casting Russia as a direct adversary. The following section synthesizes the evidentiary signatures of the longitudinal analysis and addresses the key puzzles in Macron's foreign policy toward Russia between 2017 and 2025.

7 DISCUSSION: UNPACKING MACRON'S RUSSIA POLICY SHIFT

In order to explain France's Russia policy reorientation under Emmanuel Macron between 2017 and 2025, particular attention is paid to three empirical puzzles identified through the longitudinal case study: (1) *the transformation of Macron's stance toward Russia*, (2) *Macron's changing stance on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration*, and (3) *his evolving attitude toward the use of force and war settlement*. Drawing on the theory developed in [Chapter 4](#), I evaluate the causal weight and interplay of three explanatory variables: structural pressures (H1), Macron's leadership traits (H2), and French national role conceptions (H3).

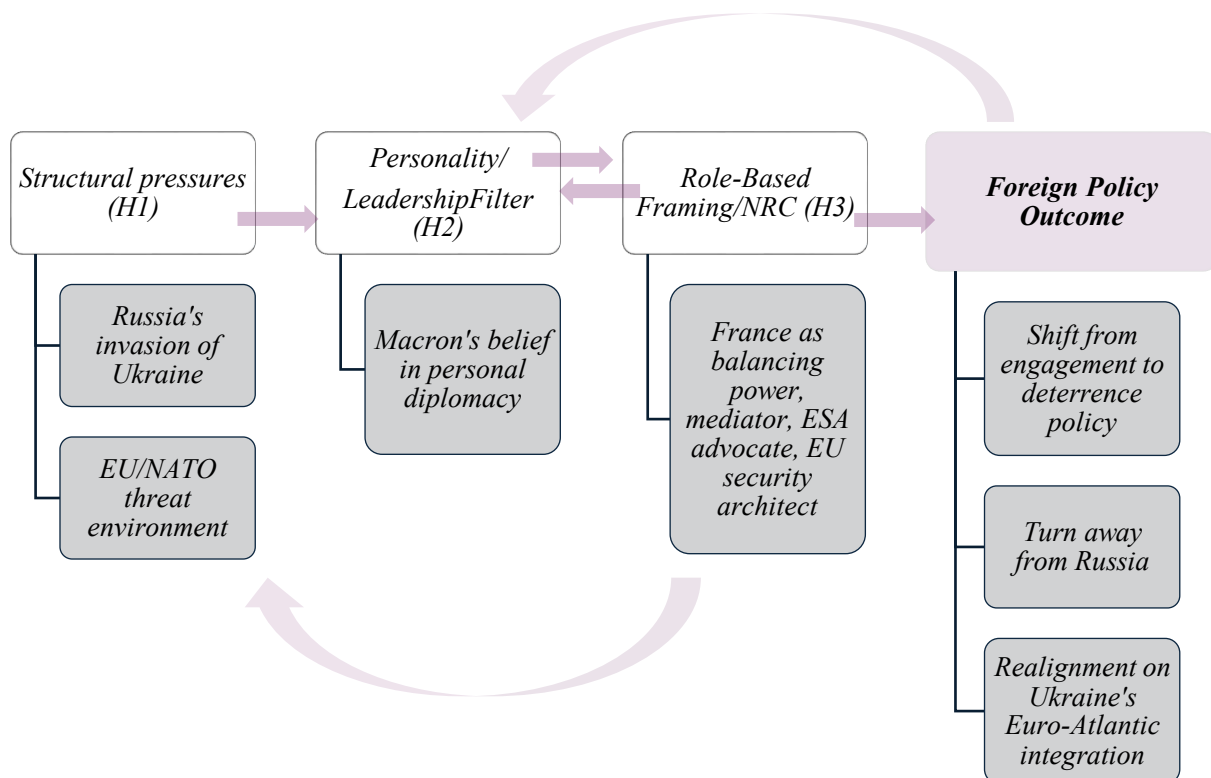


Figure 1 - Multi-Level Causal Pathways Explaining Macron's Russia Policy Orientation After the Invasion

Macron's shifting stance toward Russia

The previous chapter showed that the structural pressures in the international system, in this case, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and its long-term consequences for European security, were the most decisive triggers behind France's policy reorientation. The clearest manifestation of this shift was Macron's transition from 'strategic

dialogue’ and personalized diplomacy with Russia to a more confrontational, deterrence-based approach (see Table 5 below). From hosting President Putin in Paris right after his election in 2017 and still proposing security guarantees to him in December 2022, by 2023, Macron had begun referring to Russia as threatening the European order. His statements, such as “Russia’s aggressiveness seems to know no bounds” and “What guarantee do we have that today’s Russia will stop at Ukraine?” (Macron 2023b), show France conforming to structural realist expectations that powers balance against rising threats. This involved material commitments to Ukraine and rhetorical alignment with NATO’s Eastern flank.

By March 2025, Macron explicitly stated that “the Russian threat goes beyond Ukraine and affects every country in Europe,” raised the prospect of EU troop deployments, and argued that “Russia can no longer be trusted to keep its word” (Macron 2025d), all in line with realist logic of balancing threats. In this regard, Macron’s behavior supports the structural hypothesis (H1), which anticipates that foreign policy aligns with shifting external pressures. On 24 February 2022, Macron (2022d) attributed the war to Russian “revenge mentality fueled by a revisionist interpretation of European history” (Macron 2022l, 1) and supported Ukraine with humanitarian, defense and material aid, while emphasizing that “European defense must step up” (Macron 2022l, 3). This embodied a security-maximizing rationale and Macron’s effort to now contain the perceived Russian threat.

Nevertheless, Macron’s initial reluctance to fully align against Russia in his early post-invasion policy complicates a strictly structural account. He continued to call Putin and warned before “humiliating Russia” in June 2022, four months into the war (Macron 2022g), which points to other intervening variables – his leadership traits and France’s NRC – that moderated the effect of structural pressures and can provide insight into the timing and tone of Macron’s response.

Macron's leadership & France's Strategic Role

Macron's personality traits, as assessed in [Section 5.2](#), help explain the gradual and rhetorical nature of France's foreign policy change. Macron's openness to new information and propensity to challenge constraints help account for why France's post-invasion stance moved from conciliatory and ambivalent to confronting. Macron's actively independent leadership style caused him to believe in his ability to negotiate a settlement with Putin, delaying France's transition from referring to "Russia's aggression" to denouncing "Putin's criminal war" (Mendras 2022). His BACE and PWR traits conditioned him to resist systemic pressures early on and believe in the possibility of de-escalating tensions through engagement and dialogue, even in the face of Russia's repeated violations of IHL. Meanwhile, his moderate SC and high CC allowed him to interpret the situation in nuanced terms, employ historical reasoning, and resist not only a binary framing of Russia as a threat but also the conflict as a whole. With that in mind, Macron's cognitive openness, personal diplomacy, and the combination of "hard-nosed realism with passionate idealism" (Desprat 2017) match the evidentiary signature of the leadership hypothesis (H2).

In parallel, while Macron consistently egocast France as 'a mediator', 'balancing power', and 'EU security architect' (Macron 2017b; 2019b; 2022g; 2022h; 2023d), a more consequential redefinition occurred in France's alter-casting of Russia. During his first term, Macron framed Russia as a necessary partner in a shared European security architecture, consistent with France's NRC rooted in strategic autonomy and *Europe puissance* (Macron 2019a; Macron 2022a). However, once Russia could no longer credibly fulfill that role after February 2022, Russia's role was redefined as a destabilizing adversary and threat (Macron 2022i; 2022d), excluded from France's vision of European order, now constructed "against – or at least in deterrence of – Russia" (Cadier 2022, 2–3). Hence, Macron's conception of France as a sovereign actor was not abandoned but increasingly reframed from mediator to security

guarantor and defender advancing Europe *de la défense*. This evolution corresponds with the Role Theory (H3), which posits that leaders adapt foreign policy when roles become untenable or are redefined through social interaction with other actors (Thies 2012).

Macron's stance toward Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, the use of force, and war termination

Considerations of the changing balance of power in Europe and the positions of Central and Eastern European countries eventually led Macron to acknowledge the limitations of his “balanced approach” (Minic 2024, 6). Already in 2023 at GLOBSEC, Macron contended that an “effective counter-offensive” was essential for “peace that respects international law” and is “chosen by Ukraine,” insisting that Ukraine must become part of a “credible security architecture.” Macron’s (2023b) statement, “We will not let Europe be kidnapped a second time,” explicitly linked Ukraine’s fight for sovereignty with the safeguarding of ESA. Consequently, Ukraine was granted EU candidate status in June 2022 and secured support for NATO accession by July 2023 despite the lack of a U.S. endorsement. The 2024 statement, “We decided to open up a path for Ukraine towards NATO and the European Union” (Macron 2024e), signaled a significant reversal from Macron’s interview in 2019, when he hinted at Ukraine’s neutrality and warned against NATO “humiliating” Russia (2019b).

By 2024, Macron labeled Russia “a power of regional destabilization” (2024e), abandoned the assumption of Moscow’s interests being “logical” (2019b), and warned that “if Russia wins in Ukraine, there will be no security in Europe” (2024e). Because this shift unfolded gradually, rather than abruptly, Macron’s high CC and moderate SC enabled him to process contradictory signals and adjust his position. Perhaps the most striking transformation occurred in Macron’s attitude toward military power and the use of force. While he was initially skeptical of deploying Western forces due to concerns over Russia’s security guarantees (Macron 2022j), by 2024, he proclaimed in light of Moscow’s return to “logic of total war” that “Russia has

changed, and we have to adapt to it” (Macron 2024e). By 2025, Macron took on a fully militarized stance, advocating for “the necessity of the armed force” and the provision of “superior-quality weaponry” to Ukraine (Macron 2025e), as he argued that “peace cannot come with the collapse of Ukraine...cannot come at any price” (Macron 2025d; 2025c).

<i>Driver</i>	<i>Before 2022</i>	<i>After February 2022</i>	<i>After February 2023</i>
<i>Structural Pressures</i>	Competitive coexistence with Russia; no direct threat	Full-scale war; threat environment in Europe	Recognition of long-term systemic confrontation; Russia’s radicalization and expansionist aims
<i>Macron’s Leadership Traits</i>	Confidence in personal diplomacy; engagement and “calls” with Putin; proactiveness; belief that “Russia is deeply European”	Continued personal diplomacy despite the war; persistent ambiguity and moral framing (“don’t humiliate Russia”)	Self-positioned as a confident wartime leader and crisis manager; clear break from bilateral dialogue with Putin; balancing rhetoric
<i>National Role Conceptions (NRC)</i>	France as balancing power and mediator; <i>Russia envisioned as a necessary partner</i> in European Security	France as security guarantor and strategic balancer; Russia as a systemic challenger	France as leader of <i>Europe de la défense</i> ; ESA as a pillar of NATO; <i>Russia framed as existential threat</i> to EU security
	France as advocate for European strategic autonomy and EU as geopolitical power		
<i>Policy Orientation</i>	Rapprochement and strategic dialogue with Russia (Versailles, Brégançon); fear of escalation; Skepticism toward NATO enlargement; Normandy Format	Initial material support for Ukraine; security guarantees to Russia; support for Ukraine’s EU candidacy without NATO clarity; EPC as an alternative	Emphasis on collective EU defense; strategic ambiguity; support for NATO accession at Vilnius summit; bilateral security pact with Ukraine; possible troop deployment
<i>Macro Level Trajectory</i>	<i>Accommodation</i>	<i>Ambiguity</i>	<i>Deterrence</i>

Table 5 – Own elaboration of Macron’s Russia Policy Trajectory (2017-2025): From Accommodation to Deterrence

Taken together, Macron's ambiguity toward Russia by mid-2023 and eventual shift toward deterrence from mid-2024 onward support *a multi-level explanation*, in which structural shocks prompted reevaluation; Macron's agency and leadership traits conditioned its pace and form; and France's evolving strategic role conceptions provided discursive justification for change (see [Figure 1](#) for a synthesized causal model). The evidence thus supports H4: *Macron's foreign policy reorientation toward Russia cannot be fully explained by systemic pressures, personality traits, or national role interpretation in isolation*. This case illustrates the traditional neoclassical realist argument that there is no "smoothly functioning mechanical transmission belt between structural incentives and foreign policy outcomes" (Rose 1998, 82). It challenges the assumption that FP change requires leadership turnover, demonstrating that even leaders with stable traits and ideological convictions can adapt within a continuous presidential tenure.

8 CONCLUSION

The present thesis has examined how Emmanuel Macron's leadership traits, French national role conceptions (NRCs), and systemic pressures, notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, interacted to shape France's foreign policy toward Russia between 2017 and 2025. The research demonstrated that Macron's policy reorientation from engagement to deterrence was neither a mechanical response to systemic shifts in the European security architecture, nor merely a continuation of longstanding Gaullist foreign policy traditions. Rather, it reflected a gradual adaptation process mediated by Macron's evolving interpretation of France's role and his leadership style.

Empirically, this thesis traced how Macron's initial pursuit of personal *rapprochement* with Moscow stemmed from his vision of European strategic autonomy (ESA) and France as an autonomous power in European and global affairs. Macron's high conceptual complexity and belief in his ability to control diplomatic outcomes of engagement with Russia were particularly significant in his transformation from cautious optimism to increasingly assertive rhetoric and deeper alignment with NATO and the Eastern European states from 2023 onward. Theoretically, this supports the Neoclassical Realist view that systemic pressures are necessary but insufficient to explain state behavior, as they must be filtered through domestic and individual-level lenses, such as a leader's traits and NRCs, to influence the direction of foreign policy. In doing so, the thesis contributes to Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) by challenging structural determinism and foregrounding the micro-foundations of foreign policy change.

As Russian aggression does not seem to cease and Europe second-guesses transatlantic reliability amid Donald Trump's return to the White House, Macron's strategic realignment illustrates the decisive impact of leadership agency. Future research should explore whether Macron's adaptive role performance is replicable under similarly volatile external conditions or across other domains of French foreign policy, such as the Sahel or the MENA region. A

particularly valuable avenue would be a comprehensive, longitudinal study of Macron's crisis management and role performance across both his presidential tenures. Alternatively, such a study could also analyze how similar neoclassical-realist patterns manifest in the foreign policies of other European powers in today's increasingly unstable world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Corpus of Emmanuel Macron's Speeches Processed with Profiler+ for Leadership Trait Analysis

Verbal Output	Date	Type of Media	Link
Presidential Victory Speech	07-May-17	Domestic Speech	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39842084
Paris Climate Agreement Speech	1-2 Jun-17	International Speech	https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article8169
Le Figaro Interview	22-Jun-17	Interview	https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/203077-entretien-de-m-emmanuel-macron-president-de-la-republique-dans-le-fi
Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors 2017	29-Aug-17	Domestic Speech	https://onu.delegfrance.org/Speech-by-President-E-Macron-for-a-global-french-diplomacy
New initiative for Europe: Sorbonne Speech	26-Sep-17	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe
Der Spiegel Interview	13-Oct-17	Interview	https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/interview-with-french-president-emmanuel-macron-a-1172745.html
Speech by Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic, at the European Court of Human Rights on 31 October 2017	31-Oct-17	International Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/10/31/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-devant-le-conseil-de-leurope-a-strasbourg
New Year's Eve Speech	04-Jan-18	Domestic Speech	https://uk.ambafrance.org/Emmanuel-Macron-s-New-Year-greetings
UK-France Summit Speech	18-Jan-18	International Speech	https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-the-uk-france-summit-18-january-2018
Speech by President of the Republic at European Parliament	17-Apr-18	EU Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/04/17/speech-by-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-at-european-parliament
Speech by the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, at the Congress of the United States of America	25-Apr-18	International Speech	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwrRXozCXA / https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/04/25/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-emmanuel-macron-at-the-congress-of-the-united-states-of-america
Interactive session with President Emmanuel Macron	04-Jul-18	Interview	https://www.tonyvelumelufoundation.org/news/transcript-of-interactive-session-with-president-emmanuel-macron
Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors 2018	27-Aug-18	Domestic Speech	https://hongkong.consulfrance.org/Speech-by-President-Emmanuel-Macron-Ambassadors-Conference-2018
Speech by French President Emmanuel Macron at the 73rd UNGA	25-Sep-18	International Speech	https://ph.ambafrance.org/Speech-by-French-President-Emmanuel-Macron-at-the-73rd-UNGA
Letter from the President Emmanuel Macron to the French people	13-Jan-19	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/01/13/letter-to-the-french-people-from-emmanuel-macron
Speech at Collège du renseignement en Europe	05-Mar-19	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/05/inauguration-du-college-du-renseignement-en-europe
Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs	27-Aug-19	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1

Time Interview	19-Sep-19	Interview	https://time.com/5680174/france-emmanuel-macron-transcript-interview/
74th United Nations General Assembly – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic	24-Sep-19	International Speech	https://id.ambafrance.org/74th-United-Nations-General-Assembly-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of
Interview with the Economist "Emmanuel Macron in his own words"	07-Nov-19	Interview	https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english
Speech at L'École de Guerre	07-Feb-20	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-strategie-de-defense-et-de-dissuasion-devant-les-stagiaires-de-la-27eme-promotion-de-lecole-de-guerre
Speech at the 2020 Munich Security Conference	15-Feb-20	International Speech	https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article9598
President Emmanuel Macron's speech at Jagiellonne University, Krakow	11-Mar-20	International Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/11/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-a-l-universite-jagiellonne-de-krakow
Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the COVID-19 coronavirus	16-Mar-20	Domestic Speech	https://uk.ambafrance.org/We-are-at-war-with-COVID-19-says-President-in-national-broadcast
Speech at the Panthéon	04-Sep-20	Domestic Speech	https://www.telospress.com/macron-on-french-nationality-the-pantheon-speech/?srsltid=AfmBOoohiRJ2jmZKF_1xT90u9g5j82O6WnlX87z1SBnL_Z0dZXkH3IFE
Interview with Le Grand Continent	16-Nov-20	Interview	https://otan.delegfrance.org/Interview-of-the-President-Emmanuel-Macron-Le-Grand-Continent-16-11-2020
Interview with Atlantic Council	04-Feb-21	Interview	https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/a-conversation-with-french-president-emmanuel-macron-launching-the-europe-center/
Interview with Face the Nation	18-Apr-21	Interview	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-french-president-emmanuel-macron-on-face-the-nation-april-18-2021/
Speech before the EU Parliament during EC Presidency	19-Jan-22	EU Speech	https://onu-rome.delegfrance.org/French-President-Emmanuel-Macron-s-Speech-at-the-European-Parliament-Strasbourg
Speech at the wake of the invasion of Ukraine	02-Mar-22	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/03/02/address-to-the-nation
Presidential Elections 2022 Victory Speech: "I will be president for all of us"	24-Apr-22	Domestic Speech	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wprMB8h9wGQ
Conference on the Future of Europe Speech	09-May-22	EU Speech	https://lv.ambafrance.org/Speech-by-Emmanuel-Macron-at-the-closing-ceremony-of-the-Conference-on-the
Interview Ouest France and La Dépêche du Midi	03-Jun-22	Interview	https://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/entretien-ma-nouvelle-methode-les-confidences-d-emmanuel-macron-4af35d24-e355-11ec-afe2-d5ee186a9723
Press conference on granting EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova	23-Jun-22	Press Conference	https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/videos?keywords=emmanuel%20macron
Bastille Day Speech	14-Jul-22	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/07/13/discours-aux-armees-a-lhotel-de-brienne-1
Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors 2022	01-Sep-22	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/09/01/speech-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-at-the-conference-of-ambassadors-1

77th session of the United Nations General Assembly	20-Sep-22	International Speech	https://sanfrancisco.consulfrance.org/speech-by-the-president-at-the-united-nations-general-assembly
Emmanuel Macron: The 60 Minutes Interview	05-Dec-22	Interview	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRgjUQ6kzeA
Munich Security Conference	17-Feb-23	International Speech	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Esu6Zq7-FUE/ https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/14/49a39d55783d5cf816c4e7287ba99e478640b7b4.pdf
Speech at the Nexus Institute in The Hague	11-Apr-23	International Speech	https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11269
Globsec Forum Speech	31-May-23	International Speech	https://is.ambafrance.org/Slovakia-GLOBSEC-summit-in-Bratislava-Closing-speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron
Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors 2023	28-Aug-23	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/15/68ca793aaf44c90fd79cbf1bc3a234e71c3e1d57.pdf
Europe Speech/Discours sur l'Europe	25-Apr-24	International Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/discours-sur-leurope
Interview with the Economist "Emmanuel Macron in his own words"	29-Apr-24	Interview	https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/02/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english
79th session of the UN General Assembly	25-Sep-24	International Speech	https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11573
Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors 2025	06-Jan-25	Domestic Speech	https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/01/06/conference-des-ambassadrices-et-ambassadeurs-2025
Fox News Interview	24-Feb-25	Interview	https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11660
One-on-one Interview with CNN's Richard Quest	25-Feb-25	Interview	https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/11/Tv/video/emmanuel-macron-discusses-the-threat-of-u-s-tariffs-and-his-vision-for-europe
Macron's Speech Calling For Major European Rearmament	05-Mar-25	Domestic Speech	https://www.france24.com/en/video/20250305-europe-can-t-live-off-dividends-of-peace-says-macron-in-speech-calling-for-major-rearmament
Special Brussels Defence Summit	06-Mar-25	Press Conference	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq1Yq57sx8I